Edited by Murat Yeşiltaş
and Tuncay Kardaş

NON-STATE ARMED ACTORS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

GEOPOLITICS, IDEOLOGY, AND STRATEGY

Non-State Armed Actors in the Middle East

Murat Yeşiltaş · Tuncay Kardaş
Editors

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Editors
Murat Yeşiltaş
Sakarya University
Adapazarı, Sakarya, Turkey

Tuncay Kardaş
Sakarya University
Adapazarı, Sakarya, Turkey

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EDITORS AND CONTRIBUTORS

Murat Yeşiltaş has completed his BA and MA at the Department of International Relations of Sakarya University, in 2003 and 2009, respectively. He earned his Ph.D. at the Department of Political Science and International Relations at Marmara University in 2012. Yeşiltaş was a visiting researcher at the Department of European Studies and International Politics of Lanchester University between 2008 and 2009 and visiting researcher at Virginia Tech's Institute of Government and International Affairs between 2010 and 2011. He served as an academic advisor for Center for Strategic Studies (SAM) of Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey between 2012 and 2014. Currently, Yeşiltaş is an Associate Professor in the Middle East Institute at Sakarya University. He also holds the position of director of security studies at SETA Foundation, Ankara, Turkey. Yeşiltaş current researches are on critical geopolitics, ethnic/religious radicalization, geopolitics of non-state conflicts, terrorism, and the Kurdish affairs. He is currently working on the following research projects: Kurdish Geopolitical Space: Remaking of the Kurdish Political Subjectivity and the New Kurdish Geopolitical Imagination; the New Regional Security Project (NRSP). His most recent books are *Türkiye Dünyanın Neresinde?Hayali Coğrafyalar Çarpışan Anlatılar* (Where is Turkey Located? Imagined Geographies, Competing Narratives) (2015, Koc University Press) and *Geopolitical Mentality and the Military in Turkey* (2016, Kadim).

Dr. Tuncay Kardaş is Associate Professor of International Relations at the Middle East Institute of Sakarya University. He received his BA and MA degrees from Bilkent University in Ankara; MsEcon (Security Studies) and Ph.D. from the Department of International Politics at Aberystwyth University in Wales in 2006. He is currently serving as the Deputy Director of the Middle East Institute of Sakarya University. His research focuses broadly on sociology of security, foreign fighters, the ISIS, critical security studies, security governmentality, visual semiotics, and Turkish Foreign Policy. Dr. Kardaş is the co-editor of "The Borders of Islam: Exploring Samuel Huntington's Faultlines, from Al-Andalus to Virtual Ummah," (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009). His most recent articles appeared in Turkish Studies such as Middle East Critique, Insight Turkey, Birikim, Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations, and Economics and Management: Current Issues and Perspectives. Dr. Kardaş's current researches are on foreign fighters, Islamic radicalization, and the Kurdish conflict. He is currently working on the following research projects: Turkish Foreign Fighters, ISSDIT: Inter-Societal Security Dilemmas in Turkey, and ISSDIME: Inter-Societal Security Dilemmas in the Middle East. He is the organizer of Crisis and Critique Conferences and an editorial board member of Ortadoğu Yıllığı. His most recent research is titled "The Inter-Societal Security Dilemma in Turkey: Kurdish Opening" Turkish Studies with Ali Balci published in Turkey Studies.

Contributors

Zana Baykal Sakarya University, Serdivan, Turkey

Galip Dalay Al Jazeera Center for Studies, Doha, Qatar

Bilgay Duman Abant İzzet Baysal University, Bolu, Turkey; ORSAM, Ankara, Turkey

Recep Tayyip Gürler Sakarya University, Sakarya, Turkey

Burak Kadercan Naval War College, Newport, USA

Tuncay Kardaş Sakarya University, Adapazarı, Turkey

Şaban Kardaş TOBB Economy and Technology University, Ankara, Turkey

Berkan Öğür Sakarya University, Serdivan, Turkey

Ömer Behram Özdemir Sakarya University, Sakarya, Turkey

Farhad Rezaei Center for Iranian Studies, Ankara, Turkey

Göktuğ Sönmez ORSAM, Ankara, Turkey

Murat Yeşiltaş Sakarya University, Adapazarı, Turkey

Non-State Armed Actors in the Middle East: A Conceptual and Analytical Framework

Introduction: The Phenomenon of Non-state Armed Actors and Patterns of Violent Geopolitics in the Middle East

Murat Yeşiltaş and Tuncay Kardaş

INTRODUCTION

In a radio broadcast in 1939, Winston Churchill defined Russia in a famous quip as "a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma." The chain of metaphors in Churchill's famous maxim was to point the difficulty of making sense of the great political transformation Russia had gone through. Though perplexed, Churchill had a key to solve the Russian riddle: the national interest or more precisely "historic-life interests." The new Middle East is a riddle inside an enigma rolled up in a puzzle mat. The former is difficult to grasp even with metaphors. The advent of the non-state armed actors (NSAA) has been one of such riddles that can hardly be solved with the "key" of national interest. From suicide bombers to foreign fighters, the phenomenon has become a staple ingredient

M. Yeşiltaş (✉) · T. Kardaş
Sakarya University, Adapazari, Turkey
e-mail: yesiltas@sakarya.edu.tr

T. Kardaş
e-mail: tuncaykardas@hotmail.com

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of the alarming and perilous agenda of Middle East and the world. Even though the NSAAs pose direct challenges to the nature of states and strategic balance among the regional states, they are not a new phenomenon in international politics. The existence of such actors has been a serious security problem in the Middle East well before the Arab Spring. According to some estimates, there was a 58% increase in the number of Salafi-jihadist groups from 2010 to 2013 due in part to the significant decline in governance capacities across the Middle East and North Africa (Jones 2014, p. 13). Although enjoying extensive coverage in regional and global media, the NSAAs have only recently received sustained interest from academic and policy circles (Mulaj 2010, p. 1).

The NSAAs refer to non-state organizations that have the capacity and means to deliver systematic violent action (Vince 2008, p. 229). NSAAs strive for the state and societal control that encourage the control of land as well as the enslavement or displacement of natives in order to grab their natural sources and develop shadow economies by sowing terror and using extreme violence. The advance of NSAAs challenges local, regional, and global welfare, international security, the rule of law, human rights, and socioeconomic development. They are increasingly upsetting the residents, not only those living in their vicinity but also regional and global audiences. There is a pressing need to grasp and react to the novelty of NSAAs. The authoritarian practices and ethno-sectarian exclusion to drive violent attack on state and governing regimes, both within home territories and abroad, are the main challenges for the society of states. Their significance comes from the fact that the NSAAs pervade the global landscape at almost all levels. First, they permeate into intra-state level by challenging the nation-state capacity/security/legitimacy, leading to collapsed, weak, or authoritarian state structures. Second, they work to disentangle regional security complexes, leading to the change in regional balance of power. Third, they challenge the international society of states and hasten globalization's dark side by attacking soft targets through exploitation and subversion of the hard-won, centuries-old norms of international and global society using a variety of tools from suicide bombings to developing weapons of mass destruction. In each level, whether it is the weak state structure, the lack of socioeconomic welfare, or the weakness of counter-strategies, NSAAs are identified as the central protagonists of regime instability, political disorder, violent conflict giving way to the severe insecurity and violence. This is particularly so in the Middle East politics following the post-Arab spring era.

Despite their strong real-world impact, the existing scholarship on the NSAA is mostly confined to studies on the normative repercussions (e.g., challenges to international law or legitimate polity), political consequences (e.g., collapsed state), or theoretical debates (e.g., debating their "actorness" or aiming to establish a research agenda in terms of frameworks, methods, and approaches). Not only are studies on the NSAAs in the Middle East are rare, but there is also an urgent need for systematic exploration and detailed analysis of the organizational, ideological, and strategic preferences of these perplexing actors. Instead of the existing approaches that tackle the phenomenon from mostly normative, descriptive, or theoretical perspectives, the present volume aims to be informative and analytical.

The main challenge in studying the case of Middle East pertains to the question of developing a comprehensive framework of analysis in relation to the non-state armed groups that differ greatly in terms of size, objectives, structure, leadership, command capabilities, mode of operations, and resources and political discourses (Podder 2013, p. 17). Despite their divergent forms, the NSAAs of the Middle East also share certain characteristics and contradictions. First, despite the brutal and grotesque nature of their violence, they depend on certain belief structures and need to legitimize the use of violent means for drawing moral and material support. Legitimation, belief structures, and ideologies are necessary also to construct, maintain, and mobilize the identities. Secondly, due to strategic as well as tactical reasons, they ought to simultaneously militarize various domestic and international audiences. The militarization of the latter and NSAAs themselves takes place through the gendered power relations which help to provide international legitimacy, new forms of authority, and protection (Cohn 2013, p. 26). The recruitment of female warriors inside a NSAAs appeals to the women and girls' sense of equality, of being taken seriously, respect and liberation (as it was the case in Kobane War discussed in this volume). The women and girls serve not only as labor force or logistical support but also as demonstrate the "depth of power and determination" of the armed group as well as being a powerful symbolic move in "sustaining the groups" claim on legitimacy and, hence, power (Mazurana 2013, p. 166). Consequently, facing the context of radical and violent transformations in the Middle East, it is necessary to rethink the underlying assumptions about the NSAAs and device new tools for examining who these mostly new actors are and what their likely effects might be on the changing nature of sovereignty, violence, and regional security architecture.

As for the operational settings, although the NSAAs have been functional in the context of interstate conflict, the newly emerged NSAAs are better understood as part and parcel of the intra-state and civil war contexts as well as numerous proxy wars which reflect the non-Westphalian features of the contemporary conflict patterns particularly in the Middle East. The NSAAs are exceptional in that they get involved in what Holtsi (1996, p. 36) has termed "wars of the third kind, characterized by absence of the fixed territorial boundaries." This is particularly true in the cases of the ISIS (also known as Islamic State), YPG (People's Protection Units; Kurdish: Yekîneyên Parastina Gel), and PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party or PKK (Kurdish: Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê)), which help to transform and influence the conventional nature of the state conduct, for they create a new type of non-state practice of sovereignty, geopolitics, territoriality, and even a non-state foreign policy. As will be examined throughout the book, the NSAAs of the Middle East undergo a peculiar institutionalization process of military strategy and tactics since they employ different ideologies and conceptions of territoriality, having different sets of foreign policy practices and decision-making processes (Balcı 2017; Ogur and Baykal, in this volume).

This introduction surveys some of the central themes and highlights their relevance to our understanding of the new dynamics of NSAAs before providing an overview of the contributions in the volume. While there exist various subspecies with peculiar characteristics, it outlines the main factors and recent developments that have contributed to the emergence and proliferation of NSAAs in the Middle East following the post-Arab Spring and the hyper-localization of Syrian Civil War. It then focuses on the debates about the NSAAs so as to provide a framework of analysis by highlighting the new components of non-state armed groups in the Middle East.

THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

One of the important issues regarding the NSAAs is how a non-state armed group should be conceptually defined as well as the threshold conditions for an organization to become a NSAA. There is no clear definition for the NSAAs as many disciplines have their own understanding based on differing theoretical frameworks. Krause and Milliken claim that the definitions about NSAAs are very broad and different from each other but in general "the traditional definitions revolve around the idea

that it is 'an armed, non-state actor in contemporary wars…[with] a minimal degree of cohesiveness as an organization (to be distinguished as an entity and to have a name, to have some kind of leadership) and a certain duration of its violent campaign'" (Krause and Milliken 2009, p. 202). A NSAA can be defined as an entity with an ideology and freedom of action which use (unpredictable) violent tactics or means to achieve political aims, to reach out to a range of constituency and have control over a particular territorial space or people. In this volume, we define it as an armed group, which is able to exercise successful and sustained control over a territory to carry out concerted military operations in order to achieve political goals. Articulated as such, NSAA's common features would include the following: being organized and operating outside state control; use of violence to achieve political and military objectives; and the irregularity of military actions and semi-state structure to operationalize objectives (Roberto and Melos 2014, p. 247).[1]

In addition to the contested nature of NSAAs in the literature, it should be noted that they frequently come out in hybrid forms (Mulaj 2014) in which different types have a different set of agenda. A common denominator is that the NSAAs have strategic aims and use violent means to meet their political ends (Mishali-Ram 2009; Kydd and Walter 2006; Harmon 2001). Some scholars prefer making a differentiation between religious NSAAs (Mendelsohn 2005) and ethnic NSAAs (Mishali-Ram 2009), given the fact that in contemporary world politics these two types are more common outcomes than a classical intra-state conflict since the Cold War. The NSAAs can also be characterized by their actions as to whether they challenge or maintain the status quo and how their primary motivations and strategies come to conceptualize, securitize, and operationalize political and military settings vis-à-vis the conflict.

In this volume, we explore the NSAAs in the Middle East by examining their organizational structure, violent actions, goals, the conflict

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[1] Regarding the main categories, Krause and Milliken name five: (1) Insurgent groups; (2) Militant groups; (3) Urban gangs and warlords; (4) Private militias, police forces and security companies; and (5) Transnational groups (Krause and Milliken 2009, pp. 204–205). A similar division is given by Aydinli with six main groups: (1) Insurgents; (2) Other domestic militant groups; (3) Warlords/urban gangs; (4) Private militias/military companies; (5) Terrorists; and (6) Criminal organizations (Aydinli2013, p. 4). Despite such a classification, Aydinli claims that the best way to reflect on the NSAA is by analyzing three main principles: autonomy, representation, and influence.

region where they operate, and the recruitment methods. The contributing articles of the volume examine the NSAAs by mainly focusing on three different levels: (1) geographical environment/territorial logic, (2) organizational structure, and (3) ideational preferences/identity. The first category seeks to provide contextual explanation by focusing on the political, economic, and social landscape to find out empirical commonalities. Within this context, it can be argued, for instance, that there are multidimensions driving the environmental forces behind the rise of PYD and ISIS as the main non-state armed actors in the Middle East. The second category focuses on the internal dynamics, structure, and recruitment patterns. The ways the Middle Eastern NSAAs are assembled are manifold. While the YPG is organizationally designed in accordance with the logistical and managerial experiences of its sister organization the PKK; the ISIS's organizational structure and its internal dynamics are a novelty, compared to the YPG. It is, therefore, necessary to note the similarities and differences by way of looking at the organizational and internal dynamics. The organizational structure of NSAAs has an important role in their ability to expand, seize territory, and defend it. For instance, ISIS's success in seizing extensive territory in Syria and Iraq could not happen without adapting to the new circumstances. ISIS's expansion was in fact made possible by two mechanisms: forming alliances with local groups in Syria and Iraq, and developing logistic support networks throughout the region. Also, by exploiting a vacuum in state power ISIS has extended its ruling and organizational capacity on vast areas such as enforcing religious law on local communities and by recruiting young soldiers. ISIS has also worked on establishing new governance patterns such as codifying the sharia laws and an official justice system, organized tax collection, and even a formal education system. The third category provides a new analytical perspective that highlights the territorial logic through which the NSAAs employ conceptions of sovereignty, legitimacy, and identity/ideology. This category provides insights into how they utilize territory to achieve social control, communication, classification of subjects (inclusion and exclusion), and politico-symbolic representation of people and things. Here, our aim is to analyze how the context and environment affect the operations of NSAAs in the Middle East and how strategy, tactics, and ideologies take shape in the Middle East.

The increasing role of the NSAAs in the Middle East cannot be simply limited to the existing classifications. The type of relationship developed

between the NSAAs and states also provide an important angle to grasp their impact on the regional politics. Some of the NSAAs analyzed in this volume such as PKK, PYD-YPG, and ISIS are organized distinct from the state or in opposition to it since they often demand a state of their own. In the case of ISIS and PYD, for instance, they are actively engaged in a process of state-building through setting up parallel administrations within the territory under control and/or through military means in the process of armed struggle against the target states. However, the NSAAs and states are not always opposite entities but rather stand along a continuum (Zohar 2016). Indeed, the present volume documents how some NSAAs in the Middle East not only coexist with the state, but are co-opted by it.

The existing state structure is an integral part of the exercise of violence in reconsolidating the said state's power over the control of a designated territory. This may, of course, also reflect the state's weakness as in the cases of Iraq and Syria. For the central governments of Iraq and Syria can hardly take full control of the distant parts of their states only through security means since they either lack the military means or operate in a civil war context. It is in such circumstances that the governments prefer to use the non-state armed actors as their proxies in order to exercise control over the territory. For instance, the distribution and relocation of authority from state to non-state armed actors is evident in the case of the US military support to YPG as the main proxy in the fight against ISIS in Syria (Ogur and Baykal, in this volume). The Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in Iraq has become central in the exercise of Iraqi state power in countering ISIS. Likewise, the Shia militias and Hezbollah in Syria have become the central elements in the exercise of Iranian state power vis-à-vis the Syrian opposition groups and other regional states such as Turkey or Saudi Arabia (Duman and Sonmez, in this volume). These mobilization and recruitment patterns give rise to the vertical (in the case of PMF in Iraq) and horizontal (in the case of Hezbollah in Syria) use of violence by a state both in its own territory and in another country's territorial jurisdiction. Such practices of violence can transform the conventional logic of state sovereignty as well as the conventional dynamics of the NSAAs.

In addition to the uses and misuses of state sovereignty, there are other levels through which NSAAs become operational. The fact that they challenge the monopoly of state sovereignty and violence while acquiring domestic as well as international support may suggest that the

status alone is not sufficient to determine a NSAA's legitimacy. Many of the NSAAs seek to change the political system in which they operate, given the revolutionary agenda they often employ. While some-like ISIS-hold ambitions to change the world system in the long run by imposing a single political rule driven by religious principles instead of secular ideologies of nationalism, others want to change the political structure of a particular state as in the case of the Syrian Kurdish PYD or PKK. Some do not even recognize the long established international borders by staging fights simultaneously in different countries. The religion-based NSAAs in the Middle East are involved in external wars more frequently than before compared to other NSAAs. The ISIS, al-Nusra, al-Qaeda, and others reject Arab nationalism in their fight for territorial control in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Yemen. While Hezbollah is fighting against other religion-based NSAAs in Syria alongside the Assad regime and Yemen alongside the Hutti militias under the supervision of Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), al-Qaeda is fighting against the Assad regime under the supervision of the al-Qaeda central command.

THE ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The NSAAs do not simply emerge from social or political vacuums. They have distinct historical and organizational backgrounds, and they emerged in response to a particular set of conditions, including grievance, insecurity, spoils, and opportunities for state-building (Mulaj 2014). For instance, during the twentieth century the NSAAs were formed as a reaction against the processes of consolidation of state power. In particular, during the second half of the twentieth century they became important players that could mount several challenges to the existing practices of state sovereignty by playing major roles in reshaping the ethno-sectarian compositions leading to internal wars (Williams 2008, p. 5). In the post-Arab Spring era, however, the NSAAs appear to present major challenges to the Westphalian norms of state articulated mainly around the idea of monopoly of use of force (Yesiltas and Kardas, this volume). In most of the contemporary conflicts in the Middle East, the NSAAs are not only challenging the idea of monopoly of use of force as a result of state weakness, but they are also the main determinants behind the institutional weakness of a state with their continuous pounding (Durac 2015). In this respect, they are tied to the root causes of military or armed conflict, that is, ethno-sectarian tensions and

civil war; economic inequalities; regional interventions; land-use issues; and historical, social, and political injustices (Mulaj 2010). All aforementioned grievances are among the main forces behind the proliferation of the non-state armed actors such as Hamas, Hezbollah, al-Qaeda, PKK, YPG, and ISIS. In addition, the tragic rise of the NSAAs in the Middle East region was particularly shaped firstly by the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, the gradual decline of Iraqi state structure, the hyper-localized civil wars from Libya to Yemen, and the spillover effects (Dal 2016) of the Syrian Civil War over the neighboring countries (Young et al. 2014). With all the ingredients of a powder cake in the making, in the following section we identify the main factors that have contributed to the spread of NSAAs in the Middle East.

Decline of State Structure

One of the important determinants behind the proliferation of NSAAs in the Middle East is the gradual decline of the state structure. There is a mutually constitutive relationship between the state weakness and the emergence of NSAAs (Mulaj 2014). The Middle Eastern state system is a typical example in which the states with low legitimacy, high repression, and little capacity to allay security concerns and violence against the civilians provoke the formation of the NSAAs. For instance, according to Thomas and Kiser (2002) "extreme coercive action" by the state contributes to the decline of state structures by provoking violent opposition groups to arise. Violent government suppressions and tit-for-tat violence can rapidly escalate into conflict and lead to the creation of a plethora of new groups, having catalytic effects in the rise of non-state armed actors since individuals tend respond to insecurity by mobilizing to protect their communities. During the protests in Syria, Libya, Yemen, and Egypt, violent techniques used by regimes inadvertently created "self-replenishing cycle of violence" (Nadin and Cammaert 2014).

In the rise of new violent armed actors and their proliferation in the Middle East, legitimacy is one of the important determinant factors despite starkly different demographic and political backgrounds. Political legitimacy "is the right to rule" (Sodaro 2008, p. 103). During the Syrian Civil War and other revolutionary cases throughout the Arab Spring, the regimes were unable to provide the political and religious bases for legitimacy. The lack of political space—let alone democratic politics—and the ongoing delegitimization of existing state

institutions in Libya, Syria, Egypt, Iraq, and Yemen helped to create new power vacuums, which in turn paved the way for an extra maneuvering space for the non-state armed actors to consolidate their grip and capabilities while creating a parallel state structure of authority and violence (Khan 2013). As discussed in this volume, the cases of PYD-YPG in Syria and the ISIS in Iraq and Syria are particularly exceptional in that a non-state armed group consolidated its power and authority along with the traditional state structures when the state lost its political legitimacy over its territory.

The issue of the decline of the state structure as the determinant of the proliferation of NSAAs is not only limited with the lack of political legitimacy of state institutions. The problem of cruel repression of the civilian population is another reason behind the establishment of the non-state military actors especially in the Middle Eastern context. The politics of authoritarian repression is the key strategy for regime survival across the Middle East during the Arab Spring (Droz-Vincent 2014). As the Arab Spring spread across North Africa and into the Middle East, the regimes and ruling elites set about a reassessment of their capacity for continued rule. This involved adjusting the authoritarianism and violent actions against those who got involved in the demonstrations. The Syrian regime, for example, pursued all forms of dissent, detaining people, suspended opposition political societies, and violently attacked against the civilian people. In the early stage of Syrian spring, the conflict was mainly related to a political crisis in which people wanted to change the system in a democratic way. As the regime maintained its repression and violence, the crisis itself transformed toward an open armed conflict between the regime forces and the emergent opposition groups and new non-state armed groups within the Syria. The subsequent violent reaction carried out by the regime quickly forced the militarization of its opponents, which provided free space for their counter-violence (Ulutas 2016).

Territorial Claims

Territory not only provides a political resource with which support and consolidation for the NSAAs' are secured, but it is also one of the most significant ideological markers of belonging. In Syria and Iraq, the territorial claims of the NSAAs not only simply shape the organizational structures, tactics, and strategies used, but they also help to constitute

political subjectivity. As the cases discussed in this volume concur (Yesiltas and Kardas, this volume), the territorial logic of the NSAAs has two complementary dimensions: conception of territoriality and tactics of territoriality (Jabareen 2015). The conception of territoriality refers to the manner in which non-state military actors conceive of territoriality. The tactical dimension of territoriality refers to the military and political means deployed in order to achieve the conceived territoriality (Elden 2009; Vollaard 2009). For instance, the Syrian Kurdish PYD and its armed wing YPG present two important examples showing how a non-state armed group conceptualizes and develops a semi-governmental and military logic regarding the establishment and management of territories. ISIS is another example in seeing territory as the main battle ground that not only creates a safe zone for the organization itself but also produces a new constructed space of identity as part of their apocalyptic vision in relation to the political and military warfare (McCants 2015).

PMF in Iraq can also be given as another example showing how a militia group is established in part due to the weak state structure to protect holly Shia places against the ISIS and turned into a state-sponsored military actor in Iraq and beyond. These cases show that the non-state armed actors might easily use and mobilize the violence not only for protecting themselves and their territory but also for constituting a new space of political subjectivity. Therefore, the conception of territoriality should be taken into consideration as a response to the grievances that helps the rise of the NSAAs in the Middle East.

Regional Context

Regional context must also be considered in assessing the drivers of conflict and rise of NSAAs in the Middle East. The warring neighborhoods as well as overall regional power competition affect the dynamics of interaction between the state, NSAAs, and the non-state conflict across the region. Conflicts rarely conform to the boundaries of the state, since many conflicts in the region transcend borders and come to resemble entire regional complexes. Conflicts after the Arab revolutions, the intensification of the Syrian Civil War, and the regionalizing dynamics of conflict are not merely a case of spillover, but different threat perceptions among the leading regional and international actors (Kadercan, in this volume).

The process of the establishment and evolution of the Hasd Shaabi (PMF) as the main state-sponsored military actor in Iraq's fight against ISIS is another interesting example showcasing how the regional context transforms the antagonistic relations between the Sunni and the Shia Arabs (Duman and Sonmez, in this volume). While Hasd Shaabi was erstwhile constructed as the main defender of the Shia population and holy cities in Iraq against ISIS with the assistance of the Iranian government, it has also become an alternative power house in the context of Iraqi domestic politics against the other non-state military actors such as Peshmerga and Sunni Arab militias. Other regional actors such as Turkey are supporting Hashd al-Vatani composing of mainly Sunni Arab in Iraq in an effort to deter the influence of Shia militias toward the northern Iraq. Because of the hyper-localized regional competition among the regional actors, the non-state armed groups find an opportunity to consolidate their power, expand their organizational structure, and gain a social base in which they construct their identity.

External Military Intervention

Systemic factors such as international balance of power or great power competition often intensify regional conflicts and has the capacity to limit the duration and scope of regional wars, leading, for instance, to the "cold peace" in the Middle East after the Cold War (Miller 2007, p. 255). It is difficult to think of the emergence and prevalence of the NSAAs in the Middle East without the role of external military intervention. However, great powers can hardly prevent wars in the Middle East since it is mostly the unit-level dynamics and regional pressures that together shape the local powers' conflict patterns. Regional or external systemic military interventions can still accelerate as well as halt the proliferation of NSAAs. For instance, the Russian involvement in the Syrian Civil War in late 2015 not only shifted the existing balance of power in the Iran's favor, it also halted the proliferation of the rival Sunni NSAAs. Additionally, the long-running rivalry between regional powers (Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia) played out itself as a proxy campaign affecting other neighboring countries, with Iran supporting the Hezbollah in Syria alongside the Assad regime against the opposition forces supported by Turkey and Saudi Arabia.

THE STRATEGIC AND TACTICAL CONTEXT

The NSAAs also significantly differ in relation to strategies and tactics used. Many usually adopt a *hybrid* military strategy in their efforts to gain and maintain control of territory, the self-proclamation of sovereignty, and internal order accompanied by a proto-state structure (Lia 2015). Hybrid warfare is simply a combination of conventional and irregular warfare (Manea 2015). Its main characteristics include a blend of conventional military means, guerilla warfare, flexible and adaptable pragmatic strategy applying differing techniques simultaneously, mobile cells, terror campaigns with excessive violence, propaganda networks actively using social media, a communication strategy using information warfare techniques, and a criminal network using all illegal ways to access sources of revenue (Jasper and Moreland 2016; Parameswaran 2015; Alzamalkani 2015; Hoffman 2009).

For example, ISIS exhibits almost all the characteristics of the abovementioned features of *hybrid* warfare (Zelin 2016). The menu for choice in the hybrid warfare for the NSAAs in the Middle East differs in relation to the particularities of location and target. While techniques and tactics of war and assault are used by the organization in the interior ring as some elements of the hybrid warfare techniques are used in some countries (where the state structure is collapsed or some of the state structures are uncontrollable) in the near abroad ring, and terror attacks are committed mostly in the far abroad ring.

THE PLAN OF THIS BOOK

This book seeks to provide a critical analysis of the "new" in the Middle East after the Arab uprisings by taking into account the newly emerged non-state armed groups and their impact on the rise of violent geopolitics. It is organized around the main empirical cases within the ambit of our aforementioned frameworks. Part I deals with the Kurdish non-state armed groups within the context of emerging Kurdish geopolitical space during and after the Arab Spring, the transformation of Kurdish identity across the region, internationalization of the Kurdish entities, and the changing nature of non-state foreign policy strategies. It particularly seeks to understand the role of ISIS's offense against the Kurds in the making of the new Kurdish strategic and tactical codes and their political

subjectivity across the region. Part II deals with the saga of ISIS as the leading "revolutionary" non-state armed groups from different angles to unpack its historical transformation, organizational structure, territorial logic, teo-political discourse, and its strategy of warfare from its foundation to the present. This part draws attention to three interrelated dynamics. First, the emergency of ISIS is best seen as the (6th) revolt against the West currently underway in the contemporary Middle East. Second, ISIS' success and failure cannot be divorced from the multidimensional crises of the state and society in the Middle East. Third, it is necessary to consider the groups' impact on the greater Middle East with respect to two related dimensions: sectarian tensions and ethnic relations. Part III deals with three broader interrelated contexts with regard to the non-state armed groups in the Middle East: First, it examines the role of sectarian and religious aspects of the non-state armed actors in the context of national, regional, and international dynamics; second, it particularly underlines the advent of new armed non-state actors in the Iraqi case with specific reference to the Shia militias known as Hashd Saabi; third, it provides an empirical and analytical framework to grasp the transformation of the regional security relations and political complexities by taking into consideration YPG, ISIS, and Shia militias.

In all, this book investigates the nature and changing roles of non-state armed groups with a special focus on Kurdish, Shia, and Islamic State groups in the Middle East. It seeks to contribute to the study of violent geopolitics, critical security studies, and international relations by particularly focusing on the new empirical insights regarding the main non-state armed groups in the Middle East. By employing its analytical perspective in understanding the nature of transformation of the new Middle Eastern geopolitical space, this volume seeks to provide new insights into the impact of three prominent actors, namely ISIS, YPG, and Shia militias. It puts the main analytical foci on the changing contours of sovereignty, geopolitics, border, secularism, and ideology in the Middle East. Overall, this book offers a variety of analyses about the transformation wrought by the NSAA in the context of the changing Middle Eastern politics, particularly after the Arab uprisings. One of the distinctive features of this book is its detailed, multifaceted engagement with the subject matter. For instance, unlike now abundant studies on the nature and origins of radical religious organizations, this book explores relatively less-known topics such as the prospect for the militant jihadists to acquire and use nuclear and radiological weapons to expedite

the new Caliphate; the political decision-making processes of the Syrian Kurdish PYD/YPG; the increasing prominence of the new controversial Shia militia force in the Middle East Hashd Shaabi; and the intriguing resilience of foreign fighters in the Middle East.

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Author's Biography

Murat Yeşiltaş has completed his BA and MA at the Department of International Relations of Sakarya University, in 2003 and 2009, respectively. He earned his PhD at the Department of Political Science and International Relations at Marmara University in 2012. Yeşiltaş was a visiting researcher at the Department of European Studies and International Politics of Lancaster University between 2008 and 2009, and also at Virginia Tech's Institute of Government and International Affairs between 2010 and 2011. He served as an academic advisor for Center for Strategic Studies (SAM) of Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey between 2012 and 2014. Currently, Yeşiltaş is an Associate Professor in the Middle East Institute at Sakarya University. He also holds the position of Director of security studies at SETA Foundation, Ankara, Turkey. Yeşiltaş's current researches are on critical geopolitics, ethnic/religious radicalization, geopolitics of non-state conflicts, terrorism, and the Kurdish affairs. He is currently working on the following research projects: Kurdish Geopolitical Space: Remaking of the Kurdish Political Subjectivity and the New Kurdish Geopolitical Imagination; and the New Regional Security Project (NRSP). His most recent books are *Türkiye Dünyanın Neresinde?Hayali Coğrafyalar Çarpışan Anlatılar* (Where is Turkey Located? Imagined Geographies, Competing Narratives) (2015, Koc University Press) and *Geopolitical Mentality and the Military in Turkey* (2016, Kadim).

Dr. Tuncay Kardaş is Associate Professor of international relations at the Middle East Institute of Sakarya University. He received his BA and MA degrees from Bilkent University in Ankara; MsEcon (security studies) and Ph.D. from the Department of International Politics at Aberystwyth University in Wales in 2006. He is currently serving as the Deputy Director of the Middle East Institute of Sakarya University. His research focuses broadly on sociology of security, foreign fighters, the ISIS, critical security studies, security governmentality, visual semiotics, and Turkish foreign policy. Dr. Kardas is the Co-editor of "The Borders of Islam: Exploring Samuel Huntington's Faultlines, from Al-Andalus to Virtual Ummah," (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

His most recent articles appeared in Turkish Studies, such as Middle East Critique, Insight Turkey, Birikim, Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations, and Economics and Management: Current Issues and Perspectives. Dr. Kardaş's current researches are on foreign fighters, Islamic radicalization, and the Kurdish conflict. He is currently working on the following research projects: Turkish foreign fighters; ISSDIT: Inter-Societal Security Dilemmas in Turkey; and ISSDIME: Inter-Societal Security Dilemmas in the Middle East. He is the organizer of Crisis and Critique Conferences and an editorial board member of Ortadoğu Yıllığı. His most recent research is titled "The Inter-Societal Security Dilemma in Turkey: Kurdish Opening" Turkish Studies with Ali Balci published in Turkey Studies.

The Transformation of the Regional Order and Non-state Armed Actors: Pathways to the Empowerment

Şaban Kardaş

This chapter will start by analyzing different dimensions of the regional transformation. Those dimensions will be elaborated in five different headings. Then, it will be argued that the undoing of the regional order has given way to a new wave of insecurities, corresponding to four sectors of security, namely state security, regime security, societal security, human security, and interstate security. These various patterns of insecurity, in turn, created different causal pathways that explain the emergence, proliferation, and empowerment of the NSAAs. This chapter will identify some of these causal pathways that produce different categories of the NSAAs, which are elaborated throughout this edited volume.

Ş. Kardaş (✉)
TOBB Economy and Technology University, Sogutozu Cad No.43,
Cankaya, Ankara, Turkey
e-mail: sabankardas@gmail.com

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Introduction

For the last few years, regional security environment has been shaped by the cycle of insecurity and instability underpinning the broader Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The tectonic structural change in the MENA has reached such a level that the region is destabilized by multi-faceted conflicts, characterized by the involvement of many local, regional, and global actors. The risks and security challenges produced by the wave of instability and conflicts have proved beyond the means and ability of the regional and international conflict resolution mechanisms to contain. As the institutions of the states-system have been unable to stabilize the regional order, violent non-state actors have grown in numbers (Mulaj 2014), expanded their capacity, and started to play decisive roles in regional security affairs.

To better contextualize the proliferation of the non-state armed actors (NSAAs), therefore, one has to look at the contours of the regional transformation. The years of turmoil have made it very obvious that the regional order was undergoing a major transformation, which is clearly reflected in the discussions on the future of the Sykes-Picot order, which arguably laid the foundations of the modern day Middle Eastern states-system in the post-Ottoman era (Yesiltas and Kardas, in this volume). As the phenomenon of NSAAs evolves within these overlapping processes of the reconfiguration of the states, the region and regional security dynamics, the chapter will start by analyzing different dimensions of the regional transformation. Below, those dimensions will be elaborated in five different headings. Then, it will be argued that the undoing of the regional order has given way to a new wave of insecurities, corresponding to four sectors of security, namely state security, regime security, societal and human security, and interstate security. These various patterns of insecurity, in turn, created different causal pathways that explain the emergence, proliferation, and empowerment of the NSAAs. This chapter will identify some of these causal pathways that produce different categories of the NSAAs, which are elaborated throughout this edited volume.

Transformation of the Regional Order

It has been widely acknowledged that the transformation in the MENA regional order has been sparked by a wave of popular uprisings, called the Arab Spring. Although the promise of democratic transformation

heralded by the initial phase of the Arab Spring generated optimism, in its second phase, the regional transformation has increasingly been viewed in pessimistic terms. The initial prognoses for democratization have given way to mixed feelings about the future direction of regional transformation. The authoritarian comeback in Egypt, an ongoing conflict in Iraq, Libya, and the Syrian civil war have all altered the regional and extra-regional attitudes toward the regional transformation, whereby the rise of new security threats shaped all actors' approach to the region. Today, the MENA region is perceived riskier than was at the outset of the Arab Spring, due to a multitude of destabilizing factors. A growing number of NSAAs have been one major manifestation of this new insecure environment, as they have contributed to the rapid erosion of the putative security in the MENA region.

Questioning of Borders

First, the existing borders in the region, recognized under international law, are increasingly questioned and challenged. Regional turmoil dealt a serious blow to the borders, marking the modern interstate system in the MENA, which emerged in the wake of the Ottoman order and then the process of decolonization. The questioning of borders is happening at least in two different directions. On the one hand, the borders are losing their function and meaning, such that in many parts of the region they have been rendered irrelevant, due to the movement of refugees, militants, arms, and other supplies across borders beyond control and regulation by legal authorities. The state authorities, from Libya to Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan, can no longer exert effective control over their international borders, as they are challenged by a myriad of actors. The loss of control over crossing of people, goods, or weapons over borders or control of the same borders by actors other than the states renders the borderlines growingly meaningless.

On the other hand, the current borders recognized under international law are increasingly threatened and challenged, both in intellectual discussions and on the ground. The intractable conflicts in different countries have proved to be so resilient that the idea of "redrawing borders" is gaining momentum as a way to solve the underlying problems (Ayoob 2015). As such arguments are repeated in different quarters, there has emerged questions as to whether some of the "nation-states" can sustain their current borders in the years to come. It is in this context

that there have been calls for the dismemberment of some countries and the emergence of new states in the region. The local actors advocating such agendas have contributed to the empowerment of NSAAs.

Erosion of Sovereignty, Authority, and Governance

Second, popular upheavals led to the erosion of national authority, raising issues of legitimacy, and governance. Initially, the Arab Spring was a direct challenge to the legitimacy of extant regimes, as it was grounded in calls for good governance. Some regimes like the Gulf monarchies managed to weather the storm, either through gradual reforms or a mix of sticks and carrots. Others with weak state structures or limited resources failed to respond to the pressures and witnessed regime change. Due to the authorities' failure to stabilize the transition, the ensuing conflict cycle continues to plague their ability to govern. Governing at a time of tectonic regional transformation is proving impossible at worst and very difficult and costly at best. Today, although various countries have experienced the regional transformation in their unique ways, they all face problems of governance and are challenged by the erosion of state sovereignty.

The erosion of sovereignty and state authority further puts pressure on the nation-states, hence, the states-system in the Middle East. The national authorities, which continue to possess legal sovereignty under international law and represent their countries in international institutions, are no longer able to govern the entirety of their territories. There are competing centers of power that have established effective controls over large parts of several states, sometimes crosscutting existing state boundaries. As a result, either in the form of redesign of the existing administrative structures through federalism or in the form of dismemberment of the states, the future shape of the Middle Eastern political map remains uncertain (Kardaş 2016). In any case, in this environment, the region is full of failed or failing states, which are creating large areas that are ungoverned or outside the boundaries of legality. Such ungoverned spaces created a fertile ground for various terrorist groups, insurgents, or criminal networks to act outside of legality and international jurisdiction. Particularly, the new wave of militant extremist groups capitalized on the weak state structures and ungoverned spaces to expand their operations and use such areas as safe heavens (Hazbun 2015). Consequently, the region has been suffering from various security threats that have flourished in this chaotic environment.

Empowerment of Sub-national Actors and Identities

Third, sub-national actors and identities are empowered during the process of regional restructuring, largely at the expense of the "nation-state" model. On the one hand, the political mobilization around ethnic, sectarian, tribal, or local-regional loyalties is undermining the achievements of the controversial nation-state model in the region. At the same time, the empowerment of sub-national actors and identities has highlighted the mismatch between borders and societies. The so-called Sykes-Picot order, which laid the foundations of the modern interstate system in the post-Ottoman Middle East, was partly characterized by the artificiality of the borders (Sayyid 2014). The new states were far from homogenous while their societies were made up by numerous ethnic, religious, sectarian, or linguistic groups. During the colonial and post-colonial era, the governance models adopted in the regional countries have failed to manage the ethnic and sectarian diversity and mold them into a national identity. Although the nation-state model was never perfect in this part of the world, nonetheless, it achieved some semblance of national identity throughout the twentieth century. Now, the empowerment of sub-state identities and actors is threatening the putative national identity and risking fragmentation along ethnic, religious-sectarian, or local-regional identities.

On the other hand, various actors ranging from criminal networks to militant groups are expanding their resources and capabilities. As they are engaged in different forms of violence and criminality, they also work to weaken the public authority, hence the sovereign nation-state model (Williams 2008). The main challenge before the region in the years to come will be to address the demands of the various sub-state actors within an inclusive and participatory framework. If the regional countries fail to manage this highly mobilized bottom-up wave, the nation-state model is likely to encounter further destructive challenges coming from those sub-state actors adopting violence as their method of political expression.

Structural Instability

Fourth, there is a vicious circle between the economic and social underdevelopment on the one hand, and political underdevelopment on the other, which is producing structural instability in the MENA region. The

worsening socioeconomic conditions are feeding the political underdevelopment, while the poor political institutions are weakening the prospects for socioeconomic progress. The consequence of this vicious cycle is that the specter of state collapse is on the rise in this new environment, as was experienced in different countries. The descent into conflict, let alone meeting some of these demands for reform within a reasonable framework, in the last couple of years has brought several states on the verge of state collapse or undermined their ability to govern. The lack of a stable framework for and inability to govern the political transition has once again securitized the political demands in the region.

It is in this context important to remember that the regional transformation process was triggered by the Arab Spring. It was a genuine call for socioeconomic and political reform, with Arab people demanding bottom-up transformation. Although that process was interrupted by the spread of conflict in the region, what prompted the masses to go on to the streets at the beginning of the Arab Spring remains ever more relevant today. The underlying social, economic, and political grievances are still there, with no realistic prospect of resolving them any time soon. As a result, the region is characterized by deep structural instability, which will be aggravated by the demographic trends and other socioeconomic indicators. This observation suggests that if the regional actors and international community fail to assist the socioeconomic reforms and transition toward representative political structures, the region is likely to encounter new waves of destabilizing uprisings.

Lack of Conflict Resolution Mechanisms

Fifth, the lack of effective conflict resolution mechanisms in the region worsens the manifold problems already outlined. The above-mentioned processes have presented such deep socioeconomic and political challenges that they have produced an ever-widening security gap in the MENA region. When a region goes through such a deep wave of instability, the most needed instrument is a collective security mechanism to deescalate tensions and pacify conflicts. The MENA region lagged far behind other parts of the world in terms of developing regional conflict mechanisms. This has been demonstrated once again at this critical juncture: The regional actors failed to develop a regional solution to the crises ranging from Libya to Syria, relying instead on international powers. The weakness of regional or international conflict resolution mechanisms, in turn, has aggravated political problems (Kardaş 2016).

The old mechanism of external security provision by the international actors, which used to suppress violence, however questionable it might have been, has proved increasingly ineffective in this current cycle of violence. On the one hand, the new course of American foreign policy, where the incumbent US administration preferred to lessen commitments in the Middle East, has undercut its constructive peace broker role in the regional disputes. The declining US security provision on the one hand and the changing regional geopolitics in the wake of the Iranian nuclear deal have triggered security competition among major regional actors. On the other hand, the involvement of Russia to expand its influence in the region escalated the tensions and increased the potential for further conflicts. The lack of regional mechanisms has been revealed more blatantly with the deepening conflict spirals in Syria, Iraq, or Libya, where local, regional, and global rivalries have led to various forms of direct conflicts and proxy wars throughout the region (Durac 2015). As the regional rivalries have been further aggravated, fueled by the destabilizing involvement of global actors, the security environment in the region has been further deteriorated.

Wave of Regional Insecurities: Pathways to NSAAs

The new wave of regional insecurities has bred a conducive environment within which NSAAs have flourished and been empowered. Definitely, one critical variable explaining the emergence and success of NSAAs is the ability of a particular group to take advantage of the opportunities provided by the new regional environment. There are, however, various ways and causal mechanisms within which the proliferation of these groups is happening (Yeşiltaş and Kardaş, in this volume). While the empowerment of NSAAs is taking place in a radically altered regional environment, they are also supported directly and indirectly by actors ranging from their respective states to regional powers and international actors. Based on the foregoing discussion, below, four causal mechanisms will be explicated, each corresponding to a different sector of (in)security (Table 2.1).

State (in)Security

As has been discussed, as a result of the erosion of sovereignty and governance, national authorities are hardly able to exert full control over the entirety of their countries. At the same time, the spread of arms or militants across state borders continues to destabilize regional countries

Table 2.1 Pathways to the empowerment of NSAAs

Security sector	Main dynamics	Type of NSAAs empowered
State (in)security	Weakening state power	Anti-government Loyalists
Regime (in)security	Regimes' survival strategies	Loyalists Extremists
Interstate (in)security	Security competition and proxy wars	All forms
Societal and human (in)security	Kurdish and Shiite mobilization and Sunni marginalization	Sectarian Ethnic

(Dal 2016). The weakening of state capacity and the physical limits to state power have reached such levels that many regional states can no longer manage security issues and establish public order over their territory.

Subsequently, NSAAs emerge as contending centers of authority, further aggravating the problem of sovereignty and governance. Indeed, the most typical causal pathway is generated by the weakening of state authority and power. As several countries have come to the verge of failed or failing state, NSAAs emerged in the governance vacuum. In this new environment, various non-state actors now are in control of major segments of territory, resources, and population and in some cases are claiming sovereign jurisdiction over parts of regional countries and cross-border areas (Vinci 2008). In particular, the weak states and ungoverned or non-governable spaces have been utilized by the militant extremist groups to expand their clout, in which they are seeking to substitute state functions, most notably security provision.

The emergence and spread of multiple militant non-state actors in Syria is the case in point. When the Syrian uprising began, the security forces encountered difficulties in maintaining effective physical control in all parts of the country. Later, coupled with the rapid pace of defections from the regular armed forces, several armed groups emerged throughout the country (Lister 2015). Consequently, particularly the border provinces of the country fell to the control of such militant groups. Over time, more radical and extremist elements within the Syrian opposition emerged to fill the vacuum. In most cases, they gained territory from the moderate opposition forces, as was reflected in the expansion of the ISIS in northern Syria through 2013. At the same time, the PYD also took

advantage of the weakening state power to establish its own cantonal structure along northern Syria (Acun 2015; Orhan 2016).

As the Syrian regime accommodated to this new reality and developed a symbiotic relationship with some of these groups, it also facilitated the widening specter of non-state actors. In cases where the Syrian regime tried to mobilize resources to encounter that challenge, the physical limits to the state power prevented it from accomplishing that objective. In several instances, for example, the Syrian Arab Army failed in its drive to recruit new soldiers, as it sought to compensate for the losses in manpower or regain control over the areas ceded to various opposition forces. The rapid disintegration of the Syrian state's security apparatus, which led many to expect a total defeat, was stopped only by the infusion of external military elements on the side of the Syrian Arab Army and its local militia allies. The Syrian security forces still remain unable to hold the territory captured from the opposition forces, despite the enormous military assistance provided by the Iranian and Russian air and ground components as well as other foreign militias. The prospects for the Syrian security forces to reestablish the government authority in the entirety of the country are bleak, which point to the durability of the NSAAs for some time to come.

In Iraq, as well, the weakness in state capacity and authority since the first Gulf War has enabled the emergence of various non-state actors contending the central government's authority. The inability of Baghdad to reign over the Kurdistan region forced it to accommodate to the Kurdish self-governance, which was formalized through a federal structure in the wake of the US invasion in 2003. The collapse of the central authority after 2003 gave birth to several NSAAs, many of which were formed to resist the US occupation. Although most attention focused on the Sunni insurgency and Al-Qaeda affiliated groups, the spread of various Shiite armed groups also benefited from the authority vacuum. Over time, the Sunni insurgency was quelled and the various Shiite militia formations were eliminated until the rise of ISIS in Iraq in June 2014 (Duman 2015). With the rapid disintegration of the state military apparatus, however, many of those NSAA actors returned back to the Iraqi scene to fill the same governance and security vacuum. Although the rebuilding of the Iraqi national capacity was a key component of the anti-ISIS coalition's strategy, the new Iraqi state has hardly been able to eliminate the threat completely.

Regime (in)Security

As the popular movements threatened the existing political orders, the incumbent regimes in the authoritarian states have been increasingly occupied by their quest for survival. Both the initial Arab Spring spirit of democratic transformation and the subsequent risk-prone regional environment pose threats to the legitimacy and survival of several regimes in the region. In the process, the rising prominence of regime security concerns has turned many countries into virtual states. The state structures have been extremely weakened, such that even many of their functions pertaining to security provision have been assumed by NSAAs, as a result of which the sovereignty of the regional states has turned into virtual reality. In particular, various survival strategies pursued by the regimes feeling threatened by the wave of political transition have facilitated the emergence and spread of NSAAs. Among others, three strategies created unique pathways through which different NSAAs emerged: abandonment of areas deemed difficult or unworthy to govern, empowerment of loyalist militias, and dividing the opposition by facilitating the emergence of new groups.

The transformation of the Syrian theater provides the best example of these growing number of virtual states in the region, where the regimes' prime concern for their own survival has led to the emergence of different violent actors. First, from the very beginning of the Syrian uprising, the Assad regime abandoned vast areas of the country, so that it could concentrate on the densely populated urban centers, the capital, and the costal areas. As the defections and the cost of holding the entire territory increased, the regime chose to embolden its security and governance apparatus as well as to protect its own social base. As it consolidated the so-called useful Syria, the opposition forces gained control in the country's borders to Turkey, Jordan, and Syria. These areas also allowed for the penetration of various militant Salafi groups, as the Syrian revolution was hijacked by radical extremist ideologies and actors (Lister 2015). Second, in order to divide the moderate opposition and delegitimize it internationally, the regime has facilitated the extremist elements' gaining more prominence. It has been well documented how the Syrian regime released many known extremist militants in the early stages of the uprising, which later provided the nucleus of the Al-Qaeda and ISIS in the country. The deep ties the Syrian intelligence services established with the Salafi militant networks in the wake of the US invasion of Iraq allowed the regime to manipulate the course of the Syrian crisis.

Lastly, the regime's empowerment of various loyalist militia forces, partly because of its eroding power and partly because of a policy of implicit burden-sharing has further proliferated the NSAAs. Most attention has been focused on the myriad armed groups making up the "Syrian opposition," as well as the foreign fighters flooding into the country to support various militant groups. Analysts and policy makers have pinpointed the fragmentation of the opposition as one of the major security challenges in the region. Nonetheless, it is often overlooked how the security apparatus that the Syrian regime has relied on was hardly unitary. In addition to drawing on the support of its external backers, namely Russia and Iran, the Assad regime's survival strategy came to hinge on foreign and domestic militia formations, which are textbook examples of NSAAs. As the sustenance of the regime became the ultima ratio of the government in Damascus, it has expressed no jealousy in sharing its monopoly over the use of force with various domestic and regional non-state actors. On the one hand, the foreign militia groups from other countries, facilitated largely by Iran, have come to the aid of the regime (The Soufan Group 2015). On the other hand, various loyalist militia formations have flourished throughout the country, which were supported, endorsed, or facilitated by the regime. Limitations and weakness in the state security apparatus could only be compensated for by the mobilization of militia forces, which proved essential for the regime's survival strategy.

In many instances throughout the course of the Syrian civil war, militias fighting on the regime side have emerged as the lead actors to shape the fate of the conflict, thus becoming the main arbiter of the regime survival. On many fronts, the ground elements making up the fighting force for the Assad regime have been drawn from regular army units, National Defense Force (NDF), various loyalist militia, as well as sectarian militia groups from Iraq, Lebanon, Iran, and beyond. While military units from Iran and Russia under different guises complemented that picture, the domestic militia forces provided an important source of manpower in Assad's military arsenal. For instance, one of the loyalist militia forces, Qalamoun Shield, was utilized by the regime on several critical fronts. Initially, it emerged in the countryside of Damascus to fight the opposition groups alongside the border with Lebanon. The regime also encouraged participation of loyalist citizens into this militia group, as well as others. The regime issued pardons for the youth who fled conscription and military service, should they join such militia

forces. When the regime confronted shortages in its military operations in Northern Hama, this force was called to support the regime advances in the province. Later, after the fall of Palmyra to ISIS for a second time in December 2016, the reinforcement units from this loyalist militia were dispatched to the battlefield to support the regime forces.

Regime security concerns have also played a large role in the destabilization of Iraq, hence the spread of the NSAAs. The new governance structure in the post-2003 Iraq was rested on a power-sharing model along sectarian and ethnic lines. Over time, however, the dominance of the Shiite political actors led to the marginalization of other groups, which raised the societal security concerns of particularly the Sunni Arabs. The intra-Shiite political dynamics of the post-American invasion Iraq have generated an equally destabilizing dynamic. The competition among the Shiite groups and Prime Minister Nouri Al Maliki's attempts to monopolize power and build a new regime centered around his group shaped the Iraqi political scene, especially after the withdrawal of American forces by 2011 (Duman and Sönmez, in this volume). With the onset of the Arab Spring, Maliki's efforts to embolden his rule shook the delicate power-sharing arrangements even further. A new Sunni insurgency was already in the making by the end of 2013. There were arguments that he deliberately overlooked, if not allowed, the growing influence of ISIS, so that it could pursue heavy-handed repressive policies to bring the Sunni political leadership onto its kneels (Weiss and Hassan 2015). When ISIS took control of Mosul in a swift move in June 2014, the entire political dynamics changed. At a time the regular Iraqi Army was in a state of panic, the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) rose to prominence as the lead security force to stop the ISIS advance. The rapid mobilization of the PMU owed partly to the intra-elite dynamics among the Shiite groups. As part of the intra-Shiite political struggle, especially Maliki, who lost his bid for premiership for a third term by the summer of 2014, and his entourage empowered the PMU.

Interstate (in)Security

As has been outlined, the onset of the Arab Spring underscored a deep tectonic transformation in the regional security order. No actor's efforts alone were enough to assist the political transformation agenda, and diverging positions pursued by different international actors resulted in the stalling of political reforms. Increasingly, the region has been drawn

into a cycle of violence as observed in Libya, Syria, or Iraq, creating myriad security challenges that are threatening the regional order, as well as producing security externalities, for the international system at large.

When regional actors failed to develop effective instruments to prevent, mitigate, or stabilize either political disputes or military conflicts, the region's characteristic as a sub-system that is prone to the international penetration came to the forefront. From their very beginning, the crises in the region have been internationalized. The involvement of extra-regional actors, however, has been far from constructive, reflecting either the poor state of international conflict resolution mechanisms or the clash of interests shaping international reactions. The declining commitment of the international community and the policy of containment and relative disengagement deepened the vacuum of regional security governance.

Consequently, the MENA region has seen a deep cycle of insecurity, in which security competition has been the norm, dealing a serious blow to the interstate security. While the MENA region was going through radicalization, militarization, and fragmentation, in this new regional environment, initiating cooperative projects has proven difficult. Through the contagious effect, regional countries have been exposed to the security risks stemming from the conflicts. The rising tide of sectarianism, the threats posed by ISIS, the militarization of politics, and spread of ethnic terrorism have been the specific challenges that put enormous pressure on the regional actors. Similarly, there has been major potential for conflict spillover in the region, as a result of the weakening of regional order and the lack of commitment from the international actors to quell violence. The spread of the conflict from Syria to Iraq is a clear attestation of the contagious spillover effect. At the same time, polarization between the regional actors along strategic or identity-based fault lines put further stress on the interstate security. Indeed, the civil wars unfolding in Iraq and Syria had multi-faceted characteristics. In addition to being rooted in the local grievances, they have turned into a stage for the regional rivalries. The deepening polarization among regional actors, thus, came to be reflected on the battlefields.

In this highly competitive and risky security environment, regional actors have been mired in proxy wars, bordering direct confrontation. Likewise, international actors, too, were part of the same (in)security dynamics. While security competition produced proxy wars of various sorts, proxy wars, in turn, empowered a wide range of non-state actors.

For several reasons, the regional actors, as well as the international players, preferred to realize their objectives through proxies, which eventually unleashed the NSAAs throughout the region. First, the conventional thinking suggests that high costs of interstate warfare breed irregular methods, hence proxy wars. Given the risk of direct entanglement at a time of deep regional polarization, which might have proved very destructive for all parties concerned, the employment of proxies has been a less risky option. Particularly, the rift between Saudi Arabia and Iran has been the main dynamic to empower local proxies. Second, the evolution of the concept of hybrid warfare has also forced international powers to work through irregular elements on the field rather than deploying ground components. In that respect, both the USA and Russia, for their own reasons, empowered various non-state actors in the conflict zones, whereby their modern war machinery worked in support of those proxies on the ground. Third, relying on proxies has been seen a less costly option for the intervening country, in terms of both blood and treasure, than direct military engagement in the protracted civil wars. Fourth, the patrons have also found it useful to support multiple proxies as a way of disciplining their clients, which led to the multiplication of the NSAAs. Even in cases where the government in the target country was a client, regional, and international, actors still worked with different non-state armed elements.

In Syria, one can trace the evolution of those proxy dynamics very clearly. The ability of the anti-Assad opposition forces to draw support from different regional actors, particularly from Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies, has been a major factor facilitating their emergence, spread, and empowerment. In the initial phase of the Syrian uprising, even funding channeled from private sources, through charities, has been instrumental in financing various groups on the battlefield. Over time, the vetted opposition groups, loosely coming under the banner of the Free Syrian Army, also received financial and military assistance from Western actors and Turkey through the different train and equip programs, which resulted in the further fragmentation of opposition, and accompanying the growth in the number of NSAAs. The availability of weapons flows to the conflict environment has directly and indirectly facilitated the expansion of different brands of NSAAs. At the same time, the flow of foreign terrorist fighters, to a large part supported by the proxy war dynamics, further proliferated the NSAAs in the conflict. Some of those groups either evolved into more radical line or through the shifting dynamics of conflict, the assistance from international backers landed

in the hands of more extremist groups. Later, the dissatisfaction of the USA with the FSA-affiliated groups led it to tilt toward PYD/YPG. The US supply of various types of advanced military equipment, including anti-tank missiles, as well as close combat air support, empowered the PYD/YPG at the expense of others. In an illustrative example of working with various rival proxies, there was constant reporting that while the Pentagon backed the PYD/YPG, the CIA continued to support the FSA through the train and equip programs, at the risk of the two groups fighting each other occasionally (Öğür and Baykal, in this volume).

On the Syrian battle field, the very obvious proxy dynamics have also been illustrated by the pro-regime, mostly sectarian Shiite, militia formations. Given the place Syria occupied in its regional policies, Iran has been the main supporter of the Syrian regime. While a long proxy of Iran in the regional affairs, the Syrian regime's survival was ensured by the lifeline extended by Iran. In order to counter the Western and Saudi policies, Iran marshaled huge resources to rescue its proxy and ally. The manner in which Iran channeled this assistance, however, contributed to the proliferation of NSAAs even further. In addition to the direct economic and military assistance to the regime, Iran also created, assisted, or supervised several loyalist militia formations, ranging from Shabiha forces to the NDF, involving predominantly Shiite but also Druze, Christian, and other communities. Moreover, Iran also mobilized its other Shiite proxies into the Syrian battlefield, which extended a very decisive support to the Syrian regime. Especially, the deployment of the Lebanese Hezbollah, which not only provided a fighting force but also offered training to the local Syrian and other foreign Shiia militia, was instrumental in preventing the fall of the Assad regime. Similarly, the transfer of various Hashd Shaabi groups from Iraq to Syria, as well as Iran's orchestration of the recruitment, training, and transfer of sectarian fighters from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and other countries with Shiite minority played a key role in the Syrian conflict. As such, the emergence and spread of various Shiite militia forces from other countries in Syria was a stark reminder of the contagious effect of the proxy war dynamics (Duman 2015).

Similarly, the conflict in Iraq has seen a rapid proliferation of the sectarian militia formations, through proxy dynamics. Iran has for long supported various underground opposition movements in Iraq, dating back to the Saddam era. With the collapse of the Baathist rule in the wake of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Shiite political-religious

groups immediately moved to form their armed elements, which was seen as essential in the chaotic civil war environment during the US occupation. These groups received covert support from Iran, which feared a US intervention at the time. Although some of these groups were brought under the control of the Iraqi central government, with the advance of ISIS in 2014, the Shiite militia formations came to the agenda once again. Definitely, some of these groups were products of the local dynamics and are Iraqi in character, but many of them benefited from Iranian assistance in the form of military aid or training. This time, Iran was in the position of extending its assistance to these groups in a more open fashion, since a friendly government was ruling Baghdad and over time they also received legal recognition in the Iraqi military apparatus. In any case, many of these groups have been instrumental to Iran's political objectives in Iraq and the region; hence, Iran actively supported these groups.

Societal and Human (in)Security

In an altered security environment where the state authority and national identity have weakened and sub-state identities emboldened, the societal security concerns have been heightened. Ethnic, tribal, local, or sectarian grievances increasingly emerged as markers of the conflicts in Syria, Libya, Iraq, and other countries to overshadow the initial democratic character of the regional transformation. As the sub-national identities became politicized and served as tools for political and military mobilization, the nation-states have confronted with a formidable challenge. Especially considering the cross-border nature of the dominant sub-state identities, both the territorial integrity and societal security of the nation-states have been threatened. The rising specter of violent extremism, which is intermingled with the politicization of sub-national identities, has a devastating impact on many of the societies, undermining the multicultural fabric.

Parallel to societal security, human security has gone through degradation as well. With the collapse of the public order, myriad threats to individuals emerged in regional countries. The violent extremism took a heavy toll on the civilian lives. In this environment, not only non-state actors, but also the regime or government operatives have been the main perpetrators of killings and crimes against the individuals. The deterioration of human security has taken also indirect forms. For instance, the

refugees and internally displaced people have experienced extreme misery. Basic humanitarian needs have been difficult to reach, while the civilian infrastructure has been damaged by the conflicts. Overall, human development indicators have been worsened throughout the region. In this environment of eroding human security and disintegrating social fabric, the marginalization and atomization of individuals created a vast pool from which NSAAs could draw recruits and resources.

The declining societal security contributed to the rise of NSAAs in various ways. As the specter of identity politics deepened, two particular reactions are worth mentioning: First, some groups have capitalized on the new opportunity spaces and asserted their identity in the regional politics. For instance, the erosion of borders and state authority raised the expectations of the Kurdish actors to alter the status quo to their advantage, as was reflected in the discussions on the revision of Sykes-Picot order. The growing salience of the Kurds on the regional level has forced the existing states to reconsider their policies toward the Kurdish demands. Similarly, the increased assertiveness of the Shia groups in different countries and their utilization of sectarian identity as a tool of political mobilization have helped them expand their influence, though this process escalated the sectarian tensions (Orhan 2015).

The second dimension of identity politics-related mobilization concerns the groups feeling threatened. While some identities have been empowered, members of other identities have been politically marginalized. In particular, the Sunni marginalization and disenfranchisement throughout the region have emerged as a major source of violent extremism. The lack or collapse of a Sunni political leadership and the perceptions of an expansionist Shiite arc raised fears among many Sunni communities from Iraq to Syria and Lebanon. Those marginalized groups in many cases sought representation and protection by various non-state actors, and in some cases the NSAAs. The ability of the extremist groups such as Al-Qaeda or ISIS to capitalize on the Sunni marginalization has been one major factor, facilitating their emergence, expansion, and durability.

Conclusion

As the regional order in MENA goes through restructuring, various forces including but not limited to sectarianism, ethnic mobilization, social fragmentation, the militarization of politics, and so on are breeding polarization among regional actors. The international actors have

been mired in the very same patterns of insecurity. What is needed today is a new framework for security governance in the Middle East that will help mitigate conflicts and a new political understanding structured around reform and institution building to heal fragile state structures. Both of them are lacking, and the prevailing trends are working in an opposite direction. In this environment, NSAA actors have emerged as key players, affecting the course of regional security affairs.

While some of the NSAAs are products of the vacuum created by the conjecture, there are indicators that several of them may have gained durable quality. Here, the example of the Lebanese Hezbollah may be one path that will be taken by these groups. Emerged in the context of the Lebanese civil war and the subsequent Israeli occupation of the country, the Hezbollah managed to maintain its existence and retain the military power in the shaky structure of Lebanon. Some of the NSAAs may replicate the same model in their respective countries. Another path is presented by the IRGC experiment as a secondary security establishment, which is very unique. Hashd Shaabi elements in Iraq or the NDF in Syria may eventually come close to this model.

As they have assumed critical roles, NSAAs have increasingly moved beyond being mere proxies and have occasionally acted on their own agendas. Emboldened in this new environment, they have come to claim regional actorhood, the case in point being the Lebanese Hezbollah, which is now operating in several other countries. It remains to be seen how they will transform the notions of statehood, region, and order in the Middle East, once the current phase of conflict comes to an end.

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Author Biography

Dr. Şaban Kardaş is the President of ORSAM and a faculty member at the Department of International Relations at TOBB ETU. He has published scholarly articles and chapters on Turkish domestic and foreign policies, human rights, energy policies, and international security and has been an occasional contributor to Turkish and international media. He is assistant editor to the quarterly journal Perceptions and writes analyses for the GMF's On Turkey series. He has taught classes at Diplomacy Academy, Sakarya University, Police Academy, and Turkish Military Academy. He received his doctoral degree in political science from the University of Utah. Dr. Kardas also holds a master's degree in international relations from the METU in Ankara and a second master's degree in European Studies from the Center for European Integration Studies in Bonn, Germany.

The Ethno-Secular Geopolitical Space
in the Middle East

Understanding "Foreign Policy" of the PYD/YPG as a Non-State Actor in Syria and Beyond

Berkan Öğür and Zana Baykal

INTRODUCTION

Having experienced its first wave of groundbreaking changes following the First World War, the Middle East underwent the second most important transformation with the Arab Uprisings. Starting in Tunisia and stalemating in Syria, the most significant result of this, without any doubt, is the evolution of a volatile conflict zone with hundreds of armed non-state actors (ANSAs) large and small. Added to this conflict area are the regional and global actors supporting various armed groups to different degrees; whereby, we can witness an unprecedented network of novel relations, which have gradually become the center of global politics. Going beyond the foreign policy defining our conventional understanding of interstate relations, this network has also extended to have a

B. Öğür (✉) · Z. Baykal
Sakarya University, Serdivan, Turkey
e-mail: berkanogur@sakarya.edu.tr

Z. Baykal
e-mail: zbaykal@sakarya.edu.tr

form involving ANSAs in which their relations and decision-making are directly influential.

In Syria and Iraq, especially, the environment of multilateral conflict has led to the formation of hundreds of new ANSAs. Adding to these the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS), which has attracted most of the attention, with its methods and intensity of violence, the presence and actions of ANSAs have almost become the main issue. Beyond doubt, the Syrian Kurds represent a faction that seems to be distinct from those groups describing themselves mainly as "Islamist." In contrast to other groups, relying on ethnic factors, both rhetorically and by how they act on the battlefield, the Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat—PYD), prevailing as the dominant political organization of Syrian Kurds, hit international headlines for the first time during the siege of Kobani, even though it had been present and known in the region long before. Through this event, the PYD became the main focus of global actors in their Syria policy. The PYD not only as an ANSA, but also as a power that enjoys ties to both the Kurdish and non-Kurdish groups and adheres to the leftist ideology, considerably complicates any study of already complex affairs in the Middle East.

The PYD is the object of this research, not because of its ideology nor its reliance on ethnicity, both factors which render it different from other groups. Doubtlessly, these factors are important and feature as distinguishing characteristics of the PYD. Yet, it is the PYD's ever developing network of foreign ties that makes it really exceptional. While in Syria, Iraq, and Iran it enjoys relations with the Kurdish minorities and non-Kurdish anti-regime movements, the PYD has also built-up ties with regional and global powers.

Looking at the examples of other ANSAs, we can see that they are in fact in the process of continuous territorial loss and gain. Considering the fact that this process to a great extent depends on military confrontation and cooperation between the actors, we would be able to assert that, in contrast to other groups, the PYD is successful in keeping and developing its network of ties, reaching up to a global level. On the one hand, the PYD has soured relations with fellow ANSAs over military cooperation; on the other hand, however, it has developed ties with foreign actors and succeeded in preserving local support while managing to protect its domains in spite of the presence of rival Kurdish groups and conflict environments. In this regard, it is important to understand what enables the PYD to develop its coherent foreign policy while having

differences with other ANSAs? How does the PYD manage to maintain its relations with local, regional, and global powers? To put it differently, how does the PYD succeed in securing assistance from the big powers like the USA and Russia? Essentially, these questions revolve around the structural properties, which make it possible for the PYD to develop its foreign policy, military, and political decisions, which in turn help to maintain the network of foreign ties in constantly changing conflict zones.

In this context, this work aims to explain the parameters that enable the PYD to develop a "consistent" and "successful" "foreign policy" (as asserted) and to maintain working ties with a number of regional and global powers, despite the organization's structure, military priorities, ideology, regional developments, and strategic differences. At the same time, this work focuses on four parameters that contribute to the PYD's foreign policy: *organizational structure, military management, political representation power, and structural factors.*

In this way, with the help of the aforementioned parameters, the PYD's foreign relations at the levels of regional and global dimensions will be explored. On the *regional scope*, the PYD's foreign relations include non-PKK Kurdish factions, non-Kurdish anti-regime forces like Free Syrian Army (FSA) or al-Nusra Front, as well as northern Syria's minorities and regional actors like the Syrian regime and Turkey. The PYD currently conflicts with some of these actors, while it cooperates with others. The *global level* includes powers, which have been enjoying ties to the PYD/YPG at the global level: above all the USA, Russia, and European states. Even though the nature of these ties and what the future holds for them is under discussion, the PYD's existing relations with these states enable the organization to carry out military operations in cooperation with them, to enjoy the assistance of military consultancy and intelligence, and to realize their political activity in European capitals.

Finally, even though there are ideological and strategic differences among actors, ranging from regional to global, with whom the PYD has ties, and these differences occasionally result in military and political difficulties for the group, the PYD has managed to maintain its foreign relations. Beyond doubt, the clearest example of this achievement is the continuing US help to the PYD despite Turkey's opposition. Again, in a similar vein, despite its reliance on ethnic factors and the absence of cooperation with Masoud Barzani-affiliated Kurdish parties, the PYD still

holds its position to develop ties with these groups and preserve local support. This very complex set of relations does not hinder the PYD from occupying an important position in the region and enjoying ties with a number of actors. The PYD's relations with the abovementioned actors, which continue despite many strategic differences that may hamper these ties, will be explained through the parameters already indicated.

Non-state Actors and "Foreign Policy"

There is a considerable amount of research on NSAs in the field of international relations (IR). While much of this work approaches the ANSAs on the basis of their dimensions, structures, resources, and objectives, a number of them study these actors from the point of view of their "foreign policy." The greatest resultant drawback of this is that these academic works do not provide a satisfactory explanation for the presence of NSAs' and their networks of foreign relations, even though they are increasingly becoming the center of global politics on many regional levels ranging from Africa, the Middle East, and North Africa to Central Asia and Latin America.

In traditional foreign policy analyses, one can still only find a handful of terminology that can be applied to the investigation of "foreign policy" of ANSAs. Of these, first and foremost comes their decision-making process. For example, Mintz and DeRouen (2010), while pondering over decision-making processes in foreign policy and focusing on the preferences of decision-makers, argue that the process resembles the "chess game" where four factors of *decision environment, psychological factors, international factors, and domestic factors* play a significant role. These factors that are supposed to explain decision-making processes in international relations can also be used to explain decision-making processes of ANSAs. The primary reason for this is that geography, especially in the Middle East, where ANSAs have increased their activity, has become so complex that it is impossible to explain through one single parameter. Similarly, excessive focus on personal characteristics of leaders or any organizational structure in the study of decision-making processes of NSAs runs the risk of overlooking other important factors. This is why, it is important to keep in mind that there are many various and complex factors that may impact the decision-making process of NSAs in this day and age where distant between places is effectively shrinking and flows of knowledge, arms, and people are increasingly getting faster.

The discipline of IR presents various approaches to state actors, and the most influential among them are realism and constructivism. While realists tend to view NSAs as armed groups that need to be confronted, constructivists on the other side are trying to understand sources and the formation of the motivation of NSAs, be it an uprising or an insurgency. Besides, the IR also focuses on issues relevant to the NSAs' relations, such as nation-building, conflict resolution, and peace processes (Podder 2013). This work, however, will focus on the variables enabling preferences in the foreign policy of (A)NSAs, instead of relying on state-centered theories that explain decision-making processes in states' foreign policies. In this regard, the formation or the lack of formation of "foreign policy" of NSAs will be discussed using four parameters, i.e., the organizational structure of non-state actors, their military preferences, political representation powers, and structural factors.

Making "Foreign Policy" Possible

Organizational Structure

Organizational capacity represents the ideological and physical skeleton of an organization through its membership, military power, ideology, and decision-making authorities. Encompassing the ideology, previous military, and political actions of NSAs, this skeleton allows not only for political maneuvering, but also to establish foreign relations. The formation of a management at the top of the hierarchy and a top-down labor division mechanism allows the actor to build ties to the regional. Additionally, the management structure or leadership culture in the decision-making process makes foreign relations possible. Though it cannot be stated that this kind of structure is characteristic for NSAs in the Middle East, the nature of their leaders' philosophies and their personal perception of the world are the primary factors that define foreign relations.

In a way, leaders of such organizations do not feel any necessity to form a consensus in the decision-making process. Therefore, it is possible to talk about the decision-making center that usually forms around the leaders in such organizations. Although this structure seems rather holistic, it transforms into partitions as it distances from the center. In most situations, these fractured structures are not a weakness, but rather a workable mechanism in different geographies. Finally, it is possible to

say that even though these fractions have their own agendas and set of enemies, they nevertheless are kept together by a single center. Yet, in organizations, including leader-centered organizations, decision-making processes do not always depend on the leaders' personal characteristics or thinking patterns. There are other factors rendering decisions possible and contributing to their successful implementation. Among these factors is the institutionalization of management structure. This is not only relevant in terms of administration structure, but also for the military management as well. For that matter, organizations have to withstand constantly changing political environments and situations, with unexpected political or military traumas, in order to stay operational and make it possible for the decision-making centers to carry on with their actions from the local to the global levels. Some studies in this area even argue that it is impossible for leaders to make decisions on their own, but that there is a good or bad institutionalized management mechanism of every NSA constituting decision-making processes (Schlichte 2009). Undoubtedly, the best example in this regard seems to be the PKK. Despite the absence of Abdullah Öcalan, who represented the ultimate leadership of the organization until 1999 when he was arrested, the organization's survival for more than 15 years, and its ability to continue to be involved in politics, proves that there is a professional organization structure. Apart from this, although the organization is mainly focused on armed struggle against Turkey, it has affiliate parties established in Syria, Iraq, and Iran and it is also involved in some political activities in Europe. The existence of this structure ensures that even in the case of sudden political shocks to the PKK or the PYD, as in the case of Abdullah Öcalan's capture, the organization stays functional.

The most important determinant of organizational capacities of NSAs is the ideology of an organization. While ideology allows the organization to shape its relationship with the local, this relationship determines the power capacity of the organization on the regional level. If a group has limited ties to the local, it means that local resources are also limited, which makes the organizations' position more fragile in possible peace talks. If local popular support is high (such as the ideological commitment of members and sympathizers to the organization and its leadership), the organization will have a more secured presence in the struggle and will have a high resistance to possible military confrontation (Podder 2013).

Military Management

Certainly, what distinguishes an NSA from a civil society organization is its military capacity, in other words, the possession of a military wing and carrying out terrorist activity. However, the existence of an armed wing of the NSA, i.e., its military capacity, is not the only factor determining its external relations. Another more important factor is an organization's military activities and preferences. There is a considerable volume of research on military actions of NSAs; a significant majority of these studies have emphasized factors such as territorial control, physical environment, military tactics, and preferences (De la Calle and Sánchez-Cuenca 2015). However, among these, the presence of international ties proves to be occasionally more important when we consider that the NSAs requirement for military hardware and ammunition is often supplied by foreign states from near or far abroad.

In addition to this, NSAs mostly accept all kinds of internal and external support because they have less military equipment than the states or other actors they are fighting against. This behavior, a sign of pragmatism, makes possible the provision of military power necessary for NSAs to survive (Zohar 2016). The closest example of this situation is the YPG units that have been receiving support from the USA while also welcoming Russian backing. Likewise, the PYD, which had been rejecting the help of Masoud Barzani's Peshmerga forces for a long time, approved the passage of these troops into northern Syria at the height of the ISIS attacks.

Moreover, as the examples of civil war in Syria, Iraq, and even Libya and Yemen suggest, the relations of the actors with each other, their alliances, which are beyond a military necessity, and their military preferences in the course of the war may evolve into foreign policy preferences. The most important reason for this is that the area of conflict in the Middle East transcends the local forces which in turn enjoy military support on regional and global levels. At this point, strategic factors, such as taking the correct decisions to achieve suitable political consequences in the medium- and long-term interest of an organization, which are vital to its survival and military capacity, also step in. This also necessitates battle experience as much as the proper military administration.

Political Representation

NSAs are in a struggle to retain the military support of major states, directly or indirectly, and to produce legitimacy for their existence. These efforts include actions to refute claims on the global arena, which questions the

legitimacy of its control over seized territories, and to ensure its existence. The values of NSAs, the dimension and form of the violence they use, will continue to be questioned, and this may threaten their existence. For this reason and also for the sake of their external relations, NSAs need the power of political representation through their own foreign policy.

An important aspect of achieving legitimacy or justification is that it can overcome the issue of "legality/being lawful." Today, only states or international institutions possess established legitimate legal status. NSAs find themselves beyond this legality and hence seek a legitimate ground for building their own identities in terms of both ideology and methods of struggle (Schlichte and Schneckener 2015). The important point of this discussion indicates the efforts of NSAs to locate the violence on a legitimate, justified realm. The rhetoric that is usually constructed for this purpose is the expression of rebellion against unjust rule or resistance against occupation. The existence of a considerable Kurdish diaspora in Europe gave the Kurdish movement an opportunity to promote itself in the West (Casier 2010). Consequently, the ability of PYD's leader Salih Muslim to represent PYD in Western capitals can be read as a continuation of a decades-long struggle for recognition.

Structural Factors
In addition to these three parameters, we must also mention the existence of global or regional processes that not only non-state actors can preclude, but states also struggle to resist their effects. The fourth parameter of this study will explore structural factors including political and military environments and military/political fractures that enable the emergence, survival, and military development of NSAs. In other words, the fourth parameter includes the changes that NSAs have had to keep up with, and that are in effect outside of their scope and capacity, in fact even some regional states. These effects do not always have to be large-scale changes in the regional or global context. The policy changes of actors push both NSAs and other regional states to policy changes as well. Such political and military transformations can be regarded as processes with which NSAs can: tolerate, benefit from, or get harmed by. These processes can be changed or transformed by NSAs; for instance, although the PYD had had the same military capacity in dominating the region as it had before ISIS emerged, the international public's view of the PYD changed only after the undeniable visibility of ISIS. Similarly, after Turkey shot down the Russian plane and Russia became involved in the Kurdish issue in Turkey and in Syria, the PYD had to adapt to

changing conditions that were clearly beyond the will of the PYD and influenced its regional and global relations.

Undoubtedly, such regional changes expanded their scope even more during the period of globalization. The particular meaning of globalization is illustrated in the increasing transparency of borders and acceleration of flows of people, money, and materials. When the existence of weak or fragile states and rapid transformation in information technology are added to this picture, we may see that NSAs can truly obtain a transnational scope. Such developments shrink boundaries and destabilize geographical areas that previously became evident by national borders. The most important outcome of this process is that it makes territorial control more difficult and leads to unpredictable regional transformations (Podder 2013). Perhaps, the most striking example of this is how Western people hailing from different layers of society join the ISIS despite the fact that their own governments are by all means trying to limit their freedom of action. Despite all efforts of these developed countries to hinder such a human flow, the developments such as the increasing transparency of borders due to the progress in information technologies can no longer be circumvented (Fig. 3.1).
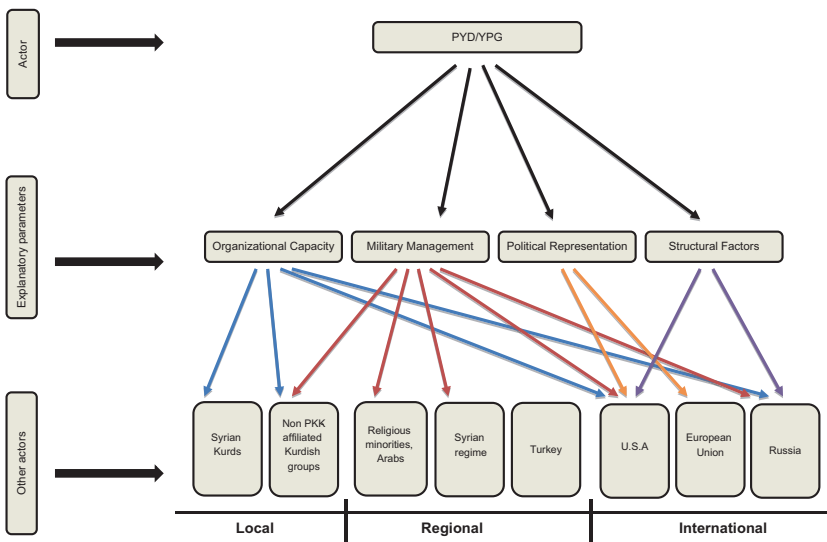
Fig. 3.1 Formation of PYD/YPG

The Formation of PYD/YPG

The historical background of the PYD in Syria is to a great extent interwoven with the PKK's past in Syria. As is known, Abdullah Öcalan who fled from waves of arrests in the aftermath of Turkey's 1980 military coup found shelter in Syria under whose protection he led the PKK from the Bekaa Valley. However, due to Turkey's increasing pressure over the years, Syria had to expel the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan by the end of 1999. Within a few years, the Assad regime's oppression toward minorities, notably the Kurds, caused unrest among them. In this repressive atmosphere, a growing political consciousness, particularly among Kurdish youth, paved the way for the establishment of various Kurdish parties. In such an environment, the PYD was founded out of PKK remnants from the 1990s, as its sister party or in other words its Syrian branch (Tejel 2009, 79). Moreover, the PYD shares the same ideology, leadership, and goals with the PKK. For this reason, the PYD's ideology and organizational structure, which are only briefly addressed in this chapter, cannot be understood if separated from the PKK.

Ideology

The Kurdistan Communities Union (Koma Civakên Kurdistan, KCK) of which the PYD is a member defines itself as nationalist, or more specifically as "Kurdish nationalist."[1] Contrary to expectations, the PKK argues that it cannot be defined as nationalist because it no longer defends the nation-state construction. Similarly, when defining itself, the PYD does not make use of any Marxist reference. Instead of referring to Marxist-like ideology, it defines itself as a party that values social justice, gender equality, and freedom of opinion and embraces direct democracy while respecting cultural, national and social rights of minorities and supporting peaceful events.

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[1] After Abdullah Öcalan's capture in 1999, the party ideology changed in many aspects. This change reveals its first sign in the writings of Abdullah Öcalan, as we broadly observe this ideological and strategic fracture in the PKK's VI Congress in 1999 and VII Congress in 2000, which is considered a continuation of the previous one. To the party members, these congresses are deemed the party's reconstruction, whereas democratic values appear to be more important in a new world in which borders commence graying. For extensive information see: "PKK Olağanüstü 7. Kongresi: PKK Programı", *Serxwebûn*, 220, (2000): 14. (Serxwebun 2000)

The PKK's party constitution, in which Abdullah Öcalan takes place as a leader, largely shows similarities with the PKK's extensive transformation during the 2000s. Yet in 1999, during the organization's transformation upon Marxist roots, the ambition of a united Kurdistan was replaced by a confederate structure that was supposed to be built within existing borders (Öcalan 2011, 22). The new idea, known as democratic confederalism, which was recommended by Abdullah Öcalan for the whole Middle East, suggests the protection of existing borders and the creation of centralized autonomous structures unveiling cultural elements within each state's borders without threatening the territorial integrity of existing nation-states. These structures do not aim to establish new nation-states which are accused of not being liberal due to their extreme centralization, but focus rather on building a society than a state. The new idea is formulated in PKK documents as follows:

> Democratic autonomy irrespective of administrative structures can be defined as the recognition of identity within democratization of different ethnic populations; education in the mother tongue, cultural freedom, providing the environment for policymaking with the own identity as a judicial and political relationship based on freedom of thought and freedom of organization. As for local parliaments, they are from now on necessities of democracies. (Öcalan 2007, 23)

The PYD suggests the same model for the Syrian Kurds and calls for protection of Syria's territorial integrity; PYD co-chair Salih Muslim explained that they often defended Syria's territorial integrity and that they pled for "a secular federalism in which all parts of Syria will be kept together," instead of a nation-state or an independent Kurdish state (Salih Muslim, interview by Wladimir van Wilgenburg 2016). Therefore, the Rojava administration which is controlled by the PYD embraces "democratic confederalism" or "democratic autonomy" as theorized by Abdullah Öcalan. This administration model endorsed not only for Syria or Turkey, but also for the whole Middle East, underlies the belief that centralized nation-state-dominated capitalism has collapsed. In this new system, as ethnic and cultural minorities find the opportunity to govern themselves within existing borders, particularly freedom of belief, women and minority rights are highlighted (Öcalan 2013, 10–11).

Organizational Structure

Analyzing the organizational structure of the Kurdish movement in the past and today in Turkey, one finds the use of many confusing abbreviations in literature used for dozens of formations consisting of many branches. It is a fact that the movement frequently sets up categories linked to numerous events, and for each event, it creates distinct organizations under particular names. The KCK, founded during the 2000s as an umbrella organization comprising the PKK and the PYD, thus unveils the cross-border structural existence of the Kurdish movement. The PYD and the PKK, as different branches of the KCK, an alternative to the national states, possess a similar engagement although they are not parts of a party, they follow the same ideological framework, and they manifest similarities in military aspects, as well. Moreover, one can see that the strict discipline and organizational tradition which is familiarized with PKK are completely reverberated in the PYD. This heritage, which the PYD acquired from the PKK, gave rise to its rapid establishment as the most organized party among dozens of Kurdish factions in Syria.

There is collaboration between the PYD and the PKK in both military and political activity. The PYD's military wing, the YPG and the YPJ (Women's Protection Units—Yekîneyên Parastina Jinê), received military training for a long time from the HPG (People's Defense Force—Hêzên Parastina Gel) which is the military wing of the PKK. YPG/YPJ and the HPG consider each other as members of both groups. In the course of clashes in Syria, many HPG militants went to Syria and joined the YPG/J (International Crisis Group/ICG 2012, 16). Apart from this, until mid-2014, before military service became compulsory for men in Kobani and Afrin, the YPG/J consisted of voluntary units. While HPG mostly consists of Kurdish fighters, the YPG/J includes fighters from non-Kurdish minorities from northern Syria. Thus, it can be said that the YPG/J presents a more heterogeneous structure when compared to the HPG. YPG/J members, while defending the PYD's ideas strongly, also integrate non-Kurdish anti-ISIS fighters who want to join them for the fight against ISIS. Despite these two military wings—HPG and YPG/J—acting in cooperation, they do not form a single military organization. The most prevailing difference between them is that the YPG/J remains considerably under the control of the organization's political wing, the PYD. In the Middle East, where actors such as ISIS, al-Nusra, or the FSA do not possess political organizations linked to them, this appears to be an important fault line.

In addition, the PYD maintains the practice of operating on a local level in the region. Rather, what distinguishes the PYD from other organizations and grants it a special status is its relationship with the local, inherited from the PKK's experiences in Turkey. Maybe the clearest example for this is that the PYD, given the diminishing power of the Assad regime in the region, reorganized the functioning of daily life by establishing local defense councils. These councils play a municipality role regarding food supply, education, health care, and public order in daily life. In the long run, it plans to rebuild the society.

The factor that carries the organizational capacity borders of the Kurdish movement beyond the Middle East is the existence of a 2 million strong Kurdish diaspora, originating from Turkey, in Europe. The PKK, since its foundation years, has kept contact with Kurds living in Europe and has involved them in the movement by eliciting logistic and financial support. The Kurdish population in Europe which is mostly located in Germany plays an important role in the Kurdish movement for two reasons. Firstly, the PKK does not restrict its organization to Middle Eastern countries where Kurds live in masses, and it provides financial support for itself from the Kurdish diaspora (Aydın and Emrence 2015, 24–27). According to research, approximately half of the Kurdish population living in Europe subsidizes the Kurdish movement (ICG 2012, 18–19). Secondly, the Kurdish diaspora with the help of the PKK has turned into a more and more organized structure and a strong voice in European capitals campaigning for the legitimacy of the Kurdish movement. This structure, organized in an association style, is thought to have close ties to the PKK. It is particularly focusing on the option of taking the PKK out of the terrorist organizations list and hence tries to draw attention to Turkish policy toward Kurds inside the parliaments and public opinion platforms of European countries.

While pro-Kurdish associations were presenting the Kurdish movement to the Kurds in Europe, via Kurdish-speaking broadcasters, the Kurdish Parliament in Exile was founded in 1995, followed by the Kurdish National Parliament (KNK) in 1999. The KNK led by Tahir Kemalizade, an Iranian Kurd, can be generally considered as a lobby group. While having its headquarters in Brussels, the KNK also conducts many activities in Middle Eastern countries. Following the example of the South African National Congress that came to power, the KNK is trying to become a similar organization through mainly aiming to bring up human rights violations against Kurds to the international agenda.

Though council members often claim that they form an independent structure from the PKK, it is hard to say that their discourse is much different from the PKK's (Akkaya 2015, 129).

The PYD/YPG in the Regional Context

With the beginning of anti-regime demonstrations in 2011, Syria's northern provinces were much more complicated than other regions of Syria for a number of underlying reasons. *Firstly*, it is known that the Kurdish population live in Syria in significant numbers, and in the past—although fewer when compared to Turkey or Iraq—there were multiple attempts to revolt. For example, the rebellion in Qamishli in 2004 is still fresh in their memory. *Secondly*, the region witnessed the competition between Kurdish parties to lead and organize the Syrian Kurds even before anti-regime demonstrations occurred. *Thirdly*, the fact that the region has a long tradition of interaction with Turkey, which has been in conflict with the PKK for decades, has developed the Kurdish position in Syria into a cross-border one, extending to northern Iraq, Turkey, and Iran. This was a sufficient reason for the Kurds to carry their position and preferences far beyond Syria. *Finally*, in many parts of Syria, especially in the FSA and al-Nusra held regions, the presence of groups, which are an important part of the conflict with the regime, led to the question of where and how the Kurds would be involved in the conflict. In this respect, relations in the regional level of the PYD, which dominated the region shortly after the start of the anti-regime initiative, can be examined in three dimensions, including other Kurdish parties, non-Kurdish anti-regime groups, and regional states.

The PYD/YPG in Kurdish Competition

While there are many parties or organizations in Kurdish-populated regions of the Middle East, two among them, namely Kurdistan Democratic Party (Partiya Demokrat a Kurdistanê-KDP) led by Masoud Barzani and the PKK led by Abdullah Öcalan, dominate Kurdish politics in many aspects and both are competing for the leadership of the Kurdish world. If we look at Syria, we would see that similar competition exists not only in the present conflict environment but also in the past. Although the accusations that the PYD is close to the PKK in the region and that it cooperates with the regime have existed from the outset, the

actual accusations became more prominent when the PYD declared cantons under the name "Rojava" in three Kurdish settlements. Some Kurds participated in anti-regime demonstrations; however, the PYD as an organization did not participate in such events. The PYD rather organized events praising the PKK and Abdullah Öcalan instead of being an anti-regime voice. This attitude of the PYD led to criticism that it cooperated with the regime for its own interests, and in a period in which other Kurdish parties participated in anti-regime demonstrations, the PYD allied with left-leaning Arab parties which increased its influence in a short time (ICG 2013, 10–11).

In contrast, Kurds in northern Syria founded the Kurdish National Council in Erbil (KNC, in Kurdish "Encûmena Niştimanî ya Kurdî li Sûriyê") on October 26, 2011. Its initiators were 11 parties which are ideologically close to the KDP and the PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan) and grouped together under the leadership of Masoud Barzani. The main objective of the KNC, which accused the PYD of joint action with the regime (Carnegie Middle East Center 2012), was to increase the KDP's power among Syrian Kurds. The same groups have continued to accuse the PYD of resorting to non-democratic methods of pressurising at the time when the PYD pronounced the creation of cantons in Afrin, Kobani, and Jazira in January 2012. The tension between the PYD and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) culminated during the trench-building, by the KDP-led KRG, between northern Syria and northern Iraq. While the KRG administration explained that the purpose of the trenches was to prevent the transit of terrorists from Syria to the Kurdish region of Iraq, the PYD considered this as a move against its territorial control (Çiviroğlu 2014).

As has been alluded to in the short summary above, there is a rational reason why the KNC and the PYD do not take the further step of breaking off relations, despite the tension, or even the environment of partial conflict between them. For the PYD, it is important to ensure the support of the KRG, which holds a significant position internationally due to its legal recognition. For this reason, in the PYD's network of external relations, in spite of all tensions and mutual accusations, ties to the Masoud Barzani-led KRG have so far continued. From the perspective of Masoud Barzani, the military absence of the KNC in northern Syria, which is lacking sufficient social consent, restrains Barzani from going as far as to accuse the PYD of being authoritarian or an ally of the Assad regime. To cut off relations with the PYD would mean that the Rojava

region, where the majority of administration is held by the PYD, could completely slip away from the hands of Barzani.

Another factor that has caused Barzani to maintain the troublesome policy toward the PYD is that the territory of northern Iraq is still under the threat of ISIS. Moreover, as is well known, the KRG's Peshmerga forces have settled in the regions contested by the central administration of Baghdad and want to keep these regions in its control. From this point of view, Barzani faces military difficulties. Hence, politically, Barzani is in a far more difficult situation than he was in previous years. During his visit to Diyarbakir in 2013, Barzani, who was the first chair of Kurds to contribute to the settlement of the Kurdish problem in Turkey, is now a contested leader even in northern Iraq. All these difficulties can be seen as factors that weaken Barzani in his policy toward the PYD.

In such an environment, it is possible to explain the relationship between the PYD and other Kurdish groups by the application of two parameters, the organizational capacity and military capacity or management. *Firstly*, although the PYD was established in 2003, the fact that the PKK, much earlier, took roots as an organizational structure enabled the PYD to achieve considerable social consent. Unlike the governing style of leaders from Erbil who are close to the KNC, the PYD is infamous for its harsh discipline in the region, inherited mainly from PKK cadres; especially in 2004, during the uprising in the Kurdish settlement of Qamishli, policies of the PKK and the new established PYD spread the ideas of the PKK among recently politicized Kurds (Tejel 2009, 114–118).[2] PKK-led Kurdish nationalism imbedded in revolutionary ideas created a new attraction pole for the Kurdish youth vis-à-vis Kurdish parties that until that time stood out by their Islamic identity. In addition, unlike the Kurdish movement in Iraq, Turkey, and Iran, the PKK in Syria had no tradition of an armed struggle against the regime. So when the PKK adopted the armed struggle against the regime, it was an innovation that attracted the interest of young Kurdish people in Syria (Tejel 2014, 221). Therefore, the most important outcome of this period was that the PKK responded to increasing pressure of the Ba'ath regime with revolutionary ideas

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[2] The fact that regime forces opened fire during demonstrations that emerged after a soccer game, and continued its repressive politics in the following days, induced the PYD (and the Yekîti Party) among other Kurdish factions to lead these demonstrations. This contributed to the idea of an armed struggle and revolutionary thoughts among the gradually radicalized Kurdish youth.

and an armed struggle, and that Kurdish youths approached the PYD (Schmidinger 2015, 95).

The roots of the PYD's power in Syria are largely based on the legacy of the PKK. The politics that the PKK cadres implemented in Turkey, developing close ties to the local population, is an approach that the PYD inherited from the PKK. Today, considering the PYD administration in Syria, one has to admit that there is a strong connection between the local people and the PYD. This connection owes its existence mainly to local councils managing daily life in PYD-dominated areas, whereas one must also factor in that Salih Muslim's leadership or the fact that his son died in a conflict with ISIS has a great impact on the region's people. While Kurdish parties with proximity to the KRG came to the fore with their conservative identities, the PYD, thanks to promoting a mixture of Kurdish nationalism, minority rights and freedom of religion, not only attracted Syrian Kurds, but unlike the KRG, also persuaded minorities such as Assyrians, Armenians, and Christians to support it. Another important aspect of the PYD's successful implementation of local politics is its ability to fight in the ideological propaganda war. For example, Barzani's close relations with Turkey, especially with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, turned out to be a disadvantage for parties close to the KDP in northern Syria. The end of the peace process in Turkey, the return of the AKP government to military methods in Kurdish settlements, and Turkey's prolonged blockage of aid to Kobani during its defense all helped the PYD to justify their accusation that Barzani was sharing the position of "anti-Kurdish Erdogan."

Secondly, the PYD could control the region through its military power and organizational structure. Despite the YPG General Commander Sipan Hemo's claim that the YPG and the PYD do not represent a single party's force, the relationship between both is publicly known. In addition, the fact that YPG is the only force in the region has allowed it to survive in local politics and further maintain relations with the KNC. Unlike the emergence of military wings of other Kurdish factions that mostly occurred after the outbreak of anti-regime demonstrations, the YPG's existence as the military branch of the PYD was rooted long before. Although the YPG defines its branches in Rojava as a police force, factoring in the PKK's military presence from Syria to Iran, it could be said that the YPG effect crosses frontiers, up to Iran. Even when considered only on the scale of northern Syria, the YPG is a power that holds control units at settlements, fulfills the duty of ensuring

public order, and controls checkpoints on Rojava's border with Turkey and northern Iraq.

Given his military absence in the region, in 2012 Barzani brought forward the idea of a "unified Kurdish army" consisting of YPG fighters and Kurds to be trained by KRG. However, this plan, which would strengthen Kurdish parties close to him in northern Syria, ended without any further development. Syrian Kurds trained by KRG were precluded from entering Syria by the YPG, and their existence was presupposed to be fighting under the YPG mandate. Although Barzani gave a harsh reaction to this condition, he could not go any further. Another example to demonstrate the effectiveness of military capacity in that relation is the Duhok Agreement which was signed just after the attacks of ISIS (Rudaw 2014). Even though pro-KRG and pro-PKK groups were constantly accusing each other, and despite the YPG preventing Peshmerga forces trained by KRG from entering northern Syria; in response to ISIS attacks the YPG had to approve the entrance of Peshmerga forces trained by KRG into Kobani.

The Foreign Relations of PYD/YPG Toward Non-Kurdish Groups

It is known that ethnic and religious minorities such as Assyrians, Christians, and Chechens have long been present in northern Syria with a Kurdish intensified population. Unlike its rivalry with the KRG, the PYD has been taking steps toward increased cooperation with non-Kurdish groups in the region. Political alliances which were formed in the early days of anti-regime demonstrations were followed by military cooperation initiatives. Shortly after the start of demonstrations in September 2011, the PYD spearheaded the formation of the National Coordination Committee for the Forces of Democratic Change (NCC), which included left tendency Arab parties and the Syrian Aramaic opposition party. NCC-led anti-regime demonstrations were of a more moderate character than those organized by other opposition factions. Consequently, the NCC was able to negotiate with the Syrian regime and ensure the release of several political detainees (Schmidinger 2015, 110).

Despite the aforementioned accusations against the NCC and PYD, the driving motivation of grouping together with other minority groups under one roof was the struggle of preserving a conflict-free

environment and keeping Islamic and jihadist armed groups like ISIS outside the region. To the PYD, keeping the region a conflict-free environment also meant maintaining and developing its own power, whereas to minorities this meant protection from Islamist, jihadist, or Arab nationalist groups and their possible violence. In contrast to policies of jihadist groups, the PYD's "Democratic Autonomy" project aiming to preserve the rights of the Kurdish minority throughout Syria, and its claim to protect minority rights, facilitated the establishment of the PYD's relations with other minorities in the region.

After the conflict environment in Syria progressed northward, ties between Kurds and other minority groups and their political rapprochement were even more consolidated due to military cooperation. Subsequently, the most important outcome is the military and political cooperation between the PYD and the minority groups against regional jihadists or Islamists. Developing political alliance and military cooperation with minorities in the region it controlled, the PYD could preserve its conflict-free zone by proclaiming neutrality during the conflict between the FSA and the regime. Apart from that, in January 2013, the alliance between the PYD and non-Kurdish groups such as Arabs and Christian-Assyrians succeeded in winning the conflict with the FSA and jihadist organizations such as al-Nusra and ISIS, thus managing to keep Islamic groups conflicting throughout Syria away from northern parts of Syria (Schmidinger 2015, 116–120). In short, the military preferences of the PYD are to fight on the side of and for minorities against attacks of Islamic groups and to remain neutral when it comes to clashes between the regime and Islamic groups. The PYD's strategy and alliances with minorities have not only left northern Syria out of the conflicts but also strengthened the new cantonal governments it established under its own rule.

However, Kurdish nationalism, which helps to keep Kurds together in northern Syria, loses its influence more and more when the PYD turns southward to the overwhelming Arab population. This also gave rise to the accusation that the PYD began to change the demographic structure of the region in favor of the Kurds. That is why, the Arab–Kurdish alliance in YPG-held areas could partly enable the PYD to increase its local support. In areas with considerable Arab presence like Tel Rifat, Manbij, and Harbul, YPG's Arab fighters do not let the YPG enjoy mass support which would help in controlling the region. As seen, the military capacity and preferences of the PYD stand out as a parameter that also contributes to explaining its relations with non-Kurdish minorities in the region.

Syrian Regime: Old Friend in the New Conflict

PYD has faced serious allegations of cooperation with the regime because of several reasons. *Firstly*, the regime forces abandoned their long-term military presence in the areas where the PYD is now dominant; *secondly*, in doing so, they left behind a large part of the military equipment and ammunition without entering in any conflict with the YPG; and *thirdly*, the regime still continues to control some official buildings in the region governed by the PYD (Tejel 2014, 52). Even if it is assumed that the accusations are all groundless, it is incontestable that both the PYD and the regime have been benefitting from each other for a long period. The fact that the regime could withdraw its troops from northern Syria without conflict can be considered a vital advantage for the regime which had been fighting on many fronts. It is also possible to say that the regime has benefited from the continuing Kurdish–Arab and Kurdish–Turkish tensions in northern Syria. As the contested environment in northern Syria has hindered oppositional forces to confront with the regime in a new front, the presence of the Rojava administration, which recognizes the Sham government, has played an important role in keeping Syria together. From this point of view, it can be said that both the regime and the PYD have taken military decisions that are largely pragmatic and directed at avoiding any conflict.

As for the PYD, the reasons why it did not participate in the demonstrations at the beginning and afterward did not engage in any military confrontation against the regime are manifold. *Firstly*, the fact that the region stayed as a non-conflict zone helped increase the PYD's dominance. The *second* reason is that the PKK has faced political and military difficulties in the region. Turning back into a conflict zone in Turkey, resumption of military operations in Turkey as well as in northern Iraq and the KRG President Masoud Barzani's pursuit of anti-PKK politics have limited its military capabilities. Under such conditions, the power vacuum and non-conflict zone in northern Syria provided the PKK the space it needed. Under these grave circumstances, the PKK could transfer its fighters from Turkey and northern Iraq to northern Syria. More importantly, this space has also become a fertile ground for its decades-old idea of "Democratic Autonomy."

On the other hand, the absence of a conflict between the regime and the PYD indicates that there is an unofficial agreement between them. Even though the PYD has been harshly criticized in this regard, it seems

clear that the PYD took a firm decision to not engage in any anti-regime fight and to keep the Kurdish region out of the conflict. Apart from that, though the regime has militarily withdrawn from the region, it still pays the salaries of teachers and officers in the region and pictures of Bashar Assad can still be seen in school reports (Schmidinger 2015, 114–115). In this way, the PYD's military decisions and its relationship with the regime made it possible to keep the region largely out of conflict and also facilitated the preservation of the newly constructed structure inside. Besides, all this also enabled the PYD to create ties with Syria's ally, the Russian government, as we will focus on later.

Turkey: Under the Shadow of Structural Matters

At the beginning of anti-regime demonstrations in Syria, the attention of Turkey and the whole world was turned to northern Syria. The most important reason was that the PYD, a branch of the PKK, which adopted an armed struggle for more than 30 years, was active in Turkey. For Ankara, the PYD's control over the region means that a pro-independence or autonomy-like structure emerged under the control of PKK-PYD-YPG. In the following period, the concerns about Turkey increased after the PYD administration declared cantons in three Kurdish regions, so ever since Ankara's main policy has changed to prevent the YPG forces from crossing the Euphrates to the West and to hinder any unification of the cantons.

Since the very beginning, Turkey expected the PYD to cut its relations with the Syrian regime, join the Syrian opposition, end its relationship with the PKK, and refuse any idea of creating a de facto structure based on ethnic or religious grounds. Turkey has declared that the establishment of a PYD-led Kurdish construction would be interpreted as a development that may jeopardize her national security (Bostan 2013). Rapidly deteriorating relations between the PYD and Turkey had previously had a high point during which a meeting was held by Turkish officials and the PYD co-chair Salih Muslim in Ankara. In this meeting, Turkey's expectations were delivered to him, as Salih Muslim explained that the PYD considers itself as a part of Syria. Muslim also confirmed that they would not make any attempt to threaten Turkey's territorial integrity adding that until the chaotic environment in Syria is settled, there would be an administrative structure corresponding to the needs of the regions of Kurds (Pamuk and Solaker 2013). As Turkey's expectations were not

met in the process, the conversion of the three settlements of North Syria to Kurdish control under the name of "Rojava," in which the PYD was active, ruined relations between the PYD and Ankara.

For the PYD, Turkey's policy toward Kurds in the Middle East has always been important because of physical geography and historical background. Turkey and Syria share a long border, and now, a part of this border is under the control of the PYD. The most important feature of this border line is undoubtedly the Kurdish people living on both sides. Turkey's view of northern Syria remained unchanged during the Kobani blockade; rather, President Erdogan declared that "two terrorist groups are fighting" (Semo et al. 2016). For instance, while Kobani was under siege imposed by ISIS, Turkey refused to help the PYD. Moreover, northern Syria's politics became an important issue within Turkey and led to mass protests for some days. Above all, the long-term negotiated peace process between Turkey and the PKK came to an end (BBC 2014). Therefore, it can easily be claimed that Turkey addresses the Kurdish issue as not just a simple domestic issue but also as a cross-border issue.

After all, a possible rapprochement between Turkey and the PYD does not seem realistic. From the onset of the Syrian civil war, ways of establishing relations between the two sides have been sought; nevertheless, structural factors (such as, Turkey considering the PKK as a national threat while the PYD share a long border with them) are hampering the chance for any relationship. Both sides view each other's gains as their loss. In spite of Turkey's military presence, the fact that the PYD enlarged its network of external relations and its ability to maintain military maneuverability on the ground can be recorded as a success of the PYD.

The PYD/YPG in the International Context

Although the siege of Kobani caused regional tensions with Turkey, the PYD was granted a special position beyond the regional geography, particularly in the Western world. With the liberation of Kobani from ISIS's months-long siege, the PYD was codified as the ultimate group of secular Kurds fighting jihadists. As a result, speaking of the increasing importance of non-state actors in the region, we must admit that non-state groups except the PYD can only operate militarily, whereas the PYD, apart from its military capabilities, enjoys foreign ties ranging from the local to the global level, which is something unusual for non-state actors.

To a certain extent, the existence of foreign ties of non-state actors may seem assumable on the regional level, yet foreign ties in which the USA, Russia, and the European Union are involved are a novelty.

The USA: Old Enemy, New Friend

There is still an ongoing debate on how the US grand strategy may look like vis-à-vis the ongoing conflicts in Iraq and Syria; however, it does not require much effort to grasp what kind of political tendency the USA holds toward the region's Kurds. Unlike the period when the ISIS emerged, in August 2014 with its attacks on the territory of the KRG, the US administration became increasing involved in the conflict. Syrian Kurds had long remained outside the US Middle East policies. However, since ISIS attacks on Kobani in 2014, the USA officially began (Daily Sabah 2014) to provide military support to the PYD. Although the future of this support remains a matter of debate, it certainly has a special meaning for the Middle East. While the USA refused the delivery of heavy weapons to non-state actors since the civil war broke out in Syria, it did not hesitate to train YPG/J fighters and provide military advisory assistance (U.S. Department of Defense 2015). As we might recall, the USA trained the FSA some time ago, but it did not last long. Even after the announcement that the support for the FSA would be cut off as the fight against jihadist groups in the region was found insufficient and thus the program would end, the military and training/equipment support for the PYD continued (Göksedef 2016).

The PYD's secular ideology presented in many studies as the main driver for the USA to support it is, however, an insufficient explanation if taken alone. Firstly, the ideal of "Socialist Kurdistan," which has been advocated by the PKK for decades, described Western powers on the US front as "the real exploiter of oppressed Kurds" (Öcalan 2000, 7). However, the secular ideas that have been advocated by the same ideological tradition and became more visible in the 2000s were accepted in the West. These ideas ironically became the foundation of the cooperation between the PYD and the West within Syria's present-day environment. Even if we no longer discuss whether the idea of "democratic autonomy," which has been advocated by the PKK and in the 2000s also by the PYD, is still anti-American or not, values that are considered Western are overwhelmingly accepted by the PKK and PYD. This even plays a role in legitimizing the military support for the PYD

in Western and American public opinion spheres. Being aware of this, the PYD leader Salih Muslim said that the PYD has the same enemy as the West, and that both the West and the Kurds are fighting jihadists. He said: "… I want the American public and the entire world to know that we are trying to stop these jihadist groups, and we want them to stand with us. These people attack innocent civilians and kill children; women and old people simply because they are Kurds…" (Salih Muslim, interview by Mutlu Çiviroğlu 2013). The widespread concern about "Islamic terrorism" in the West is undoubtedly the direct target of Salih Muslim's words, and this target enables the PYD to position itself on the West. This largely influenced not only the relationship of the PYD with the USA but also its relations with EU countries, as representations of the PYD in American public opinion and mainstream media received the same exposure in European states.

However, although this explanation may be correct, it is not flawless. The most important reason is that the Western public opinion defining the PYD as a secular actor who copes well with Western values knows that the same PYD can resort to non-democratic methods in establishing its own power in the region, and that these methods can include the killing and arrest of Kurdish politicians opposing the PKK (Human Rights Watch 2014). Even the use of such methods by the PYD and their documentation by international organizations such as the reputable Human Rights Watch (HRW) has not been able to disillusion the image of the PYD in the Western public opinion. In other words, to introduce the PYD as an actor who promotes and lives with Western values makes USA support to PYD acceptable in the West, even if the PYD can resort to non-democratic methods.[3] Although the recognition of the PYD as such is an important parameter in its relations established with global powers, yet another parameter is needed to explain the US deliveries of heavy weapons. Perhaps one of the most obvious indications defining the Western stance toward the PYD comes from an American official stating: "We are equally clear that we don't see for the future of Syria an autonomous Kurdish area or territory" (Gordon 2012). This leads us to conclude that the USA cares much more about military developments

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[3] Like in European media, YPG/J fighters' stories seem to attract the American audience, too. Due to this interest, it becomes easy to present the PYD as a secular-oriented organization. For instance, see: Bradley, Matt, and Joe Parkinson. 2015. "America's Marxist Allies Against ISIS." *The Wall Street Journal*, July 24.

and military choices of the YPG/J than about its secular orientation. After rebellions in Syria soon transformed into a civil war and Mosul was seized by ISIS, all eyes turned on the Obama administration, and at that time, a US intervention seemed almost certain. However, the USA did not send any troops to the region and its strategy on Syria and Iraq remained a mystery. While the Obama administration's steps toward the Middle East still keep the same debate alive, the USA seems to fight against ISIS only.

The second parameter that helps explain the cooperation between the USA and the PYD is to a great extent the PYD's military capacity and preferences, that is, the existence of the YPG/J, its combat experience, and its decisiveness to fight jihadists. Recalling the liberation of Kobani, the YPG/J firmly fought ISIS with air support provided by the USA to protect the Rojava administration. As the only secular force without an Islamic agenda that defeated ISIS since the day of its emergence, the PYD subsequently gained the respect of Washington (Özer 2015). On the other hand, the Washington administration, from the very beginning, was not willing to send troops to the battlefield. The fact that the USA has neither its own boots on the ground nor any stable regional state to cooperate with has made the existence and cooperation with the PYD in fighting ISIS and other jihadist organizations a crucial factor for the USA. As a result, the conditions enabling the PYD-US relationship are not restricted to only having ISIS as a common ideological enemy. However, the fact that the YPG/J has sufficient organizational and military capacity, due to its cross-border structure, and a high motivation to carry out this war against ISIS, plays a crucial role in this relationship.

EU: The Secular Partner

The YPG's defense of Kobani witnessed a great deal of raising assistance from the USA and later from Russia. However, the conclusions drawn from how the PYD was represented in Western public opinion, making the aforementioned US-PYD relationship possible, are even more applicable to the European press and public. In fact, the PYD leader Salih Muslim's official visits to capitals of leading European countries such as France and Germany show that the PYD is politically more representative in Europe. The existence of the Kurdish diaspora, which the PKK is trying to lead, shows that the representation of the Kurds in the PKK axis is nothing new for the West (Watts 2004; Balcı 2017; Kelly

2002). Therefore, although the PYD has received the greatest military support from the USA and Russia, its relations with European Union countries are also built on its secularist ideology. In particular its activity and organization, dating back to previous decades, the Kurdish diaspora's efforts make the anti-jihadist struggle appear like a common cause which it shares with the West in the name of secularism (Gordon and Callimachi 2015).

Another issue arousing great interest among Western journalists, who visited the region after the defense of Kobani, was the involvement of women and their increasingly active role within the PYD. By adding the implication of feminism in education, administrative and military system, they reflected in all aspects to the Western media outlets that female fighters of YPJ were able to supervise roads and liberate Yazidi women. In Western media and public opinion, this reinforced the image of the secular PYD against the existence of Islamists perceived as a major threat to Western values.[4] Contrary to many states in the Middle East claiming secularity for themselves nowadays as they did in the past, women in the PYD take place in decision-making structures instead of passive membership. This proved to be a highly significant factor. Even the fact that women can ascend toward the top of decision-making mechanisms inside the co-presidency model made the PYD more attractive to Western public opinion. Of course, the most striking example of this was the YPJ female fighters. Apart from being presented on cover pages of famous French magazines such as in "Elle" or "Marie Claire" (Griffin 2014), these women fighters were welcomed by French President François Hollande while being introduced in the French press as "heroic Kurds of Kobani" (France 24 2015).

The reasons for promoting secularism through female representations are probably rooted in the Western public's discussion of Islam and terrorism, linking both to the clothing of Muslim women. Subsequently, the fact that the Western media discovered YPJ women fighters in uniforms during the defense of Kobani and emphasized their struggle against ISIS helped the PYD to position itself favorably in the secular West in many aspects. In opposition to ISIS, with its theocratic governance model and brutal misogynic practices in an Islam-dominated geography that is considered a threat to the Western world, confident/brave

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[4] For instance, see: Enzinna, Wes. 2015. "A Dream of Secular Utopia in ISIS' Backyard," *The New York Times Magazine*, November 24.

women who fight and protect themselves and the Kurdish population created the image of secular women fighting Islamists.

Similarly, this view gains strength from the accusations of Turkey supporting ISIS. In addition, Turkey's conservative government under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdogan are rendering obvious support to the Syrian opposition, while turning back to a conflict environment vis-à-vis the PKK at home, and above all the fact that Erdogan does not differentiate between the PYD and ISIS, can be understood as contributions to this view. The symbolization of Kobani helped to empower the image of secular Kurds embodied in the PYD, fighting both the "barbaric ISIS" and the "Islamist Erdogan." It would be appropriate to say that all these factors open all doors in the West for the PYD. Hereby, the most important result is that a non-state actor's existence and its use of violence, as in the case of the PYD, have been able to overcome the lack of legitimacy.

Russia: Unexpected Partner

Unlike the USA, it is possible to say that Russia's Syrian policy is very clear. Since the beginning of anti-regime demonstrations in Syria, Russia has undertaken all interventions in the region to ensure the Assad regime's survival. Avoiding any conflict situation with the regime, it is comprehensive that the PYD tries to maintain the same conflict-free relation with Russia. For those with a keen eye on regional developments, events like PYD leader Salih Muslim's visit to Moscow (Basnews 2015) or the opening of a PYD representation there (Oliphant 2016) are not really surprising. Still, it was noteworthy that a non-state actor such as the PYD was able to engage in direct negotiations with a global power like Russia. However, this does not mean that the PYD and Russia have similar political agendas, but rather rub shoulders for common short-term interests. Before examining the parameter variation that triggered Russia's help to the PYD, we can say that Russia, similar to the US and the Syrian regime, wants the territories under PYD power to be limited. In fact, Russia just like Turkey is not in favor of any regional power expansion of the PYD toward the Mediterranean Sea and made clear that the Moscow administration would hamper such an attempt (Hiltermann 2016).

After all, the PYD-Russia relationship seems to be a lucrative cooperation for both sides. Primarily, from the Russian point of view, the PYD is fighting regional groups such as Ahrar al-Sham and al-Nusra who

challenge the regime. Moreover, helping the PYD in its fight against ISIS will serve in consolidating the discourse that Russia, which has realized air attacks to the regime's benefit in the region, also fights against ISIS on an international level. This collaboration environment was most recently tested during the regime's siege of Aleppo. During the siege of Halab, backed by Russian air bombardment, the fighting groups were the ones which Turkey supported, and the only corridor through which they could receive assistance was the region of Azaz, controlled by the PYD. The PYD's cutting of the Aleppo–Turkey connection was a crucial move for the regime's siege of Aleppo. The importance of this region for the Kurds underlies the aim to establish a geographical continuity of the PYD's control, ranging from Qamishli to Afrin (Balanche 2015). Even if these assumptions are put aside, it is a fact that the PYD and Russia meet each other's interests due to their military strategies.

The second parameter that could explain the external relations the PYD holds with Russia emerged when Turkey shot down a Russian plane. Consequently, Russia changed its foreign policy toward Turkey by supporting the Kurds in Syria along with many economic and political sanctions it imposed on Turkey. In this way, Russia began to intervene in Turkey's "Kurdish problem" in Turkey as well as in Syria (Jones 2015). In Syria, Russia's aid of military ammunition for the YPG was obvious, while in Turkey the belief that the PKK was given weapons by Russia is fostered by a video published by the PKK, on May 13, 2016. In this video, a PKK militant shoots down a Cobra helicopter belonging to the Turkish army, using a Russian-made air defense system (9K38 Igla MANPADS) (Tabler and Çağaptay Tabler et al. 2016). It appears therefore that the relationship that the PYD has established with Russia does not only exist in the joint military strategy in Syria, but also includes the anti-Turkey politics of the Putin administration. Concluding the PYD–Russia relationship, the military capacity, and management of the YPG/J including structural factors paved the way for the PYD to cooperate with Russia, both on the political and on the military dimension.

Conclusion

The ongoing and protracted conflict environment in the Middle East has led to unexpected new developments in global politics. At the starting point of these developments is the increasing integration of non-state actors into world politics. In particular, the PYD with its unexpected

appearance on the international scene alludes to the transformation of non-state actors. The PYD has become the focus of this debate due to its network of relationships, and this indicates that more parameters are needed in order to explain this new trend.

Firstly, the PYD, despite its establishment in 2003, possesses both conflict and management experience and political skills at the local level due to its connection with the PKK. Secondly, although the PYD is a political party, it holds military wings like the YPG/J which already had military experience prior to the outbreak of the Syrian civil war. Thirdly, the PYD has a broad network enabling its political representation not solely on the regional but also on the global level. This network is an important asset used by the PYD to overcome its legitimacy problem. The PYD, due to its struggle against ISIS, became codified as a defender of modern Western values which enabled it to gain a just position defending the rights of Kurdish people as a minority.

The case of the PYD with its diffuse patterns is not restricted to the Middle East but matters in the context of international relations as well. It can inspire new discussions within traditional foreign policy analyses on the roles and effects of non-state actors. The increasing complexity of non-state actors in the Middle East and the factors enabling their development such as increasing border transitivity further complicate foreign policy analysis and demonstrate that new explanatory models are required. In this respect, the study of non-state actors through their structure and ideology, and the effects of such studies are likely to become the focus of new foreign policy debates.

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Authors' Biography

Berkan Öğür graduated from Sociology Department at Sakarya University, Turkey, in 2011. Berkan Öğür received his MA from the Department of Sociology at Sakarya University with a thesis entitled Kurdistan Representations in PKK's Texts as a Dissedent Geopolitical Discourse (1982–2013) in 2015. He is currently working as research assistant at the Middle East Institute and doing his PhD on the topic of Kurdish Secularism in the Middle East. His most recent articles were published in Turkish Journal of Middle Eastern Studies and Middle East Analysis.

Zana Baykal is a research assistant and PhD candidate at the Middle East Institute of Sakarya University, Turkey. He got his MA degree from Middle East Research Institute of Marmara University Istanbul with a thesis untitled Energy Relations of Turkey and Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) of Iraq (2002–2014) in 2014. He is mainly interested in Kurdish Studies, KRG non-state military actors, and terrorism in the Middle East.

The Kurdish Fight Against ISIS: Realizing the Virtual Kurdistan Through Factionalized Politics in a Fragmented Homeland

Galip Dalay

INTRODUCTION

The self-styled Islamic State, or ISIS, has served not only as a menace but also as an opportunity for Kurdish politics in the Near East. On the one hand, Kurdish demands for statehood in Iraq, autonomy in Syria, and political settlement in Turkey appeared to be on the verge of collapse as a result of the ISIS offensive against Kurdish forces in both Iraq and Syria.

Research director at Al Sharq Forum and senior associate fellow on Turkey and Kurdish Affairs at Al Jazeera Center for Studies. He previously worked as a visiting fellow at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) in Berlin and as a political researcher at SETA Foundation in Ankara. He is a regular contributor to German Marshall Fund of the United States' on Turkey policy brief series, and a columnist for Middle East Eye. Research Interests: Turkish Politics, Turkish Foreign Policy, Regional Kurdish politics, Political Islam, and Radical Movements.

G. Dalay (✉)
Al Jazeera Center for Studies, Doha, Qatar
e-mail: galip.dalay@gmail.com

The situation has not only damaged the Peshmergas'[1] or Iraqi Kurdish forces' reputation, who initially retreated from their posts against advancing ISIS forces, but also the Kurdish political elites' self-confidence and the morale among the Kurdish people.

On the other hand, the common danger presented by ISIS provided an impetus for the emergence of a common Kurdish public sphere and politics and enhanced international prestige for Kurdish politics. In particular, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) proved to be a capable fighting force that could withstand the ISIS offensive. Moreover, the danger posed by ISIS triggered a process of much needed security sector reform in Iraqi Kurdistan. Thus, while the Kurds in Syria and Iraq did incur heavy humanitarian casualties along with economic, political, and security costs, they also made significant gains as a result of its fight against ISIS. This has especially been the case as the Kurds, after overcoming initial shocks and setbacks, proved to be a capable fighting force after all.

After the initial military setbacks, the Kurds, with the backing of international air power, scuttled the ISIS offensive and pushed it back from Kurdish-majority territories. ISIS has now been contained for the most part, especially in the Iraqi Kurdistan. The climax of this pushback against ISIS came with the liberation of the Syrian Kurdish town of Kobane, which endured an ISIS siege for more than 4 months, in January 2015. Since the beginning of the Syrian imbroglio, no other place has received as much international media coverage as Kobane during the fight between the Kurds and ISIS. Thus, Kobane acquired a symbolic significance incommensurate with its size and strategic importance. But it has also gained a special status in the Kurdish national consciousness. Nationalism and nationalist projects are, as Michel Foucault calls them, 'discursive formations,' meaning ways of speaking that shape people's consciousness, heavily informed by symbolism including 'historical' narratives, social solidarity, a common identity, a common culture, a common creed, and shared heroes, which are threaded together and given meanings through a particular way of speaking and narrating (Calhoun 2002, p. 3). In this respect, the fight over and liberation of Kobane has provided the Kurdish nationalism with a significant narrative together with new images and symbolism.

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[1] Peshmerga is Kurdish terminology used to refer to Iraqi Kurdish military forces. This term literally means "one who confronts death".

In this regard, just as the initial ISIS onslaught against the Kurds ushered in a 'Kurdo-pessimism,' this turn of events has caused this initial pessimism to give way to an unprecedented level of euphoria among Kurds. The capture of the strategic Syrian northern border town of Tal Abyad, a lifeline for the ISIS, enabling it to transfer fighters and goods to its self-proclaimed capital of Raqqa, from ISIS by Syrian Kurdish militia People's Protection Unit (YPG) on June 15, 2015, has further contributed to the Kurds' optimism and victorious mood (Karam 2015). As argued by Cale Salih, 'The YPG's victory in Kobane was symbolically significant, but Tal Abyad offers far more strategic value. Long-term control of Tal Abyad would further the YPG's goal of connecting the non-contiguous zones of territory it holds across northern Syria, which it organises into three "cantons": Afrin (north-west of Aleppo); Kobane (west of Tal Abyad); and al-Jazira (north-east Hasakeh province). If the YPG is able to hold Tal Abyad and use it to connect Kobane to al-Jazira, it will increase its strategic value to the US-led anti-IS coalition and will empower its self-governance structures in predominately Kurdish north-eastern Syria' (Salih 2015). Moreover, despite the initial American/Western reservation, the US (and international coalition) finally aided the YPG through air strikes and intelligence sharings in its fight against ISIS, increasing the YPG, and its political wing PYD's international legitimacy. All these developments have created a foundation for the unusual level of elation among the Kurds.

Much-hyped ideas of Kurdish unity and the international prestige of Kurdish politics have thus dominated the headlines in publications linked to the Kurdish national movement. Beside these examples from the political class, some scholars of Kurdish affairs have claimed that the Kurds have never before attained such a level of influence in regional politics and international legitimacy.[2] Such analyses encouraged and confirmed Kurds in their self-confidence and self-congratulation, resulting in an increased sense of empowerment among the Kurdish political class in Turkey, especially after the pro-Kurdish People's Democracy Party

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[2] See the *Rudaw* interview with David L. Philips, Director of Columbia University's Peace and Human Rights Studies, Rudaw (2015). Kürt Baharı'nın yazarı: Kürtler hiç bu kadar güçlenmemişti! *Rudaw*, 06 February http://rudaw.net/turkish/interview/06022015 (Accessed February 22, 2015).

(HDP) gained 80 seats in June 7, 2015, parliamentary election,[3] talk of imminent independence among Iraqi Kurds, and an upbeat and victorious mood among the Syrian Kurds.[4]

Though it is valid to say that the fight against ISIS has bestowed further legitimacy upon the demands and aspirations of Kurdish national movements, emphasized the Islam friendly but the secular nature of its politics, has opened the way for the professionalization of its armed forces, especially in Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)-run areas, and has led to the emergence of a common Kurdish public sphere (for which the ISIS has served as Kurdish political identity's constitutive other), one still should be wary of bold pronouncements that 'the Kurdish time has arrived' and prevalent euphoria. Neither should this over-enthusiasm conceal other trends that have been ushered in by the same process, and which present the possibility of drastic consequences. The seeds of a menacing rivalry[5] between different Kurdish factions, which could upset all Kurdish political calculations, have been sown. Though Kurds have travelled a long way from the internecine conflicts of the 1990s, they are not yet immune to the possibility of deadly rivalries erupting among themselves. Therefore, a thorough analysis of the Kurds'

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[3] In the aftermath of Turkey's June 7 general election, pro-Kurdish HDP has been depicted as the real winner of the election. Many see this as harbinger of Kurdish ascendancy in Turkish politics, mirroring Kurds' enhanced role in the broader regional politics. Micha'el Tanchum's line "amassing power at ballot box and on the battlefield" in his Foreign Affair's piece sums up this thinking. To see the full article, Micha'el Tanchum (2015). The Kurdish Consolidation. *Foreign Affairs*, June 29.

[4] The Kurds in the Middle East are mainly divided between four nation-states: Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. The largest share of the Kurdish population lives in Turkey. Then Iran, Iraq, and Syria are, respectively, sharing the remaining Kurdish population among themselves according to their size. Though Iran possesses the second largest share of the Kurdish population, Iranian Kurds have comparatively attracted lesser attention to their political activism in recent years. Given the turmoil in the region and its implication on the Kurds of Turkey, of Iraq, and of Syria, the Iranian Kurds seem not to fit this new trend. Nevertheless, the Iranian regime has been hanging the Kurdish political dissidents in large numbers in recent years due to their political activism. This is the sign of festering tension and resentment among the Iranian Kurds toward the Iranian regime and its repressive policies, and harbinger of the emergence of the Iranian dimension of the Kurdish political activism region-wide. Hence, the state of the Iranian Kurds merits an extensive study.

[5] See the following article for a similar judgement on unleashed rivalry among Kurdish factions, Ranj Alaaldin (2014). A dangerous rivalry for the Kurds. *New York Times*. December 16.

fight against ISIS needs to take into account these two different accounts. A sound judgement as to how regional Kurdish politics will evolve as a result of the Kurds' fight against ISIS can only be attained once the positive and negative repercussions of this fight are duly analyzed and paid attention to. In this respect, it is necessary to divide this repercussion into positive and negative categories to systematically examine their implications as they apply to regional Kurdish politics.

The Emergence of a Common Kurdish Public Sphere

Historically speaking, it was difficult to talk about a common Kurdish public sphere since Kurds were divided into four different nation-states after the post-World War I settlement. These respective nation-states' agendas shaped their outlook and political projection. Turkey's Kurds, Syrian Kurds, Iraqi Kurds, and Iranian Kurds were the favored and probably better description of the Kurds rather than the more general terminology of Kurds.

In their political struggle, Kurds fought their own battle against the nation-state whose borders they were living in. For Turkey's Kurds, it was Turkey that became their nation-building process' constitutive other. For Iraqi Kurds, it was Iraq; for Iranian Kurds, Iran; and for Syrian Kurds, Syria.

Such description of the Kurds was largely a function of the preference of the nation-states in which the Kurds were residing. Affixing the Turkish, Iranian, Iraqi, and Syrian adjective in front of the Kurdish noun had three primary implications: First, such a depiction relegated the Kurds to minority status in the respective nation-states in which they were living in. Second, it denied the existence of a Kurdish nation with its attendant rights and privileges. Third, it rejected the existence of a Kurdish homeland, though divided among four nation-states, that is regarded by the constitutive elements of the Kurdish nation as a contagious political, geographical, and cultural framework. Corollary to this, these nation-states have named the territories the Kurds were living in not in relation to the Kurds, but in relation to the nation-states within whose borders the Kurds were residing. For instance, Turkish official discourse has traditionally referred to Iraqi Kurdistan as Northern Iraq; emphasizing the primacy of the Iraqi nation-state and denying the Kurds the right to claim a historical geography and homeland that cuts across the boundaries that divided them between modern-day Iran, Iraq,

Turkey, and Syria as a result of post-World War I settlement.[6] The Kurds in contrast treat Kurdistan as a single unit divided among four nation-states. As a result, they prefer a geographical terminology that reflects such a reading of Kurdistan. In referring to the different parts of Kurdish homeland, the Kurdish political class employs the following vocabularies: *Bakur* (North, Turkey's Kurdistan), *Bashur* (South, Iraqi Kurdistan), *Rojhelat* (East, Iranian Kurdistan), and *Rojava* (West, the Syrian Kurdistan) (Bengio 2014, pp. 1–15). This implies unitary nature of the Kurdistan, rather than a fragmented one.

Though the Kurdish nationalism[7] treated Kurdistan as a single unit, at least at the discursive level, few instances and issues, if any, in the last century have created incentive and impetus for the Kurds of all parts of Kurdistan to realize and emphasize this point. The fight against ISIS has provided a unique opportunity in this respect. It has given a fresh impetus to the reading of Kurdistan as a single unit and rekindled the pan-Kurdist idea of Kurdistan. For the first time in history, Kurds from all parts of Kurdistan appear to believe that they face the same enemy: ISIS. For once, the media in all parts of Kurdistan talked about the same enemy. Kurdish political leaders referred to the same impending danger. Likewise, not only Kurds from all parts of Kurdistan but also the diaspora protested against the same group: ISIS. In this regard, ISIS has not only acquired the Kurdish nation-building process' constitutive other, the fight against ISIS has also revitalized the idea of Kurdistan as a single unit among the Kurds.

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[6] In recent years, Turkey has enjoyed good relations with the Kurdistan Regional Government. It is the largest investor in the KRG's economy and has been relatively at ease in pronouncing the name of the KRG as it is rather than adopting the denialist mantra of Northern Iraq as a substitute for the KRG. Nevertheless, Turkey still remains opposed to the emergence of a Kurdistan and is especially uneasy with the emergence of a Syrian Kurdistan.

[7] Once it was fashionable to claim that the world is entering and experiencing a post-national era in which the previously strong national, nationalist ideas, feelings, and motivations will lose its currency. Yet, time and circumstances seem to disprove these assertions. Nationalism is still a potent force in today's world politics. The developments in the wider Kurdish geo-politics in the Middle East are a case in point. The eminent social scientist Craig Calhoun convincingly argues in favor of why nations still matters in the world politics and why the claim that the world has entered a post-national phase is flawed. See, Calhoun (2007). Nations matter: Culture, History, and the Cosmopolitan Dream. London: Routledge.

In her comparison between the Arab revolution and Kurdish revolution,[8] Ofra Bengio argues that one of the major differences between the Arab and the Kurdish revolutions is that 'while the Arab revolutions brought to the surface the cracks and divisions within the Arab societies, in the Kurdish case we notice a growing tendency toward transborder cooperation and unity. Thus, if the beginning of the twentieth century witnessed the division of the Kurdish territories between four states so that ties among the different communities could only be maintained randomly, the beginning of the twentieth-first century, and especially its latest upheavals, brought them closer together. It opened the way for some degree of pan-Kurdism and somehow mitigated the chronic tendency toward tribalism, internal wars, and factionalism' (Bengio 2014, p. 273).

This political aspect has been strengthened with the inclusion of an emotional ingredient, which plays an indispensable role in the development of any form of a shared belonging.[9] Cross-border funerals and transnational grief have become a defining feature of the Kurds' fight with ISIS. Increasingly, deceased bodies of young Kurds are coming from Syria and Iraq to Turkey or from Syria to Iraqi Kurdistan.[10] To borrow Benedict Anderson's terminology, such occurrences of cross-border grief

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[8] Ofra Bengio employs the terms 'Arab revolution' and 'Kurdish revolution' to refer to the developments, uprisings, and upheavals since the onset of the Arab Spring in both Arab and Kurdish contexts.

[9] For a good overview of role of emotion in the development of a common belonging, particularly in the Kurdish nationalism, see Neuberger, B 2014. Kurdish Nationalism in Comparative Perspective. In: O. Bengio, ed. Kurdish Awakening: Nation Building in a Fragmented Homeland. Austin: the University of Texas Press, 15–37. For the historical evolution of the modern Kurdish nationalism, see Eppel, M 2014. Historical Setting: The roots of modern Kurdish nationalism. In: O. Bengio, ed. Kurdish Awakening: Nation Building in a Fragmented Homeland. Austin: the University of Texas Press, 37–63.

Also, see Tetsunori Koizumi analyzing the way national development is shaped by the interplay between nationalism as ideology and nationalism as emotion in the context of global interdependence, Tetsunori Koizumi., T 1994. Nationalism as ideology, nationalism as emotion, and the pitfalls national development, Cybernetics and Systems: An International Journal, 25 (6), 747–761.

[10] For an account of cross-border funerals and grief, see Cale Salih 2015. Kurds demand unity amid battle against Islamic State. European Council on Foreign Relations. January 15.

do not only make 'the imagined community',[11] i.e., Kurdish nation, real but also create shared pain among the constituent members. In a sense, it transforms the community of common ethnic origins and language[12] into that of a sentiment, emotion, and ideology. All in all, ISIS or other radical groups have been forming the Kurdish national politics' constitutive other in the regional setting.

THE EMERGENCE OF A FRAGILE COMMON KURDISH POLITICS

The emergence of the Kurdish public sphere and ISIS as the Kurdish politics' common constitutive other also set another process in motion, namely the emergence of a fragile common Kurdish political scene.[13] This fragile political scene has manifested itself in many different ways since the outbreak of hostilities between ISIS and the Kurds. The two main veins of Kurdish politics in the regional setting, namely the Barzani-led Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Ocalan-led Kurdistan Worker Party (PKK), have set aside their traditional rivalries and cooperated for some time. The PKK came to aid of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in defense of Makmour, Mount Sinjar, Kirkuk, and other places located in the KRG. The KRG, but particularly KDP, reciprocated by sending peshmergas to Kobane to aid the PKK's sister party PYD in its fight against ISIS. This help coupled with aerial and arm support from the US and its partners saved Kobane from falling to ISIS. Moreover, the KRG's parliament recognized the three PYD-administered cantons in Northern Syria, or *Rojava* in Kurdish.

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[11] In his seminal book 'Imagined Communities,' Benedict Anderson stresses the role of the 'print language' in unifying dialects, creating national languages, and hence creating a sense of common belonging among the people who share this now 'standardized' language (Anderson 2006).

   Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism. Revised Edition, London: Verso.

[12] Among the scholars of nationalism studies, Anthony Smith is famous for his famous on the historical roots or objective root (ethnic, a shared language and cread, etc.) of nationalism. See, Smith, A.D 2010. Nationalism. 2nd. Edition, Cambridge: Polity Press.

[13] For a study on how the fight against the ISIS has reshaped the Kurdish politics, see Salih, C 2015. Divided Kurds fight the Islamic State. In: J. Barnes-Dacey, E. Geranmayeh, and D. Levy. Eds. The Islamic State through the regional lens. London: ECFR, 57–63.

Such a thaw in relations expressed itself in the KDP-facilitated meeting of the different Kurdish factions of Syria in Duhok, a city located in KRG near Turkey's border, which culminated in the Duhok agreement on October 22, 2014 (Bozarslan 2014). According to Duhok agreement, the pro-KDP Syria Kurdish National Congress and pro-PKK PYD agreed to establish a joint political and military administration for the three Kurdish cantons of Kobane, Afrin, and Jazeera in Syria. While the current PYD administration will be maintained, it will be more inclusive in its administrative structure (Bozarslan 2014).

The Duhok agreement seems to have overcome some of the thorniest points of contention between the KDP and the PYD/PKK. To put it more bluntly, given the history of bitter exchanges between KDP and PYD/PKK on the one hand, and of minor clashes between pro-KDP and pro-PKK factions in Syria on the other, this agreement represented an important step forward for intra-Kurdish reconciliation in Syria, but also in the region, since the Kurdish part of Syria has become the main battle ground between the PKK and KDP to dominate Kurdish politics in the Near East (Bozarslan 2014). Having said this, one, however, should be careful not to become too sanguine on this front, because there are still ample sources of friction between the parties (Al Jazeera Turk 2014). In fact, as the magnitude of the danger posed by the ISIS to the Kurds, but especially to the Iraqi Kurds, has relatively decreased since the late March 2015, the Kurdish leadership has engaged in bickering among themselves. For instance, the PKK-affiliated Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK) accused the KDP-affiliated *Rudaw* media group as being founded by Turkish Intelligence Organization, hence called for the boycott of the media group for committing the crime of 'treason' by conducting a 'smear campaign' against the PKK in a press release.[14]

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[14]To see the KCK's press release, ANF News 2015. KCK: Rûdaw TV hareketimize karşı yayın yapıyor. *ANF News*. 21 June. http://anfturkce.net/kurdistan/kck-rudaw-tv-hareketimize-karsi-yayin-yapiyor (Accessed 16 July 2015).

SECULARISM CLOUDED WITH LANGUAGE OF ISLAM OR SECULARISM *A LA* KURD

All the groups[15] that the Kurds are facing are disciples of variants of Islamist politics, mostly in its radical forms. This led the Kurdish political leaders to further emphasize the secular nature of their politics and utilize it as a social-marker of Kurdish politics in the region. Kurds have indeed emphasized secular themes throughout their conflict with ISIS. The emphasis on the well-representation of females and inclusion of people of different faiths or no faith in the rank and files of party organizations, non-religious content of the would-be social contract of *Rojava*, incessant criticism of Islamism are all part of a strategy that aims to set Kurdish politics apart from dominant characters, i.e., Islamic, of Syrian opposition, and contemporary Iraqi, Iranian, and Turkish politics. Believing that such a political disposition will earn Kurds more international legitimacy and support is another motivating factor for the Kurdish politics' overemphasis of its secular nature.

In tandem with these developments, Kurdish politics has also resorted to the language of Islam aimed at their domestic constituencies. Given that Islam will increasingly shape the political inclinations of its adherents and is a potent mobilizing force in the region, Kurdish politics also feels the pressure that it cannot remain oblivious to the language of Islam. In the end, the language of Islam adopted by its adversaries resonates with a segment of its constituency. As a response, Kurdish political groups have shown a willingness to play the Islamic card as well and adopted, partially, the language of Islam as a discursive shield. For example, the PKK's offshoot organization, the Democratic Society Congress (DTK) organized the Democratic Islamic Congress in Diyarbakir in 2014 (BBC Turkce 2014), and Barzani's increasing utilization of Islam in his public speeches illustrate this tendency among Kurdish factions.

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[15] These groups can be divided into several categories such as between radical Islamism and democratic political Islamists. For instance, while the pro-Kurdish HDP has competed with democratic political Islamist AK Party in the June 7, 2015, general election in Turkey, the Syrian Kurds fought against radical groups such as ISIS, Jamaat-al Nusrah, and etc., and Iraqi Kurds against ISIS, but also Shia-dominated central government in Baghdad.

Security Sector Reform

During the ISIS offensive against the Kurds, famed-Kurdish peshmergas, contrary to the expectation of many and its fame, disappointed people by speedily retreating from their military posts. Their inability to withstand the advancing ISIS forces in the initial stages of the fight immeasurably tarnished the peshmergas' image. All of a sudden, the once revered and feared Kurdish peshmergas appeared to have been made into paper tigers. Kurdish public, officials, and seasoned observers of Kurdish politics have attempted to identify the causes of such a military setback.

Several factors were cited and various explanations were offered to account for this military retreat. For example, the relative security that has reigned in the Kurdish part of Iraq, the peshmergas' involvement in extra-military affairs, their lack of proper military equipment, and necessary discipline, motivation, and professionalism were said to have all contributed to the poor performance of the peshmergas on the battlefield.[16] Besides these factors, there are other more structural factors at work in engendering such a dismal picture of the peshmergas' military performance. The fragmented nature of the Kurdish peshmergas' command structure along partisan lines, divided loyalties of its constituent parts, lack of national imagination of its members can be cited as such structural factors that crippled the peshmergas' ability as a fighting force.

Both sets of factors point to the same urgent need: security sector reform. ISIS's offensive made clear the need for security sector reform in the KRG to be felt acutely (Schmidt 2014). This need in fact made the case for reform. To that effect, the KRG has undertaken several steps. A parliamentary committee was established to oversee the transition of peshmerga forces from party militias into a national army. Steps were also taken in order to unify the peshmerga command structure. Moreover, peshmergas acquired heavy weaponry and foreign military advisers in the KRG are driving Peshmerga restructuring efforts and military training.[17] These steps, if implemented successfully, will help the KRG to transform

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[16]Anne Hagood 2015. The Peshmergas and the Future of the State. *Noria: Network of Researchers in International Affairs.* January. For another analysis arguing along the same lines, see Michael Knights 2014. Divided Forces. *The Washington Institute.* October.

[17]See a well-researched piece on the KRG's drive to acquire heavy weaponry for the peshmergas, Martin Chulov 2015. Kurdish peshmerga call for heavy weaponry to take their fight to ISIS, *The Guardian.* 22 February.

its peshmerga forces from being party militias with divided partisan loy-alties to a national army with its loyalty located at the national level. As the conventional wisdom suggests, if army-building precedes the nation-building process, the recent fight between the KRG and ISIS is likely to prove beneficial for the Kurdish nation-building process in the medium and long run.

Thus, the fight between Kurdish national movements and ISIS has engendered some new trends in Kurdish politics in the Near East. Most of these trends are likely to contribute to Kurdish national aspirations and aid its politics in the intermediate and long term. However, one should not be overly optimistic on this account. The same process has also intro-duced some alarming new trends and causes for friction in the regional Kurdish political sphere. The seeds for a dangerous rivalry between differ-ent Kurdish groups in the regional setting have been sown.[18] If allowed to materialize, this scenario might prove ominous for the Kurds in the Middle East. This rivalry, which is reminiscent of the old bloody and perilous rivalries in Kurdish politics, is taking place along two axes: on the regional setting between the KDP and the PKK, and within the con-text of the KRG between the KDP and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Therefore, a thorough account should set positive developments that have been ushered in by the fight between Kurds and ISIS against the negative developments that could potentially materialize.

Who Will Define the Future of the KRG?

On the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) level, the KDP and PUK, as the two traditional ruling parties of Iraqi Kurdistan, have been engaged in a simmering rivalry. As the KDP has progressively come to dominate Kurdish politics in the KRG, and as the PUK has gradually lost ground to the Gorran Movement, a splinter group originating from the PUK, the PUK feels cornered. This is especially the case in Sulaymaniyah province, PUK's traditional stronghold, by the Gorran and by the KDP in the KRG at large, and now the PUK is searching for ways to regain some of its losses. It is believed that ISIS's early offensive against the

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[18] See the following article for a similar judgement on unleashed rivalry among Kurdish fac-tions, Ranj Alaaldin 2014. A dangerous rivalry for the Kurds. *New York Times*. December 16.

Kurdish forces in Iraqi Kurdistan in August/September 2014 provided such an opportunity. The Peshmergas' initial retreat and move back from some of the areas attacked by ISIS with the ensuing loss of territory and lives gave the PUK an advantageous public standing, since the retreating Peshmerga is seen as belonging to the KDP.[19] As the KRG's prestige and public standing was dented by these attacks, the PUK tried to frame this early setback as the KDP's inability to stand for Kurdish lives, rights, and the Kurdish cause. Moreover, while it cast its struggle in the lexicon of a national cause, it framed the KDP's cause as that of tribe and party.[20] If this rhetoric continues, this drive by the PUK to reclaim its waning influence in Kurdish politics might cause serious friction with the KDP with dire consequences for Kurdish politics in Iraqi Kurdistan.

KDP and PKK Axes: A Struggle to Dominate Regional Kurdish Politics

Second, another rivalry is taking place along PKK and KDP lines in regional Kurdish politics.[21] The historical roots of discord between the PKK and KDP go back to the late 1980s and the 1990s. Inflamed by power struggles, factional and ideological differences and competition, this discord claimed thousands of lives on both sides and gave further

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[19] For a good and extensive report and analysis on the impact of the peshmerga's initial retreat from their posts in the face of ISIS onslaught on Iraqi Kurdish politics in general and the intra-Kurdish rivalry in particular, see Dexter Filkins 2014. The fight of their lives. *New Yorker.* 29 September.

[20] KDP is dominated by the Barzani family/tribe. The President and the Prime Minister of the KRG, respectively, Mesut Barzani and Necirvan Barzani, come from the Barzani tribe. Likewise, the head of the intelligence service, Masrour Barzani, is the son of KRG President Mesut Barzani. Many senior posts within the KDP's party politics and KRG's regional politics are filled by figures from either Barzani tribe or close associates. This led many to accuse the KDP of prioritizing tribal links over the national ones.

[21] See the strongly worded warning from the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK), an umbrella organization of pro-PKK groups, aimed at the KRG in general and the KDP in particular. In the statement the KCK "called attention to the hidden and dirty policy and propaganda recently pursued in South Kurdistan (meaning KRG) against the PKK." As a response, the KCK threatened to withdraw PKK forces from the KRG. See the news, ANF News 2015. KCK: We are discussing to withdraw the guerrilla forces fighting ISIS. *ANF News,* 08 February http://anfenglish.com/news/kck-we-are-discussing-to-withdraw-the-guerrilla-forces-fighting-isis#.VNfB3f-lpBM.twitter (Accessed February 25, 2015).

prominence to the Kurdish concept of *brakuji*, which literally means fratricide. Despite a relative calm in relations in the 2000s, this rivalry was revitalized in the context of the Syrian civil war and the drive of both sides to dominate Syrian Kurdish politics and enclaves. In this drive, the PKK proved much more successful than the KDP. It established an almost total grip over the Kurdish enclaves in Syria, situated itself as the only credible representative of the 'Kurdish people' in the country, and maintained a battle-hardened fighting force on the ground. Moreover, it either expelled or imprisoned pro-KDP forces, especially targeting the leadership of the group in *Rojava,* the Kurdish term that refers to the Kurdish part of Syria. This further intensified the already tense relations between PKK and KDP. The President of the KRG and Chairman of the KDP, Masoud Barzani, responded by closing down the border between the KRG and *Rojava*, cutting off significant supply and economic lifelines to the region, with an attendant acrimonious exchange between the two sides. The first of many casualties of this rivalry was the repeated delaying of the convention of the much vaunted Kurdish National Congress in Erbil to strike a modus vivendi among Kurdish groups, and chart a direction for Kurdish politics in the Near East.[22]

This picture and psychology have temporarily been changed by the fight against ISIS in Iraqi and Syrian Kurdistan with ensuing cross-border cooperation between the PKK and KDP. The PKK came to the aid of the KDP and other Kurdish groups in the KRG and the KRG reciprocated by coming to the aid of the PKK/PYD in Kobane, creating a new dynamism in relations. This process has been buttressed by political pressure on the political elite from an emerging common Kurdish public to devise a common position and undertake cooperation in a regional setting. Such cooperation has proved significant for pushing back ISIS, reclaiming some of the lost territories and securing US/Western military equipment and assistance for PYD forces in *Rojava* by using the KDP/KRG as a conduit, though the USA has cooperated with the PYD directly since the saving of Kobane from falling to ISIS. Moreover, this amicable and cooperative atmosphere was further bolstered by the signing of the Duhok agreement, brokered by Barzani between different

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[22]The convention of the much vaunted Kurdish National Congress in Erbil still remains unfulfilled as of late July 2015. This projected Congress has suffered repeated delays as a result of the fierce rivalry between the KDP and the PKK.

Syrian Kurdish groups. This agreement envisioned cooperation between them and the adoption of a common position by signatory parties with the aim of establishing a common integrated military structure in *Rojava* (Rudaw 2014).

Yet, this picture has suffered a setback in the form of the PKK's announcement that Shingal province, which is inhabited by Yazidi Kurds and located in the KRG, should declare its own cantonal administration, mirroring the PKK instituted, administrated, and maintained cantonal structure in *Rojava* in January 2015.[23] This declaration has been and will be seen by the KDP as a direct intrusion by the PKK into the KRG's domestic politics in order to seek a foothold for itself on KRG territory. Hence, this move has driven a wedge between the two parties. In fact, the KRG has warned the PKK against interfering in Shingal and attempting to turn it into a canton under its own influence. 'We want to announce that the current PKK attempts to create a canton for Shingal is unlawful and is completely contradictory with the laws of the Iraqi state and the Kurdistan Region, and they must stop these interventions inside the Kurdistan Region, as Shingal is part of the disputed areas in the Iraqi constitution,' the KRG said (Rudaw 2015).

This move is likely to elicit a similar response from the KDP in the form of an increased effort by the KDP to have its offshoot organization in the Kurdish part of Turkey to disturb the PKK's hegemony over Kurdish politics in Turkey. In other words, if the PKK continues to seek an oppositional role for itself against the dominance of the KDP in the KRG, the KDP will have an enhanced motivation to situate itself as an oppositional force against the hegemony of the PKK over Turkey's Kurdish politics through its offshoot organizations. But as the result of the Turkey's June 7, 2015, general election showed, the PKK is consolidating its power among Turkey's Kurds. PKK-affiliated HDP won a major electoral victory by acquiring the majority of the Kurdish voters, hence inflicting a heavy defeat on its main rival, the governing AK Party.

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[23]To have a comprehensive understanding of the impact of the PKK's approach to Shingal on PKK-KDP relations, see Dağ, R 2015. Ortadoğu Denkleminde Suriye Kürtleri, *Ortadoğu Analiz*, 69 (7), 9–13. While PKK's this move has proved inimical for its relations with KDP, Marianna Charountaki contends that the nature of the Syrian Kurds, and PKK's, relations with the KDP and KRG are instrumental fort them to gain international legitimacy and support. See, Charountaki, M 2015. Arap ayaklanmalarinin Suriyeli Kürtler üzerindeki etkisi, *Ortadoğu Analiz*, 69 (7), 13–16.

This also shows that any attempt by the KDP to seek an oppositional role for itself against PKK will face an uphill battle in Turkey's Kurdish region. Nevertheless, the KDP can still create some headaches for the PKK through its links among Turkey's Kurds.

A Common Kurdish Public Sphere: A Cause for Cooperation or Competition?

As Kurdish affairs analyst Rebwar Kerim Weli has also argued, it seems that the PKK's motivation for establishing a de facto presence or gaining the upper hand in Shingal is three-fold. First, it is competing for primacy with the KDP in *Rojava* (in which it has proved much more successful than the KDP), and it regards asserting influence over the land that borders *Rojava* in the KRG as being of utmost importance. Shingal has significant strategic value in the PKK's calculations. Second, by emphasizing its role as the savior of a minority religious sect, i.e., the Yazidi Kurds, the PKK believes it will acquire further international legitimacy. Third, Shingal will provide the PKK with another foothold on KRG soil and a reason to play a role in internal KRG politics, hence squeezing its main competitor, the KDP, on a regional scale (Weli 2015). Though ferociously resisted by the KDP, the PKK's approach has neither received criticism from the PUK nor Gorran, reflecting the fact that it is the PKK and KDP that are the main contenders for primacy in Kurdish politics in the Near East.

Third, as a common Kurdish public sphere is emerging, most of the Kurdish movements have gradually begun to adopt a pan-Kurdish agenda, in addition to more localized concerns they previously had, which largely restricted their political activities and ambitions to the nation-states within which they were operating, or against whom they were struggling. Therefore, the common Kurdish public sphere has provided new opportunities for Kurdish politics in the Near East, but it has also provided ample causes for friction among Kurdish groups as they feel more pressure to appeal to the larger Kurdish public to justify their political activities. This cause of friction is still a theoretical one and has not materialized yet. The political skills and dexterity of Kurdish politicians will decide whether this common Kurdish public sphere will be utilized as a reason for further cooperation or cause a rift between different Kurdish factions.

Conclusion

All in all, the fight against ISIS has served not only as an opportunity but also as a menace to Kurdish politics in the Near East. A sole focus on the opportunities prompted by this fight will not present a complete and accurate picture of the strengths and weaknesses of Kurdish politics in the regional setting. An informed and impartial observation requires attention to be paid to sources of friction unleashed as a result of the fight between Kurds and ISIS. Yet, it is eventually the regional context, and the will and deftness of Kurdish politics that will decide as to which scenario will prevail in the Kurdish politics in the region.

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Author Biography

Galip Dalay is Research Director at Al Sharq Forum and senior associate fellow on Turkey and Kurdish Affairs at Al Jazeera Center for Studies. He previously worked as a visiting fellow at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) in Berlin and as a political researcher at SETA Foundation in Ankara. He is a regular contributor to German Marshall Fund of the United States on Turkey policy brief series, and a columnist for Middle East Eye. His research interests include Turkish politics, Turkish foreign policy, regional Kurdish politics, political Islam, and radical movements.

Global Politics of Image and the Making of a Legitimate Non-state Armed Actor: Syrian Kurds and 'The Secular West' in Kobane

Tuncay Kardaş and Murat Yeşiltaş

INTRODUCTION

The post-Arab Spring Middle East has witnessed the rise of a variety of trans-state and non-state military actors previously unheard of, which also introduce new models of governance such as the ISIS that aims at utopian trans-state caliphate. The ISIS is not only committed to 'outgunning Baghdad, but also outgoverning it' (Phillips 2014, 496). In many ways, while the rise of ISIS represents the radical aspect of the non-state military phenomenon, the others such as PYD, and other Kurdish non-state military actors symbolize the new face of the transformation in the Middle East. While more imaginary than real, the so-called Rojava revolution in the governance of 'Rojavayé Kurdistan' (Syrian Western Kurdistan) seeks to showcase a new experience in state-making. Meanwhile, the contemporary Kurdish military predicament in the region

T. Kardaş (✉) · M. Yeşiltaş
Sakarya University, Adapazari, Turkey
e-mail: tuncaykardas@hotmail.com

is getting even more complicated. To be sure, the Kurdish predicament is a by-product of infights and competitions with heavy internal-tribal interests, ideological or political bickering among Kurdish social forces in the region (Marcus 2007). It is also related to being one of the world's biggest stateless nations that historically often found itself in the geopolitical crosshairs of conflicting interests and regional actors (Gunter 1996). The bloody war between the post-Arab Spring weary Sunni Arab states and an increasingly assertive Shia Iran has also contributed to the predicament of the Kurds in Syria (Gunter 2014, 2015). Since June 2014, however, Kurdish political forces have been facing arguably one of the most existential threats coming from the ISIS.

After the Assad regime lost the grip of the country beginning with 2011, Syrian Kurds were able to take control of the Kurdish-majority areas in the north with the exception of Kobane, which came under the attack of the ISIS forces particularly since October 2014. The Kobane war has become an internationalized local struggle with manifold actors and a highly contested conundrum that goes beyond inter-state strategic interaction so as to include the realms of the symbolic and iconic. Indeed, more than simply reinforcing the Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria, the former has remarkably been an internationalized (local) struggle by a non-state actor. The so-called Rojava revolution of Syrian Kurds and their struggle to retake Kobane from the ISIS forces has remarkably been at the center of a meaning-making strategy around which visual representations of war, gender, and global politics coalesced.

The present study argues that the war in Kobane and the subsequent making of the global coalition against ISIS went beyond geostrategic frame so as to present a case of identity construction for the Kurds and the global audience. The Kobane siege by the ISIS and the Syrian Kurds' effort to withstand in 2014 became a global vehicle for identity construction employing pictorial tools of imagination. Not only had the Kurds of the region but also the global audience took part in the latter process. The new Kurdish geopolitical identity can hardly be complete without the Kobane war experience that emanated in part from the politics of identity and pictorial representations including variegated means such as maps and photographic portraits. Such tools also helped to make and feel the threat of ISIS and a 'distant war' over Kobane familiar for the detached regional and Western audiences, who were later got involved through their own meaning-making strategies forging Kobane war as a war of identity.

By employing critical visual-discourse approach and critical geo-politics, the present study shows the process of a particular subjectivity namely 'the secular-civilian Kurd' being reinforced through the war against the ISIS. It focuses on how visually and discursively mediated construction of the Kobane offensive in the West was enacted as self/other relations between the Kurds, ISIS, and the West. This paper seeks to explain the question of what was 'exceptional' about Kobane in the context of the rise and consolidation of Kurdish geopolitical space in the Middle East. In the first section of the article, we provide a theoretical framework regarding the politics of imagination in order to understand in what sense and ways non-state military actors construct a particular conception of territoriality and geopolitical discourse. The article illustrates these arguments in two case studies: first on the use of symbolic politics and metaphors in the remaking of Kurdish identity and geopolitical imagination, and second on the politics of visual affect established around the representations of the Rojava's women warrior portraits for the consumption of distant audiences.

Theoretical Framework: The Politics of Imagination

Imagination is 'an organized field of social practices,' helping to constitute 'a form of negotiation between sites of agency and globally defined fields of possibility,' with the help of media outlets that give rise to 'imaginary collective aspirations' (Appadurai 1996, 31). The impact of the visual mode of communication in contemporary global politics has received academic interest producing studies arguing that visual, print, and digital products have an increasing role in world politics (Robinson 2001; Williams 2003; Der Derian 2005; Hansen 2015). Cartoons, maps or illustrations are powerful artifacts that both convey messages and constitute meaning (Kress and Leeuwen 1996). The present seeks to understand how people experience places and transform them.

Critical discourse analysis' 'ideological square' can help to explain the construction of identities through analyzing how positive self-representation, negative other-representation (or misrepresentation), verbal, visual rhetorical tools and techniques such as beautification-demonization, euphemism-dysphemism, or metaphors work to produce identities (Van Dijk 2003, 33). A visual or verbal text thus mediates reality and situates readers *qua* subjects by providing them 'a vehicle for

thought, communication and action' (Purvis and Hunt 1993, 485). If successful, verbal and visual artefacts might introduce 'possibilities for changes in consciousness and calls to action' (Greenberg 2002, 194).

The representations of the Kobane siege in visual artefacts, drawings, and photographs thus function not simply as purveyors of reality but rather as means to construct a 'historical agency' for the Kurdish as well as international audiences who could then 'see themselves' in those collective representations. Such representations made the distant [Kobane] war proximate and familiar. As Campbell argues (2007, 358) 'Visual imagery is of particular importance for geopolitics because it is one of the principal ways in which news from distant places is brought home, constructing the notion of 'home' in this process…Much like cartography, these images contributed to the development of an ''imagined geography'' in which the dichotomies of West/East, civilized/barbaric, North/South and developed/underdeveloped have been prominent.' Texts and visual images thus work as 'pedagogical tools' because they can 'communicate to the viewer, in the language of photography or painting or illustration or commemoration, the qualities, the pleasures or pain, the duties, the kind of past, present, and/or future that is or that is desired' (Hale 1999, 8).

In what follows, we analyze two cases to show how various media platforms situate the regional and Western audiences *qua* subjects. We analyze how meanings around identities are temporarily and spatially 'fixed' through practices of visual, speech, and textual representations. Overall, our aim is to discuss the effects of Kurdish geopolitical imagination in relation to identity, civility, and regional security.

REIMAGINING THE KURDISH GEOPOLITICAL SPACE: THE CASE OF KOBANE WAR

It is difficult to pinpoint a common thread in the Kurdish nationhood-identity discourse since the Kurds have been divided into four different nation states and shaped by different socio-political experiences of their designated nation-state (Bozarslan 2014). It is for this reason that many scholars prefer to label Kurds as Syrian, Iranian, Iraqi, or Turkish Kurds (Gunter 2015). Historically, the identity of Kurds was often constructed with reference to an 'other' according to different social and political circumstances (Yeğen 1999). While the Kemalist regime in Turkey was the constitutive 'other' for the PKK, the Ba'ath regimes in Syria and Iraq

were the common enemy for the Syrian and Iraqi Kurds. Particularly after the Kobane war, however, Kurdish identity has reinvented and manifested itself against a globally designated common threat: ISIS. The ISIS has uniquely become a 'constitutive other' for the Kurdish political identity. In many ways, a new type of Kurdishness was expressed itself in the struggle against ISIS and Kobane, which suddenly graduated to being not only a burgeoning center of newly empowered Kurdish nationalism, but also more importantly, a major flashpoint in the regionalization of the common Kurdish political discourse (Güneş and Lowe 2015).

Following the Kobane siege, Kurds found a new 'constitutive other' for their political identity which also shaped the global imagination and shared as a common threat: ISIS. The latter helped to crystallize the emergent Kurdish political and geopolitical discourse after 133 days of war (*KurdWatch Report* December 4, 2014). Functioning as a nodal point, the defense of Kobane gave rise to a new Kurdish geopolitical imagination associated with nationhood with a secular post-nation-state discourse. Kobane gradually became for Syrian and Turkey's Kurds what Halabja became for Iraqi Kurds in 1988, that is, a platform for the reconstruction of nationhood and identity for the Kurds of the region (Barkey 2014). Even though the political consolidation of Kurdish subjectivity had been evident well before the Kobane experience, the latter was instrumental in spreading the Kurdish identity to regional and international levels. As a new marker of Kurdish nationalism, it was an external/international factor that pushed the military–political positions of the regional Kurdish forces and the 'Global Coalition to Counter IS.' The USA was actively involved as well asking Kurds of the region to join and work together in forming a common front against the ISIS. Thus, as a response to the ISIS's Kobane offensive, Kurdish nationalists were forced to cooperate while still retaining competing paradigms and regional interests. The existential threats from the ISIS's religious fanaticism made the Syria's secular-Marxist Kurdish group PYD to side with its conservative rival KRG-affiliated Syrian groups that resulted in the agreement setting up a 30 member power sharing council in Syria (*Rudaw* 2014a).[1] The agreement was hailed by the Iraqi Kurdistan KRG

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[1]Despite the agreement did not fully materialize, certain common practical-military initiatives for saving Kobane were realized with the deployment of Iraq's KRG's Peshmerga forces in northern Syria via Turkey.

president Barzani, who claimed '[T]his agreement brings us together and is itself a significant answer to enemies who did not intend the Kurds to be united' (*Rudaw* 2014a). While the PYD's leader Salih Müslim said: 'all Kurdish people are under attack, so they should be united' (Ismaeel 2014).

The struggle over Kobane also strengthened secular representations of Kurdish political subjectivity over competing narratives for the global audience which was increasingly concerned with the ISIS atrocities. The latter helped the Syrian Kurds to attract international support for their 'secular Kurdishness.' The Kobane predicament thus turned into a powerful international symbol (BBC 20 October 2014) and a symbol for a united Kurdish front (*Interviews* December 2014).[2] The much publicized fear of loss of Kobane was represented as a defeat for the entire Kurdish nation (Al Jazeera 2015). Confiding, the PKK's Executive Council had this to say in an effort to downplay differences with rival groupings:

> The PKK will continue to defend and to ensure Kurdish unity, and Kurdish interests and gains. We remain determined to defend South Kurdistan against IS or any other forces. For the PKK and the KCK, Kirkuk is the same as Amed, and Sinjar the same as Kobanê. We have the same sensitivity towards all the provinces and districts of Kurdistan… The defence of Kirkuk must be at the same time a defence of Kobane, the defence of Jazeera must defend and strengthen at the same time Duhok and Sinjar (Bestanuce 24 September 2014).

The representation of the ISIS was in the meantime revolved around the themes of barbarism and evil easily accessible to the general Kurdish public (*Interviews*, September 2015) that proved valuable in mobilizing popular support. These geopolitical imaginations promoted an 'us-and-them' distinction, and an emotional attachment to Kobane was normalized serving as a constitutive element in the formation of new Kurdish

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[2] The interviews were conducted with the political elites and leading figures from different political parties in Erbil, Kirkuk, and Sulaymaniyah in northern Iraq between December 25 and 31, 2014. The second part of interviews was conducted in Diyarbakır, Mardin, and Şanlıurfa in Turkey between September 9 and 14, 2015.

geopolitical imagination and space (*Interview with Deputy Secretary General of PUK Mulla Bakhtiar*, September 2015).

The politics of representation of Kobane can hardly be confined to the discursive level. By construing Kobane through a select geopolitical discourse is also important in that it provides a fertile ground for public imagination while serving the regional interests of the Kurdish political actors. It also includes the representation of Kurdistan's territorial limits, as well as its geopolitical codes and a sense of 'Kurdish national mission.' Despite their differences on many issues, the main political actors in this context locate Kobane as an integral part of the greater Kurdistan by defining Kobane as a 'Kurdish land' (*Rudaw* 2014b). The representation of the ISIS as an enemy, who are portrayed as barbaric or evil, is based upon the stories deposited in national myths that are easily accessible to the general Kurdish public. This is quite important in mobilizing popular support behind the actions by invoking ideas about collective mission or political strategies of the Kurds. These geopolitical codes that ultimately shape geopolitical imagination of the Kurds by making an 'us-and-them' distinction and emotional attachment to Kobane, a societal dimension. In this way, ideological reference to Kurdish national values, as well as to strategic concerns about the defense of Kobane, become important in the formation of new Kurdish geopolitical imagination.

The struggle for defense of Kobane itself gained a special status in which the idea of Kurdishness was remade and reconstructed for the regional Kurdish national consciousness. Therefore, Kobane as a 'terrain of resistance' has four different effects on the regionalization and reconstruction of common Kurdish political subjectivities in the Middle East. First and foremost, it is an important marker in the construction and consolidation of Kurdish nationhood on the regional level. Second, it is also an important symbol in the rewriting of Kurdistan as the new Kurdish common geopolitical imagination and Kurdish homeland. Third, the Kobane defense is an important marker in the reorganization and relocation of non-state Kurdish armed actors in the regional geopolitical competition. Fourth, it is an important marker in the reconfiguration of the secular representation of Kurdish political subjectivity on the international level.

The Discursive and Pictorial Representations of the Kobane war

While there was fierce ground warfare going on for Kobane against the ISIS, Kurds worldwide took to the venues and platforms of social media to assist and encourage the 'secular militias' the YPG/YPJ, in defense of the 'Kurdish homeland.' The dominating mottos such as 'Kurds defend secular democracy against the Islamic State terror' often filled Facebook pages and Twitter feeds. In addition to fighting the ISIS, the discursive and pictorial representations also sought to legitimize the imagined unity of Kurds. In all, these efforts sought to establish a unified front against the ISIS and imagine a new Kurdish geopolitical space in juxtaposition with the existing nation-state boundaries. For instance, in image 1 entitled 'The Map Built with Guns' the cartoonist Şahin Berzenci partakes in the efforts to ward off the ISIS threat by way of a violent reinterpretation of geopolitics in the form of an imagined map of unified 'Kurdish homeland' united by the militias of Kurdish non-state armed actors in the region Fig. (5.1).

The master signifiers circulating around the Kobane war had been Rojava and secularism, which were mass-circulated via the international media that amplified Rojava's democratic governance model and its secularism. The so-called Rojava revolution owed a lot to the Kurdish nationalist movement's secular-Marxist ideology.[3] The movement's decades old normative commitments to progressive political values such as women's liberation, secularism, and radical democracy were not new-found but rather rooted in internal dynamics and local politics (Watts 2010, 11). Kobane is part of the newly established Rojava canton, which is built on the ideology developed by Abdullah Öcalan, who brands it as 'Democratic Confederalism' (Öcalan 2011). The latter model implies that becoming a nation-state should no longer be on the agenda since a nation-state would continue only to serve the ruling elites and the bourgeoisie. Partly inspired by Ocalan's own readings of Murray Bookchin's (1982) anarchist philosophy of ecological municipalism, the model sees

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[3] Certain aspects of Kurdish politics are secular, while there are Kurdish Islamist movements as well working within the same geopolitical space as leftists and nationalists (Gunter and Yavuz 2007; Tolunay 2014).
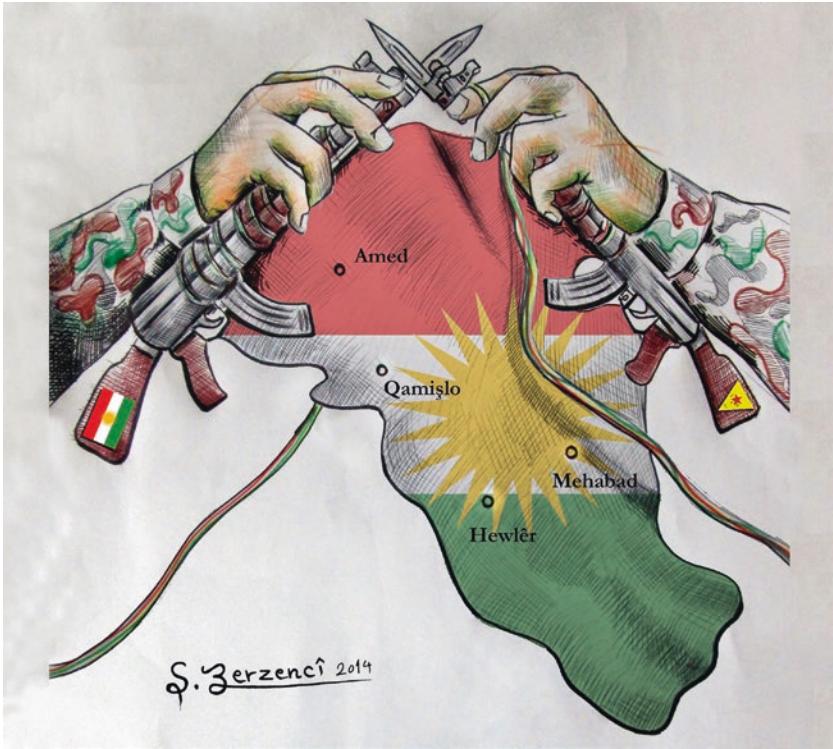
Fig. 5.1 Map built with guns. *Source* Cartoon by Shaheen Hassan, Published in *Rudaw, October* 2014

Kurds granted an autonomous to practice their own brand of democracy based upon gender and ethnic equality, ecological sustainability, and secularism. Ignored earlier by the international society and global media, the rediscovery of the model conveniently overlapped with Kobane coming under attack from ISIS. Suddenly thrust into the spotlight, the world was introduced with the Rojava's 'Revolution.' A former British diplomat reporting from Rojava for the *NYT* had this to say: 'the Kurds are there not only to fight against the Islamic State, but also to defend a precious experiment in direct democracy. In Rojava, the Kurdish name for this region of eastern Syria, a new form of self-government is being built from the ground up' (Ross, *New York Times*, 30 September 2015).

The Ideological Square Through Beautification

In line with the narrative of secularism, the ideological square in the representation of Kurdish female fighters in the YPJ—the all-female wing of the YPG—who took up arms against ISIS was particularly potent. When the Kurdish female warriors lost their lives, they would be hailed as 'martyrs' and largely sensationalized by the local and international media. The beautification of the YPJ and their public visibility went on to include even fashion companies which attempted to usurp the YPJ's warring experience by designing outfits based upon the Kurdish female military uniforms.

The support of the media was crucial through the representation of the Syrian Kurds as secular, self-ruled society that let its women to participate in government and even fight alongside men. Mesmerizing for the Western audiences was the images of women of their ilk fighting a war of survival in the battlegrounds of the Middle East often portrayed as oppressive and backward was eye-catching. The global popular support for saving Kobane and other endangered cities from the ISIS was increasing as the politics of secularism played well into the hands of Syrian Kurds. Struggling against the ISIS and belligerent regional states, the Syrian Kurdish non-state armed actors enjoyed widespread global media coverage as many Kurdish female fighters gave interviews to notable reporters of the global media outlets (Gatehouse 2014; Çiviroğlu 2015; Ross 2015). The modes of positive representation of the Syrian Kurdish female fighters were so gripping that the Western gaze could not hide its orientalist overtones often revolving around the quixotic idea of female soldiers fighting the barbaric other armed non-state actors. The demonization of the latter was such that these fanatic religious actors were both affronting every Western secular value and experimenting a new 'democratic experiment' against the ancient 'Mesopotamian "ziggurat" model' (Ross 2015).

In analyzing how the identities of the non-state armed actors are shaped, it is necessary to revisit the Kurds' efforts to withstand the siege under the continued assaults of ISIS forces in Kobane war. The latter was an instance of war-making that involved not only strategic and tactical conducts but also aesthetic signification. It would be erroneous to separate the realm of the strategy from the realm of aesthetic. The Syrian Kurdish actors were well aware of the power of images in the wider context of violent geopolitical confrontation with rival regional actors. Therefore, their strategy in the Syrian civil war in general and in Kobane

in particular can hardly be separated from the aesthetic appropriations in various mediascapes. That is, it is vital to see that street fights in Kobane went hand in hand with the war of images of women warriors beautified-appropriated for winning the hearts and minds of Kurds of the region as well as the Western audiences and global society. Such images were instantly to become war paraphernalia, since the Kurdish female warriors successfully reframed their violent nationalist struggle against the ISIS not simply as one for a Kurdish homeland but also for the defense of the Western ideals of secular democracy and gender equality. Therefore, saving Kobane was an instance of a globalized culture war in which the female warriors were represented as fighting against not simply the ISIS's strategic assaults but also, for instance, against its misogynist extremism.

Construed as such, it becomes less puzzling and more meaningful why the world witnessed a war in which images of deface, brutality, and grotesque violence coalesced with images of grace and sensibility. It was through iconic and humanist representations of the Kurdish female fighters as against the 'obscurantism' of ISIS that employed enslavement of women and children. It would therefore be erroneous to see their efforts just as a gendered juxtaposition cloaking a larger strategic cause of cleansing the region from the ISIS. These representations mediated reality and situated readers *qua* subjects by providing them 'a vehicle for thought, communication, and action.' The constitution of responsibility of the 'secular West' and the support thereof for Kurdish effort to save Kobane from the IS forces were enabled through the politics of image. Those images were reproduced and extensively circulated in the Western media. One of the end results was that the Kobane defense and the formation of subsequent global coalition were construed as a necessary, good, and just intervention (Ross, *New York Times*, 30 September 2015).

Constructing an affective relationship between the Kurds and the Western audience was made in part through beautification and emotional identification, which familiarized the viewer with the fate of Kurds and Yezidis. It also helped to embolden calls for retribution against the forces of ISIS by the liberal politics of war at a distance (*BBC News*, 19 August 2015). The positive narrative representation of the Kurdish struggle and the beautification of female Kurdish militant subjectivity were largely a discursive and political tool. The Kurds' meaning-making strategies were largely formed around 'civility versus barbarism' narrative that have successfully reworked self-other relations at the regional as well as the global

levels. By identifying and locating their struggle within the humanist-secular Western frame as opposed to the ISIS theocratic imagination helped to demonize the ISIS to the degree of flagrant barbarism. Overall, through such discursive and pictorial interventions, a non-state armed actor (here the PYD and its militant wings YPG-YPJ) could more easily resist or survive the persistent geopolitical conditions in the Middle East.

In a recent H&M advertisement, the narrated (anchorage) trait of the secular civility is matched through fusion with the Kurdish female fighters. The accompanied saturated photographs may assign 'the allocated social roles' by the way of a select set of images that depict women in daily routines rather than in war-making roles or activities. Another example is the case of a Kurdish female fighter, Ruken (*nom de guerre*) who claimed that she 'joined the PKK to defend human values, to fight for women's equality' as she was photographed combing her hair, with the caption reading 'Ruken…getting ready to be deployed [to fight the ISIS]' (see *BBC* report 'In Pictures' 2015). Such was a politics of identity that includes an attempt to engender 'sameness' between the Syrian Kurds fighters and the general Western viewers. The PYD has enjoyed an increasing diplomatic recognition particularly in the EU member states as well as Russia, the former has been opening new diplomatic offices in European states (ImcTv 2015).

Saving Kobane, Constructing the Secular West

When asked whether he believed the post-World War II international order was disintegrating, Obama claimed that unlike other regions 'what we're seeing in the Middle East and parts of North Africa is an order that dates back to World War I starting to buckle' (Interview in *New York Times*, 8 August 2014). Having learned the hard lessons from the Libyan Civil War following the NATO-led intervention against Kaddafi that left the country with 'no sufficient international follow-on assistance on the ground to help them build institutions,' US President Obama is reported to have kept asking himself the following: 'Do I have the partners-local and/or international-to make any improvements we engineer self-sustaining?' The US President further reckons 'there has to be a much more aggressive effort to rebuild societies that didn't have any civic traditions…So that's a lesson that I now apply every time I ask the question: Should we intervene, militarily? Do we have an answer [for] the day after?' (*New York Times*, 8 August 2014). In his desperate plea for direct US military assistance, the

KRG's security and intelligence chief Masrour Barzani claimed that for long they were 'left alone to confront the extremists' and revealed that 'the Kurds [were] supposed to receive a share of US-supplied weapons to Iraq, but they have gotten not a single bullet.' (*Rudaw* 2014a). The US-led international intervention on behalf of the Syrian PYD and other Kurdish forces against the ISIS in Iraq and Syria was eventually realized after intense media coverage of the plight of *secular* Kurds and Yazidi minority and their enslaved women and children by the ISIS. It is necessary to note that now prevalent depiction of Kurds as secular has not always been the norm. For instance in 2010, a veteran Marvel Comics writer Daniel Way had in *Wolverine Origins* depicted Kurds as religious savages attacking innocent victims at the heart of capital Ankara.

The US intervention implied that the US political elite was convinced of the necessity to save Kurds in general and Kobane in particular, the latter having a symbolically indispensable value of victory over the ISIS. It also implied that the US president had all of a sudden 'an answer for the day after' with the intention to 'international follow-on assistance' to help the Kurds of Syria and Iraq to 'build institutions.' It seems reasonable that just as the symbolism of Halabja Massacre retrospectively helped convince a skeptical American public of the brutality of Saddam's Iraq and the following US intervention in 2003, the ISIS barbaric brutality in Mosul-Iraq and Kobane-Syria seemed to have helped in a similar vein to convince an international audience about the necessity to intervene on behalf of the Kurds. This was particularly the case since on the scale of grand strategy the US and international coalition forces' airstrikes and ever increasing military training and assistance to the Kurds in its war against the ISIS seems unwarranted given the Obama administration's earlier preference of pivot to Asia-Pacific. It is evident that such grand strategy schemes or persistent geopolitical conditions were subverted in part by visual and discursive meaning-making processes. The latter are largely enacted via global print, visual, and digital media strategies to a degree that the global society and representative states could hardly remain indifferent to the pressures and consequently such calls as the following fell on deaf ears: 'Obama administration needs to start believing in its own grand strategy [of pivot to Asia]. Let the Iraqis and Saudis feud, let Yemen continue in its five-decade-long civil war, let Iran waste resources in Syria. Washington should focus its energies, attention and efforts on Asia.' (Zakaria, *Washington Post*, 16 April 2015)

In all, the overwhelming sense of helplessness associated with the reluctance of Western political elites to get involved in another Middle East war led to the liberal politics of war at a distance. Indeed in keeping with the earlier Kosovo experience, aerial bombings of ISIS strongholds in Iraq and Syria had appeared as the ideal option given the strategic preferences of the US and European states to steer clear of yet another war in the Middle Eastern 'morass' (Zakaria, *Washington Post*, 16 April 2015). However, the much publicized beheadings of US and EU citizens by the ISIS had not simply stoked public outrage it also rendered liberal politics of war at a distance as an unsatisfactory option for the wider public gaze. Following was a widely shared call to stand up against the ISIS brutality by reinforcing—through various media outlets—the Western secular identity markers, which have been *visually* challenged, scorned, and belittled by the ISIS beheadings. Clearly, there was a need to reenact political agency and restore Western identity with its secular and humanist underpinnings.

Conclusion

The present study provided an investigation into the politics of identity around the Kobane war against the ISIS, showing how the representations of 'secular-civilized Kurds' in opposition to the 'religious barbarism of ISIS' have been reinforced by verbal and visual signs. It argued that the Syrian Kurdish struggle and the subsequent global intervention against the forces of ISIS can be better understood by analyzing the discursive and pictorial strategies put to work largely through global mediascapes (i.e., mass circulation of select maps, drawings, photographs, or portraits). The Kobane war was not simply an undertaking by rival local non-state armed actors, it was rather a globalized struggle against the ISIS that went beyond the regional strategic interactions by becoming a venue for reimagining Kurdish identity and geopolitical imagination. The pictorial and discursive interventions helped to raise regional and international awareness against ISIS and support for the Syrian Kurds in part due to the media-projected 'responsibility of the secular West.' Certain verbal and visual modes of communication such as maps, drawings, or photographs produce effects through the dualistic construction of subjectivity such as humanity versus barbarism, male versus women warriors, and obscurantism versus secularism, which are not simply reflective of an outside reality but also performative and productive

of regional identities that can influence public opinion and inform foreign policy choices.

The Kurdish question is in large part a nationalist struggle including a strong push for ethnic rights against the Middle Eastern states and regimes that oppressed or punished claims to Kurdishness. The threat of ISIS on Kobane and other Kurdish regions forced the Syrian Kurds to globally employ cultural vehicles to advance their cause such as secularism and humanism. Secularity of the Syrian Kurdish movement, however, is hardly a window-dressing move. The positive media *representations* of Kurdish female fighters and negative ISIS acts in the Kobane war should not mean that representations are all there is. The struggle for Kobane included fierce battles and graphic brutality of the ISIS. The present case study on the use of sterilized/idealized beautified versus demonized images circulating around the Kobane war case shows how images, pictorial, and discursive strategies can make and feel a distant war proximate, familiar, and urgent for an otherwise disinterested Western audience.

The Kobane was not only a strategic choke point in the Syrian civil war that geographically links the scattered Kurds of northern Syria, but the struggle to save Kobane also functioned as a globalized symbolic, culture war fought in part with the armory of select images and narratives. Through the help of the latter, rewriting of the Kurdish geopolitical space during the Kobane defense augmented the politics of identity despite the territorial and demographic complexities within Syrian, Turkish, and Iraqi Kurdistan. Contrasting and Juxtaposition of the Syrian Kurdish secular subjectivity against the radical religious identity of the ISIS in the Middle East helped to overcome the initial Western inertia. Overall, the positively received and globally projected secularity of the Syrian PYD empowered the nationalist Kurdish forces in the region including Turkey to stage a more effective political and military campaign in the context of the war against the ISIS.

In all, the impact of images in the Middle East in general and Kobane war in particular is an important case study to show how the immediacy of iconic photography and other globally circulated visuality and discourses constructed universality/particularity, self/other, and reason/barbarism in relation to Kurds, ISIS, and the West that eventually helped the USA and its Western allies to shift the security agenda and policy in the Middle East. It is possible that reimagining of a homeland for the stateless Kurds in northern Syria, Iraq, and Turkey will gain an increased resonance. The study demonstrated how the global reimagining of world

politics-identity nexus can remake the politics of geopolitical space in the Middle East and in part circumvent solid geostrategic 'necessities.'

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Authors' Biography

Dr. Tuncay Kardaş is Associate Professor of International Relations at the Middle East Institute of Sakarya University. He received his BA and MA degrees from Bilkent University in Ankara; MSEcon (Security Studies) and Ph.D. from the Department of International Politics at Aberystwyth University in Wales in 2006. He is currently serving as the Deputy Director of the Middle East Institute of Sakarya University. His research focuses broadly on sociology of security, foreign fighters, the ISIS, critical security studies, security governmentality, visual semiotics, and Turkish foreign policy. Dr. Kardas is the co-editor of "The Borders of Islam: Exploring Samuel Huntington's Faultlines, from Al-Andalus to Virtual Ummah," (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009). His most recent articles appeared in Turkish Studies, such as Middle East Critique, Insight Turkey, Birikim, Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations, and Economics, and Management: Current Issues and Perspectives. Dr. Kardaş's current researches are on foreign fighters, Islamic radicalization, and the Kurdish conflict. He is currently working on the following research projects: Turkish Foreign Fighters, ISSDIT: Inter-Societal Security Dilemmas in Turkey and ISSDIME: Inter-Societal Security Dilemmas in the Middle East. He is the organizer of Crisis and Critique Conferences and an editorial board member of Ortadoğu Yıllığı. His most recent research is titled "The Inter-Societal Security Dilemma in Turkey:Kurdish Opening" Turkish Studies with Ali Balci published in Turkey Studies.

Murat Yeşiltaş has completed his BA and MA at the Department of International Relations of Sakarya University, in 2003 and 2009, respectively. He earned his PhD at the Department of Political Science and International Relations at Marmara University in 2012. Yeşiltaş was a visiting researcher at the Department of European Studies and International Politics of Lancaster University between 2008 and 2009 and visiting researcher at Virginia Tech's Institute of Government and International Affairs between 2010 and 2011. He served as an academic advisor for Center for Strategic Studies (SAM) of Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey between 2012 and 2014. Currently, Yeşiltaş is an Associate Professor in the Middle East Institute at Sakarya University. He also holds the position of director of security studies at SETA Foundation, Ankara, Turkey. Yesiltas' current researches are on critical geopolitics, ethnic/religious radicalization, geopolitics of non-state conflicts, terrorism, and the Kurdish affairs. He is currently working on the following research projects: Kurdish Geopolitical Space: Remaking of the Kurdish Political Subjectivity and the New Kurdish Geopolitical Imagination; the New Regional Security Project (NRSP). His most recent books are *Türkiye Dünyanın Neresinde? Hayali Coğrafyalar Çarpışan Anlatılar* (Where is Turkey Located? Imagined Geographies, Competing Narratives) (2015, Koc University Press) and *Geopolitical Mentality and the Military in Turkey* (2016, Kadim).

The Rise of Sacred Political Space
in the Middle East

Path to Become a State: From Jama'at Al-Tawhid Wal-Jihad to the Islamic State

Ömer Behram Özdemir and Recep Tayyip Gürler

INTRODUCTION

A substantial volume of literature about IS's genesis, development, expansion, and its characteristics has developed since the summer of 2014. IS has been a hotbed of discussion in various disciplines over a wide spectrum from theology to security. This study examines the process of IS's expansion toward Syria and Iraq in a historical analysis with an inquiry of the causes of IS's split from al-Qaeda. This paper addresses two questions: Firstly, What are the features of the process that transformed IS into a powerful actor in Iraq and Syria? Secondly, What are the causes of divergence and eventual split between IS and al-Qaeda? The study uses a historical analysis in expounding on these two points. The organization's policies and objectives are analyzed with respect to divergent points in the section of IS's genesis, rise, and fall. There are few studies which attempt to reveal the fractionation between IS and

Ö.B. Özdemir (✉) · R.T. Gürler
Sakarya University, Sakarya, Turkey
e-mail: omerbehram@gmail.com

R.T. Gürler
e-mail: rtgurler@gmail.com

al-Qaeda since work on this subject tends to focus on IS's genesis and development. Therefore, this study is designed to be a contribution to the "IS-al-Qaeda split" literature.

IS, which was once a small body known as Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad, transformed into an organization that has control over extensive territory, particularly in Iraq, Syria, and Libya, and has become a considerable threat not only for the Middle East but various states further afield due to its global terrorist activities. Developing after the American invasion of Iraq, the organization was able to establish territorial control in regions within which mid-/high-intensity civil wars were continuing, such as Syria and Libya. They have also shown themselves to be capable of damaging the Egyptian Army as in the case of clashes in the Sinai desert. Moreover, they manifested their potential of causing instability in the Arab world through carrying out terrorist activities with their sleeper cells in Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Lebanon, and Tunisia. Furthermore, its activities in Nigeria, Afghanistan, and Dagestan are an indication that IS has gained ground through "bayah"[1] in various conflict zones of diverse intensities. It is acknowledged that IS is also a "national security" problem for non-Middle Eastern states because of its foreign fighters and cross-border sympathizers particularly in France, UK, and Belgium.

IS is utilizing terror against its targets, without differentiating between the civil and military, while pursuing a state building process in its territory by endeavoring to implement its statehood and philosophy in fields such as health (Tamimi 2015a) and education (Tamimi 2014). Likewise, it demonstrates its will toward filling the authority vacuum in Syria and Iraq through a complex taxing system (Tamimi 2015b, p. 125). Therefore, it is difficult to define IS as an ordinary terrorist organization. It may be defined as a hybrid entity that utilizes terror internally for oppressing opponents and externally to destabilize their enemies.

Certain breaking points in IS's historical transformation can be inferred through analysis. IS's first significant fracture was the increased

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[1] "Pledge Allegiance" in Islamic terminology.

capacity of the Ba'athist corps at the top executive level through an "Iraqification" process (Gürler and Özdemir 2014) that occurred following the death of Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi (Weiss and Hassan 2015, p. 120). Increased prominence of former Ba'athists in IS provided a basis for the interpretations (Orton 2015) that IS was a reincarnation of the para-military group "Fedayeen Saddam," as the organization drifted apart from al-Qaeda central leadership's influence.

Other crucial turning points are the USA's withdrawal from Iraq and the emergence of the civil war in Syria. For a period, IS was weakened by heavy losses resulting from the "Sunni awakening"; however, it then gradually gathered strength following the USA's withdrawal from the area. The Iraqi government's exclusionist attitude against the Sunni population and the emergent chaotic environment in Syria with resulting power vacuum were also significant causes of this change. The Syrian Ba'ath regime, which utilized IS to destabilize Iraq for a long time, affected Iraq yet again with the Syrian civil war that was the result of its internal policies (Weiss and Hassan 2015, pp. 99–101). Emerging as a hotbed of activity in the international agenda through the capture of cities in Iraq and Syria as well as an array of gruesome online propaganda videos, IS gained momentum on an unprecedented scale with the influx of foreign fighters through cross-border cells. This metamorphosis transformed IS into a threat not only to the countries that it acquired foreign fighters from but also to a broader group of states. In addition, this was the inception of divergence which would lead to IS's split with al-Qaeda, whose cooperation and relationships were in decline following Zarqawi's death in 2006. Al-Qaeda announced in 2014 that it disavowed any ties with IS following certain developments, which are going to be clarified in this analysis. Several months after this breakup between Zawahiri and Baghdadi, IS declared their "caliphate." Elevating to a higher order with the declaration of caliphate, IS initiated a statehood that, in their perspective, represents the entire Muslim World, but in actuality produced a fierce rivalry between al-Qaeda and IS which in time became trans-frontier (Özdemir 2015).

IS's genesis is a complex consequence of various causes such as Zarqawi's death, Iraqification of the organization, Sahawat movement, USA's withdrawal, Maliki government's policies, Syrian civil war, and Bashar al-Assad's approach to IS. Although the founding leader Zarqawi with a small group of followers started to organize before 2003, the USA's invasion of Iraq is asserted as the turning point of IS's emergence and the rise of the ideology that cultivates it.

IS's Genesis and Transformation

The rise in prominence and power of the Iraqi branch of al-Qaeda can be traced back to the US invasion in 2003. Zarqawi who was trained in al-Qaeda camps in Afghanistan departed to Iraqi soil to fight against the USA. He was conducting activities semi-independently from al-Qaeda central leadership with Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad (JTJ) that comprised a few hundred fighters who were close to him. He was vigorously executing operations in areas with Sunni concentration in Iraq (Weaver 2006). He also explored the possibility of expanding his operational zone toward northern Iraq, Jordan, Syria, and areas in Lebanon where Palestinian refugees are residing, through executing several activities in order to gather new fighters and constituting new secure zones and camp areas. From this point of view, it is possible to argue that JTJ had connections not only with Iraq but also with others in the wider region who shared similar ideas. It is strongly asserted that Zarqawi had contact with Ansar al-Islam, a group in northern Iraq which was believed to have close relations with al-Qaeda, and it was at this stage that the Iraqi branch of al-Qaeda started to flourish.

The Transformation of al-Qaeda in Iraq

Al-Qaeda in the Land of the Two Rivers

Zarqawi's group gained further ground through bayah, by a majority of the groups (Kirdar 2011, p. 4) that were defending Fallujah against US forces, to Zarqawi as emir of "Islamic caliphate in Fallujah" in 2004. Later, they pledged allegiance to Osama Bin Laden over the Internet in October 2004 and changed their name from JTJ to "al-Qaeda in the Land of the Two Rivers," commonly shortened to "al-Qaeda in Iraq" (AQI). Therewith, Osama bin Laden, in his published sermons, appreciated Zarqawi's involvement and exhorted the Iraqi mujahideen to make bayah to him and join his cause (Gerges 2010, p. 258). It is arguable that as a leader, who did not actually share similar attitudes and ideas with Zarqawi, Bin Laden, who wanted to utilize USA's struggling position and the rise of the Sunni insurgency, may have thought that it was time for al-Qaeda's material formation in Iraq and provided a ground for emergence of al-Qaeda's Iraqi branch by approving (Corera 2004, p. 6; Gerges 2010, pp. 257–258) Zarqawi's bayah.

It seems reasonable for Osama Bin Laden and Zarqawi to cooperate in terms of strategic and geopolitical interests. Zarqawi, who had previously refused Osama Bin Laden's offer to make bayah to him and chose to act by

himself, acquired a body with financial and "brand" value with the growing insurgency in Iraq in the beginning of the 2000s. By accepting this integration, Zarqawi was increasing the potential of acquiring new fighters. On the other hand, Bin Laden probably calculated that it would be more beneficial if al-Qaeda in Iraq was administrated by someone who is well known among the insurgents, and so accepted Zarqawi's bayah even though he criticized him for being over-antagonistic toward Shi'ites, a demeanor which did not conform with Bin Laden's interpretation of Islam. Although Zarqawi had differences with the central leadership, he continued fighting under the al-Qaeda in Iraq banner until he was killed in 2006.

Alternative State in Iraq: "Islamic State of Iraq"

The organization continued its activities under the banner of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) until 2006 when it merged with other Islamist Sunni insurgent groups to form the "Mujahideen Shura Council" (MSC). This action of a merger between AQI and other Sunni insurgent groups indicates the will toward developing better coordinated policies since it materialized, while Zarqawi was still alive. Abu Omar al-Baghdadi was appointed to the leadership position of MSC in order to not draw a rebuff from the Sunni groups, emphasizing the "Iraqiness" of the organization. However, his leadership was only a facade as even his existence in the organization was hotly debated.

As a matter of fact, Abu Ayyub al-Masri who was known by the code name Abu Hamza al-Muhajir took charge of the organization after Zarqawi's assassination in a US airstrike, while Abu Omar al-Baghdadi was still leading MSC (Kaplan 2013). Masri is known for his close association with al-Qaeda's number two at the time Ayman al-Zawahiri. It is believed that he trained militants in Afghanistan between 1990 and 2001 (Global Security, www.globalsecurity.org 2013). Masri, who went to Iraq after the US invasion, elevated al-Qaeda in Iraq to another dimension after Zarqawi.

In October 2006, AQI disengaged itself from MSC and named itself as "Islamic State of Iraq" (ISI) with more ambitious ideas of a larger "Islamic State." Abu Omar al-Baghdadi was appointed to the leadership of Islamic State of Iraq (The National Counterterrorism Center, www.nctc.gov 2013). However, there are controversies about Baghdadi's leadership. It is asserted that such a step was taken to avoid the local reactions which may have been agitated by Masri's leading role in ISI. This is to say that although al-Baghdadi was the de jure leader, it was Masri who was the de facto leader of the organization. This structure in the ISI was maintained until 2010 when he was also killed.

Islamic State of Iraq and Diversification of Sunni Divergence

Controversies emerged between ISI and other Sunni groups in Iraq, while they were executing a ferocious Sunni insurgency against the USA. Initial divergences started to occur, while Zarqawi was still alive; when preceding the elections in 2005, Zarqawi publicly announced that he would wage war against democracy, threatening voters, and politicians (Start, www.start.umd.edu 2013). The majority of Sunnis did not cast their votes, mostly due to this menace which created great insecurity preventing people even from strolling in the streets of Sunni districts, but also as a protest against the Shi'ite politicians. Consequently, Shi'ites won with a landslide victory resulting in a minimum Sunni representation rate. This situation intensified the Shi'ite-Sunni rift while strengthening the disagreements between the various Sunni groups.

One of the fundamental causes of these divergences among Sunni groups was ISI's use of force against other groups to make bayah to them and the state they were starting to lay claim to and fighting with the ones that did not pledge allegiance. It was ISI policy to harshly punish people who did not obey the rules that were established as soon as the organization had territorial control of an area. This conflict among Sunni groups contributed to clashes between ISI and some tribes. The most conspicuous of the groups reacting against ISI's activities were "nationalist" and more "moderate" Sunni insurgents. These groups criticized the foreign fighters' policies that could potentially start a sectarian war (Kirdar 2011, p. 4). Zawahiri's and al-Qaeda central leadership's critiques on the degree of violence in Zarqawi's activities revealed that the Sunni insurgency's unity was rupturing.[2]

MSC was founded in order to impede these divergences and to orchestrate a more effective fight by congregating Sunni insurgent groups. It is thought that this council was established in order to avert criticism from "Iraqi Sunni insurgents" about foreign militants who were fighting under the banner of AQI. In reality, the "Iraqi Sunni insurgents" were disgusted by the policies and actions of "non-Iraqis" that they believed had the potential to trigger a sectarian war (Kirdar 2011, p. 4). Kenneth Katzman asserts that MSC was founded to preclude the divergence by manifesting the will of AQI toward cooperation with the

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[2]For the complete version of Zawahiri's message to Zarqawi see. http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/006/203gpuul.asp, 16 December, 2013.

local Sunni population instead of co-opting them. However, the idea of uniting Sunni groups did not last for long, and it was rendered moribund after the announcement of the formation of ISI in October 2006.

At that time, benefitting from these ideological discrepancies, the USA endeavored to apply a fresh solution to the insurgency. This new strategy that was developed by American General Petraeus involved increasing the numbers of soldiers in Baghdad and Anbar while offering arms and ammunition support to the tribes in the event that they distance themselves from ISI and provide security (Özcan 2009, p. 34). The leaders of those Sunni tribes who were disturbed by ISI's rise in their localities, which was gaining them the ruling position, embraced this idea. "Sahawat" movement which means "awakening, resurgence" implemented a counterattack policy against al-Qaeda militants through their militias that were to establish security in Anbar.

Supported by the USA, and with almost a 100,000 soldiers whose salaries were paid by the USA, the Sahawat movement was involved in fierce clashes with ISI until 2008 (Cockburn 2014). These clashes weakened ISI over time on a massive scale leading to a decline in militants from 15,000 to around 1000 by 2011. Accordingly, the number of attacks also decreased. The number of people that lost their lives in the violence dropped from 34,000 in 2006 to 2700 in 2011. Meanwhile, the leader of ISI Abu Omar al-Baghdadi was killed and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi replaced him.

The Politics of Islamic State in Iraq Toward Iraqi Security Forces and Shias

AQI pursued violent policies toward Shi'ites from its foundation. It was observable from Zarqawi's inflexible beliefs and behavior against Shi'ites that they embraced the Salafi-Jihadism and were radicalized in this perspective; in their opinion, the primary enemy of AQI, after the occupation forces, were the Shi'ites. It is arguable that they perceive Shi'ites and occupation forces as equal in terms of antagonism toward them, as in almost every message published by them they categorize their enemies as the "Crusaders" and "Rafidha."[3] Some Sunni scholars who indigenized the idea that Iraq was occupied by "Safavids and Crusaders" (it is asserted that these ideas are generally advocated by Saudi scholars) (Kirdar 2011, p. 5)

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[3] A term used for Shi'ites, particularly used by Islamist groups for Shi'ite actors in Syria and Iraq war zone beyond its use in divinity literature.

embittered the Shi'ite antagonism in Sunni localities by mentioning this idea frequently. This state was conducive to Zarqawi's increased capacity for acquiring more sympathizers. It is evident that AQI did not take al-Qaeda central leadership's exhortation in 2005, against violent actions toward Shi'ite civilians, into consideration. In this warning, Ayman al-Zawahiri criticized the targeting of Shi'ite civilians and indicated that killing Shi'ites had not been an objective in any epoch of Islam.[4]

AQI was targeting Shi'ite civilians alongside Iraqi security forces. The security forces which had been restructured after the USA's invasion of Iraq in 2003 were struggling to organize themselves because of the discharge of numerous personnel alleged to have been associated with Ba'athists. This meant that inexperienced and untrained individuals were responsible for administering security. Iraqi security forces "naturally" became one of the primary targets of AQI since unprecedented executive and junior administrative positions in security departments were taken by Shi'ites. They were already perceived as traitors by AQI since they were not reacting against the US invasion. Therefore, religious scholars who were not exhorting people to fight Shi'ites and the security forces were often targeted by AQI. There were numerous losses varying from religious leaders of Shi'ites to bureaucrats, tribal leaders, and politicians. The most weighty attack in terms of its results was the one in which al-Askari Mosque was targeted in Samarra on February 22, 2006. The attack on this mosque, which was immeasurably painful for Shi'ites, triggered the civil war between Shi'ites and Sunnis in Iraq. Although there is no clear proof that indicates this attack was made by AQI, it is designated as an al-Qaeda attack in the literature and from that day until 2008 approximately 100 people died in the troubles on a daily basis (Özcan 2008, p. 58).

The Rise of IS

IS After the US Military Withdrawal from Iraq

Armed attacks against Shi'ite and Iraqi security forces partially decreased after 2008 with the decline of ISI's power. However, ISI's attacks have

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[4] See the details of Zawahiri's letter to Zarqawi and its full translation into English, http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/006/203gpuul.asp, 30 January, 2014.

also increased in the period beginning after the US withdrawal from Iraq; especially with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who became the leader of the organization in 2010, ISI significantly increased its power with the implementation of various policies. The most important of these policies was the operation they launched in July 2012 called "Breaking the Walls" (Lewis 2013a). According to Jessica D. Lewis of the Institute for the Study of War, this operation had two phases. The first phase was a simultaneous explosion of a large number of VBIED attacks or suicide bombers across the country, and the second was increasing the number of ISI fighters by ensuring that prisoners escape (Lewis 2013b, p. 7).

In this context, there was a serious increase in the number of bomb attacks and prison raids in Iraq from the middle of 2012; especially in 2013 when Abu Ghraib and Taji prisons were subjected to very severe raids and hundreds of prisoners, including al-Qaeda's important names, were freed (www.al-monitor.com 2013). Alongside these types of operations, some developments occurred both in Iraq and in the region that laid the groundwork for the strengthening of ISI. After these operations, many high-ranking former Ba'ath officers who were freed from prison gained important positions within the organization. One of the most important Ba'athists in the organization was Haji Bakr, who had held the rank of Colonel in the Ba'ath Army. Together with Haji Bakr, taking positions in the executive rank of the organization (Lister 2016) were Abu Muslim al-Turkmani and Abu Ali al-Anbari, who had deep-rooted military experience and good knowledge of the area, and this was an important factor in IS's rapid increase in power after 2011. The "Iraqification" process of the organization and the breakup from al-Qaeda also led to this acceleration in activity (Weiss and Hassan 2015, p. 120).

Causes of IS's Rise

US troops withdrew from Iraq at the end of 2011 following the agreement signed between the Iraqi government and the USA, marking the official ending of the period of occupation. Unfortunately, when the USA withdrew from Iraq, they did not leave behind either a stable political structure or a systematic and powerful Iraqi Army. As a result of this fragile security and inadequate political structure, Iraq has gradually become a more chaotic country. From 2012 onward, there has been an increase in the actions of ISI. The reasons for why the organization, which came to the point of almost disintegration in 2010–2011, was able

to recover in a short period of 3 years to form a "state" that dominates wide territories within the borders of Iraq and Syria can be summarized under the following points:

1. The Sunni protests intensified from late 2012 when Sunnis felt themselves excluded and victimized because of Maliki's increased pressure on them. Some Sunni tribal leaders, concerned about Maliki's increasing sectarian politics, began to support ISI against the Iraqi Army. Disenchantment among the Sunnis against the state led to ISI regaining support from Sunni groups.

2. When the US Army withdrew from Iraq, it demanded that the Sahawat soldiers who fought against the ISI in 2006–2007 be recruited into the Iraqi Army to continue their war with the salaries being paid by the Iraqi government. Maliki did not accept this proposal because he saw Sunni fighters, who numbered around 100,000 joining the army, as a threat to the Shi'ite government. After this decision, the men who made their living by serving as soldiers began to harbor resentment against the government. Therefore, it is considered highly likely that many fighters of the Sahawat started fighting again for the ISI.

3. After the Arab uprisings that started in 2010 resulted in a civil war in Syria, some of the ISI warriors joined the "jihad" there and Syria's territory became an excellent training ground for ISI militants. The security vacuum resulting in a transitory Syrian–Iraqi border facilitated in the transfer of ISI fighters to Iraq. As a result, the organization also increased its activities in Iraq, and with the many conflicts that occurred in 2013, Iraq faced its bloodiest year since 2008. Then, with the capture of important Sunni regions such as Ramadi and Fallujah in early 2014 and Mosul and Tikrit in June of the same year, the organization became an actor changing and determining the politics not only of Iraq but also of the whole Middle East region.

IS's Expansion in Syria and Iraq

Syrian Civil War and IS

Peaceful demonstrations in Syria which started in the first months of 2011 transformed into small-scale conflicts after the harsh interventions

of the Damascus government, and from the second half of 2011, they turned into hot and constant conflicts between regime forces and armed opponents across the country. In the equation of the problem that we can call the Syrian civil war, a number of different actors have emerged among the opposition groups as the conflict progresses, including al-Qaeda elements in the year 2012. On January 23, 2012, it was announced in a video message broadcast referring to "the Syrian people and the mujahideen of the jihad lands in Syria" that a new group of "mujahideen" was formed with the title "Jabhat al-Nusra"[5] (Zelin 2012). Since its foundation, the Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), (rebranded as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham by July 2016), which has become one of the most important elements of the opposition ranks in the Syrian civil war, has gained the civilian support by providing social aid and conducting an armed struggle against Assad forces.

Ensuring al-Qaeda's involvement in the balance of war by its actions on the Syrian front in 2012, JN's prominent bomb attacks in Damascus and Aleppo and successes achieved in the northern part of Syria, especially in Raqqa, were regarded as an opportunity for IS's leaders. Longing to extend their dominance beyond Iraq, the ISI made a move which led to a new debate over both the civil war in Syria and the al-Qaeda's presence in the region and a move that would result in separation in the future. In April 2013, the ISI leader Baghdadi announced that Jabhat al-Nusra was an extension (AFP, www.globalpost.com 2013) of them fighting in the name of an Islamic State in Syria and that Jabhat al-Nusra had unified with the ISI under the name of "Islamic State of Iraq and Sham" (ISIS) in a video message spread rapidly in social media platforms and forums that were actively used by the organization (Zelin 2013). However, neither JN leader Jawlani nor al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri welcomed or accepted this proclamation made by Baghdadi. A few days after Baghdadi's proclamation, JN leader Jawlani broadcast a voice record stating JN's allegiance to Sheikh Ayman al-Zawahiri and that they were not informed about the proclamation made by Baghdadi, declaring that the respect for ISI continues but such a unification was not admitted (The Telegraph, www.telegraph.co.uk 2013).

Despite Baghdadi's unification move, JN's public allegiance to Zawahiri can be interpreted as Jawlani's move that neutralized this announcement of merging under the name of ISIS. Zawahiri's reaction to these developments

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[5]This will be referred in NF and/or Nusra abbreviation.

came with a letter containing the decisions taken on the situation. Zawahiri stated that the declaration of ISIS was not recognized, Iraq was the area of activity for ISI, and Syria was the field of operation for Jabhat al-Nusra (İnca News, www.incanews.net 2013). However, Baghdadi declared that they would not give up on this goal in the voice recording which was broadcast after this letter (Al Jazeera, www.aljazeera.com 2013). This apparent diso- bedience of Baghdadi was an unprecedented situation in al-Qaeda, which defined itself as a global "jihad" movement. In al-Qaeda, where allegiance to the Amir is of top priority, this rebellious action of Baghdadi's claim (Shami, shamiwitness.blogspot.com.tr 2013) that IS's shura rules were valid, despite Zawahiri's open orders, affected his position in the eyes of the al-Qaeda leadership. Activities undertaken in the name of al-Qaeda in Syria while disobeying the Amirs, the military commanders of al-Qaeda, would lead to the questioning of Zawahiri's authority itself. Although a signifi- cant number of JN's combatants joined ISIS after Baghdadi's outburst, this action did not result in the end of JN, leaving the stage to ISIS. The fact that Jawlani is a strong charismatic leader[6] might have also played a part in influencing the fighters in the area to continue with him.

A voice record of Zawahiri was broadcast in November 2013 where the same statements as in the letter, foreseeing the disbanding of IS, were made (The Daily Star Lebanon, www.dailystar.com.lb 2013). Zawahiri's message with his own "voice" was a signal not only for JN but also for IS which was having conflicts leading to bloodshed with other opposition groups in the Syrian war, most notably being Ahrar al-Sham. Following this mes- sage, in the photos posted by JN militants from the battlefronts, there was a change in the pennants and flags. Phrases like "al-Qaeda in Bilad al-sham" (Pietervanostaeyen, pietervanostaeyen.wordpress.com 2013) were added (al-Qaeda in Syria is commonly used in some sources) to the flags which previously had Jabhat al-Nusra banners on them. This can be interpreted as a declaration of JN announcing itself as the only one and "recognized" al-Qaeda group of Syria. In an interview to Al Jazeera, Jawlani stated that differences between the Iraqi Islamic State (he did not use the term "ISIS") and themselves were no more major than the differences between the members of a family; however, it was clear by then that a race of leader- ship and domination between the two groups had begun. Apart from the

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[6] Jawlani's appearance was kept secret till July 2016. Jawlani's face was visible for the first time in the video about Jabhat al-Nusra's abolition and foundation of Fateh al-Sham.

transformation in the use of pennants and flags, the propaganda language used in social media also evolved. In early November 2013, the group that seized large weapons depots in the Mahin town broadcast a video about the operation and named themselves as "Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Qaeda in Syria" (MEMRI and Green, www.memri.org 2013). Likewise, in November, the group placed pieces from Ayman al-Zawahiri's speeches on the background of the video broadcast after the operation capturing Rashidiya region of Deir ez-Zor after a bloody conflict (Nusra video shows intense urban fighting in Deir ez Zor, www.theblogmocracy.com 2013).

IS and Syrian Armed Groups

It is evident that IS fights on different fronts with almost all the actors in Syria. The diversity of IS's enemies is more in Syria than in Iraq. They include opposition groups, the Syrian Army, Hezbollah, Shi'ite militias, YPG (People's Protection Units), and Russian forces intervening in Syria to support Assad forces. Furthermore, Syria, where the Sunni society constitutes more than 70% of the country's population, differs in terms of sectarian structure from Iraq in which IS was born and developed. Thus, although IS sometimes had violent conflicts with the Assad forces and YPG in northern Syria, the first target for their expansion area was the regions where the Syrian opposition was active. Many cities, such as Manbij, al-Bab, Jarablus, Azaz, Marea, Raqqa, Tal Abyad, Idlib, and Deir ez-Zor, have been the scene of the clashes between IS and opposition groups (Tamimi 2013). In the conflicts, which broke out in the early days of 2014 and since then have turned into an irrevocable war between opposition groups and IS, opponents displaced IS from the positions in Western Aleppo, Lattakia, and Idlib, clearing these fronts (World Bulletin, www.worldbulletin.net 2014) from IS. On the other hand, IS almost completely dismantled all opposing elements from the area east of the Euphrates, especially in Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor (Al-Awsat, english.aawsat.com 2014). IS also took Manbij, al-Bab, and Jarablus and threatened the opposition regions in Azaz and Marea which disrupted the opposition's battle against the Assad forces.[7] The greatest opponents of IS in northern Syria are Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham, while it is the Islam Army (Jaysh al-Islam) in Damascus. These

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[7] In 2016, Manbij and Jarablus were targets of anti-IS operations which were led by YPG (Manbij) and Syrian opposition groups (Jarablus).

groups are the most prominent actors among the Syrian dissidents. In addition to these groups, small and medium Islamic groups and Free Syrian Army (FSA) groups did fight and are still fighting against IS on various fronts.

IS had intense clashes with Assad forces in rural areas of Hasakah, Deir ez-Zor, and Raqqa. A common feature of these conflict zones is that there were no dissident groups in this region during the conflicts between Assad forces and IS. To put it more clearly, in places where dissidents are not in the equation, IS and Assad forces are fighting each other for a result. On the other hand, it can be argued that IS and Assad forces are not primarily targeting each other in the situations where opponents become a party to any side, especially in Aleppo, Damascus, and Daraa regions. Moreover, it is seen sometimes that the Syrian authorities announce opponent groups as more immediate threats than IS (The New Arab, www.alaraby.co.uk 2016). The following cases are examples that support this thesis; the regime did not wage war against IS, while Assad forces were fighting with the rebels; additionally, IS also attacked the opposition rather than the regime and air forces of the regime attacked the opponents' positions during the clashes between IS and opponents in northern Aleppo. Although IS is hostile to any other military structures in the region other than itself, it is the Syrian opposition which is of top priority among its enemies. However, it should not be forgotten that the organization is constantly confronted with Assad forces, especially in the contest to dominate over the oil regions in Raqqa, rural Homs, and Deir ez-Zor. The struggle of IS with Assad forces is not limited only to the Syrian Army (SA). Similar to facing Iranian "Islamic Revolutionary Guards" (IRGC) in Iraq (Roggio, www.longwarjournal.org 2014), they encounter Hezbollah (Middle East Eye, www.middleeasteye.net 2014) and Russian military forces (www.independent.co.uk 2016) in Syria. The third party that IS has fought in Syria is YPG. YPG, a Syrian extension of the PKK terrorist organization operating in Turkey, is a group that IS has faced several times after the conflicts with the opposition in northern Syria. Conflicts that have occurred between the parties in the regions like Ayn al-Arab (Kobane), Tal Abyad, rural Hasakah, and Manbij, milestones in the northern Syrian border line, are not just a war between a left-secular radical group and salafi-militant group; rather, these conflicts have set the scene for an Arab–Kurdish conflict in the long run because of the policies of either the YPG or IS (Al Jazeera, www.aljazeera.com 2015). Although the extension of the group in Turkey is seen as a terrorist organization, in the battle against

IS, YPG has become a local partner for the Western powers, mainly the USA, because of its secular label and willingness to cooperate. From this point of view, it can be argued that the war against IS has evolved as a "means of legitimacy." Nevertheless, considering that Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham are also armed groups fighting against IS for years, it can be argued that "fighting IS" alone is not an adequate tool to acquire legitimacy in the eyes of international actors.

Iraq

As much as regional developments, Iraq's domestic policy dynamics have played an important role in the IS's rapid progress in Iraq after its rise in Syria. Government policies under the rule of Maliki have been criticized frequently by the other main elements of the society, namely Sunni Arabs and Kurds. Before the elections were held in 2014, the biggest debate was about whether Maliki would be prime minister again or not. Opposition groups demanded Maliki to act in accordance with the constitution and not to stand as a prime ministerial candidate for a third term. However, the fact that Maliki did not step back and persisted in being a candidate for a third term as prime minister exacerbated Sunni emotions. In the eventuality, following the general elections in April 2014, State of Law Coalition under Maliki's leadership was elected as the first party (BBC, www.bbc.com, 2014), and Maliki's nomination of himself as prime ministerial candidate changed the course of politics in Iraq. Many Sunni groups initiated a military uprising in response to Maliki and his Shi'ite politics against the Sunni. In this uprising, the groups that stood beside IS seized control of Mosul, Iraq's second biggest city after Baghdad, in a short period of 5 weeks. Following this success, IS and some Sunni groups moved quickly to the directions of Baghdad and Erbil and achieved domination in many cities such as Tikrit, Ramadi, Fallujah, Diyala, Samarra, Hawija, and Baqubah. This state had created a new rule in the region that is geographically known as Iraq's "central" or "Sunni triangle" (The Guardian, www.theguardian.com 2014).

Although IS is undoubtedly the main actor which has a say in the new rule of "Central Iraq," armed Sunni groups such as the Naqshbandi Army, Jaish al-Mujahideen, Islamic Army in Iraq, Ansar al-Islam, and General Military Council for Iraq's Revolutionaries have also played an

active role.[8] All of these groups other than IS have one thing in common: the aim of putting an end to anti-Sunni policies of the Iraqi Shi'ite government which they claim to be anti-Sunni. The vision of IS though is to establish an "Islamic State" which covers the lands of Iraq and Syria initially, but is aiming to cover the entire Middle East and then the entire world. Hence, IS made this goal clear in practice by declaring a caliphate.[9] Even if Sunni groups seemed to function harmoniously in the primary phases, the ultimate goals of the IS caused them to disintegrate. The divergence of common goals among the groups has made it difficult to retain the land that has been seized.

The Iraqi government has sought to benefit from these alleged disputes among Sunni groups. Accordingly, in late 2014, the Iraqi government announced that for their fight against IS, it would provide any kind of assistance to some of the Sunni groups in Anbar province, including arming (Şafak, www.yenisafak.com 2014). This policy suggested the possibility of establishing a Sahawat-like structure in 2006–2007, but when we look at the explanations from the region, it is observed that a significant part of the Sunni groups opposed this idea. Ultimately, Sunni groups are not willing to fight against IS when they consider the promises previously broken by the Maliki government in 2007, the oppressive policies against them since 2011, and the present power of IS. It is also said that some Shi'ites in government do not trust the Sunni tribes, so they do not favor the idea of arming Sunnis (Wing 2014). Taking these into consideration, building an effective Sunni bloc at that time to fight against IS was very difficult in Iraq.

IS's Fall

Since June 2014, IS has expanded its territory at a great pace and established control over a significant proportion of territory.

However, in September of the same year IS stopped expanding its territory and started to lose territorial control gradually. The most

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[8] See for more elaborated knowledge on these Sunni groups, Can Acun, "Irak'ta İsyanın Haritası: Silahlı Gruplar", SETA Perspektif, Sayı:55, June 2014. http://file.setav.org/Files/Pdf/20140627155044_irakta_isyanin_haritasi_silahli_gruplar.pdf, (Available on: 7 Sep 2016).

[9] With declaration of establishing a caliphate, the group started to call themselves as "Islamic State" (IS) without mentioning Iraq and Sham (ISIS).

significant cause of IS's retreat from the territories in which it had established control is the air strikes that were started in 2014 by US-led coalition forces. IS's rapid expansion resulted with an entity that shared borders with Erbil in the North, Baghdad in the South, and Iran in the east. The US government which attempted to take this situation under control formed an anti-IS coalition and started air strikes. The idea of forming a coalition against IS was initiated primarily by a NATO meeting held on September 4–5, 2014, and actualized following negotiations among the foreign ministers of USA, Turkey, UK, France, Germany, Australia, Canada, Denmark, and Italy. Thereafter, the coalition grew significantly, and an enormously comprehensive coalition of 66 countries has formed (McInnis 2016, p. 1).

The coalition determined the necessary steps in the campaign against IS as: performing military raids against IS, providing training to groups that fight against IS, precluding foreign fighter influx, disrupting IS's financial strength, providing humanitarian aid, and acting in harmony in cases of crisis (McInnis 2016, p. 1). The most significantly performed actions may be considered as the military raids and preclusion of foreign fighter influx. Additionally, there is an earnest effort taking place to intercept the organization's financial acquisitions. After the formation of this coalition against IS, its pace of expansion has been halted and it has started to retreat from the territories it had established control previously. There is a common belief in Iraq that had it not been for the international coalition's airstrikes IS would have taken control of Erbil and Baghdad after Mosul.

In fact, the developments in Iraq were quite contrary to what the majority of Sunnis imagined. Indeed, Sunni groups mobilized with the enthusiasm of an elevated Sunni role in politics and the acquisition of an autonomous area in the territories they possess, while proceeding to Mosul and further beyond. However, the "jihad" called by the most prominent Shi'ite cleric Ayatollah Ali Sistani resulted in the banding together of almost every significant armed Shi'ite group in Iraq. These groups have been gathered under the banner of an organization called Hashd al-Shaabi, and it has been conducting operations more efficiently than the army in Iraq. Sunnis accuse this coalition of armed Shi'ite groups of committing human rights abuses. There have been a significant number of reports received by Human Rights Watch and

Amnesty International on torture, kidnapping, execution, and looting of houses and offices of Sunni civilians by Shi'ite militias, when they liberated territory from IS.[10]

Due to the airstrikes of the international coalition and Hashd al-Shaabi's efficiency in fighting against IS, it has started to lose the territories it had gained beforehand. Phrases like "The Beginning of IS's End" are widely used when referring to 2016 in particular because Abu Gharib and Ramadi districts were liberated in February; a strategically important district Rutbah in March; and in June/July one of the "strongholds" of the organization Fallujah was liberated (Anadolu Agency, www.aa.com.tr 2016). Immediately after these successes, an operation was initiated for the liberation of Mosul, one of the most significant areas under IS control, as Iraqi Army and Hashd al-Shaabi are steadily proceeding toward it with the support of the international coalition's airstrikes.

The international coalition against IS is also executing airstrikes against the organization in Syria. The organization was targeted in the rural areas of Ayn al-Arab (Kobane), Tal Abyad, Manbij, Hasakah, and Raqqa. These airstrikes had a significant role both in the killing of IS's leadership (Times of Israel, www.timesofisrael.com, 2016) and in the operations in which it lost territory. However, designation of YPG as the infantry of the coalition airstrikes both provided a basis for a war that will expose Arabs and Kurds due to YPG's expansionist policies and also triggered severe problems between Turkey and the USA.

IS's Method and Disengagement Process with al-Qaeda

Unification of Enemy as a Method of Strengthening the Ground

It is observed that IS uses blood and violence as obscene graphic tools for establishing control over the possessed territories and leads the way in the propaganda war against external enemies. Feature-length propaganda

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[10]The most ground breaking of those reports is the reports that are written by Human Rights Watch such as: "Iraq: Militias Escalate Abuses, Possibly War Crimes," 15 Şubat 2015, http://www.hrw.org/news/2015/02/15/iraq-militias-escalate-abuses-possibly-war-crimes; "Iraq: Militia Attacks Destroy Villages, Displace ThoUSnds", 18 Mart 2015, http://www.hrw.org/news/2015/03/18/iraq-militia-attacks-destroy-villages-displace-thoUSnds. Additionally, in the "Absolute Impunity: Militia Rule in Iraq" comprehensive report it is asserted tat many Sunnis were kidnapped, arrested and murdered by Shi'ite militias. Resource: http://www.amnesty.org.uk/sites/default/files/absolute_impunity_iraq_report.pdf.

movies such as "Flames of the War" and "The Clanging of the Swords IV" comprise war scenes with plenty of action and executions of hostile elements. IS manifests its strength in the field and accessibility of enemy intelligence alongside its relentless policies, through these videos. Together with publishing the mass murders committed at Tabqa (Greene and Post Wires, www.nypost.com 2014) and Camp Speicher (RT, www.rt.com 2014), execution shows (IB Times, www.ibtimes.co.uk 2016) using children to carry out the deeds are some examples of IS's extreme propaganda. These kinds of scenes have the potential to exacerbate the hatred of all sides (Syrian opposition, Syrian Army, Iraqi Army, Shi'ite militias, Peshmerga, and YPG) who clash with IS on various fronts. In the Western media, these videos are spreading the fear that Syria would fall under the influence of radicals, strengthening the idea that "Assad should stay if he is going to be replaced with extremists" (Business Insider, www.businessinsider.com 2013). This is conducive to the promotion of a perception that legitimizes radical groups, particularly PKK's Syria branch YPG. The reflection of IS's violent policies in Iraq is the consequence of failing to recognize the attacks of Hashd al-Shaabi militias in the form of retaliations against Sunnis. The implications in the international mind-set appear to be that instead of having the notorious reputation of such a bloody organization as IS, the crimes that are committed by Hashd al-Shaabi against Sunni civilians can be ignored.

Ascending and declining in Syria and Iraq almost simultaneously, IS utilizes terror not only against its enemies but also against Sunni civilians who are perceived as the natural breeding ground for it to dominate the population. IS perpetuated a vicious revenge circle by transforming the existent conflict into an irreversible and bloodier feud between Sunnis and Shi'ites by attacking Shi'ites in Iraq, slaughtering people regardless of the distinction between civilian and militia. Inasmuch as this situation accelerated the unification of divergent Shi'ite groups and revenge attacks, the threat posed by Shi'ite militias paved the way for the familiarization of IS ideology to Sunni masses, according to Sowell (Sowell 2015). The Sunni population, who has difficulties with IS's oppressive and noncompliant structure, sometimes fell under the predicament of waging war in IS lines to avoid being a target in the war between IS and the united Shi'ite militias. As a consequence, IS is uniting the front that it perceives as hostile (in Iraq's case the enemy is Shi'ite) while eliminating other potential Sunni political and military elements in its target population. Instead of forming alliances with Sunni groups, IS prefers to integrate and assimilate

them into its structure. Slaughtering tribes such as Shaitat and Albu Nimr and the perpetual war and feuding exemplify these policies of IS (Holmes and Al-Khalidi, www.reuters.com 2014).

Disengagement from al-Qaeda and Post Qaeda

IS's disengagement process with al-Qaeda concluded via IS's presence in Syria and proclamation of a state that comprises Syria and Iraq with the purpose of absorbing JN simultaneously. Currently, there is a serious rivalry between these groups on numerous fronts. However, this rift between these two entities can be attributed to a longer history. Refreshment of former Ba'athist elements and decline in the capacity for control from the center due to the USA's pressure on al-Qaeda's main body are some of the most salient causes. On the other hand, it is observable that IS and al-Qaeda experience fundamental disparities, as Hegghammer asserts that the perception of the USA and the West as the "primary" enemy characterizes "global jihadist" groups more "global" than other Islamist groups (Hegghammer 2006). Another point of divergence between IS and al-Qaeda, in the intra-Qaeda debate, is IS's prior antagonism toward Shi'ism. Zarqawi's stance toward the Shi'a and his immoderate implementations in the field differentiated it from Bin Laden's and Zawahiri's positions. This divergence also manifests itself in relationship to the Sunni local constituents through methodological disparities as well as in policies toward Shi'ites. To exemplify, Bin Laden exhorted not to wage war with the local tribes that do not cooperate to avoid inducing endless feuds, while IS pursued a relentless policy of recrimination toward them (McCants 2015, p. 152). However, Romain Caillet indicates that although Zawahiri and Baghdadi share fundamentally similar beliefs, they are divided on the doctrinal basis and particularly on issues such as how to approach the ordinary Shi'ite communities in the Muslim world (Caillet 2013). In this perspective, it may be argued that the practice of takfiri that is "dis-communication" and an uncompromising demeanor has long been perceived as an overly aggressive outlook. Hence, the disengagement process developed through the letter and recordings, regarding the annulment of IS's genesis and statement that the militants affiliated with the group are limited to Iraqi soil, concluded in February 2014, as it was clarified that IS had no affiliations with al-Qaeda and they would not be held responsible for IS's actions with a statement (Lund 2014). The statement contains harsh remarks such as "al-Qaeda was not apprised of the

formation of IS and al-Qaeda was not consulted," "IS operated without an order or an exhortation from the central leadership," "central leadership made clear their discontent because of these activities," and "under all these circumstances there are no ties between IS and al-Qaeda." Following these statements, there have been clashes between JN and IS in Deir ez-Zor (Naharnet, www.naharnet.com 2014) and Hasakah (Timetürk, www.timeturk.com.tr, 2014), and finally, JN threatened IS through a message that contains signs of expansion in Iraq (Akşam, www.aksam.com.tr 2014).

Aaron Zelin narrates this process, which ended with the separation of IS and al-Qaeda, through the similarities in the historical examples. Zelin compares al-Qaeda's disavowal of IS to the withdrawal of support by figures such as the Egyptian Islamic Jihad group and Abu Musab al-Suri to the Armed Islamic group which was an organization from the Algerian civil war. The Armed Islamic group movement, with which Osama Bin Laden did not sympathize, experienced a similar course to IS's struggle with the other opposition groups in Syria and clashed more with the other opposition groups than the central government, frequently using takfir as a tool (Zelin 2014). Alongside with takfir, IS's methodological preference of cruelty with more bloody solutions and an inflexible stance toward noncooperative tribes are significant points of al-Qaeda and IS's divergence. Zelin indicates that al-Qaeda took a lesson from the Algerian case, and since then, al-Qaeda of Arab peninsula and JN follow the advice of central leadership on targeting security forces and avoiding damaging Sunni civilians during the operations executed by its various branches in different localities despite causing civilian losses in these operations, with the exception of IS as an extraordinary case (Zelin 2014).

Consequentially, the entity which named itself IS following the progression from Zarqawi to Baghdadi implements independent policies, utilizes takfir without hesitation, and includes the Muslims that do not cooperate with them into their category of hostile forces, without further consideration. This eventually led to a split between themselves and al-Qaeda, and in an unprecedented move, al-Qaeda denounced the group using its name. Lia asserts that whether it is "emirate" or "caliphate" jihadist proto-states are a consequence of power struggle among Islamist groups (Lia 2015). In this case, IS as a proto-state emerged out of al-Qaeda and IS divergence. This proto-state perpetuated a hierarchically elevated status with assertions of a "caliphate" which claimed political leadership of Islamic history. However, this state was in fact the actual problem for Islamic groups in their rivalry with IS, so that they questioned and refuted the caliphate of

Baghdadi (Wagemakers 2015). These two non-state actors, who have dissociated even further from each other both methodologically and ideologically, are waging war not only against statutory elements but also to each other. Al-Qaeda and IS face each other in the competition for attracting the biggest share in the foreign fighter market, which is on the rise in Yemen, Libya, Afghanistan, Caucasus, and Europe. It can be inferred that organizations follow certain motivations in perpetuating this rivalry and provide an advantageous position for themselves with armed attacks such as Charlie Hebdo and others in France and the Middle East. The propaganda prepared in languages, particularly English, to target Western audience indicates that rivalry in "virtual radicalization" is escalating.

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Authors' Biography

Ömer Behram Özdemir is a researcher at Sakarya University Middle East Institute, Turkey. He got his MA degree with his thesis "Secessionist Movements in Europe: ETA and IRA." His studies currently focus on Syrian civil war, non-state armed actors, radicalism, and violence in the Middle East. He is currently working on Turkish Foreign Fighters Project. His articles have been mostly published in Turkish Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, Middle East Analysis, Al Jazeera, Middle East Eye, Middle East Monitor, The New Turkey, and Daily Sabah.

Recep Tayyip Gürler received his bachelor's degree in international relations at Sakarya University and his master's degree at the Middle East Institute of Sakarya University, Turkey. He also works as a research assistant at Sakarya University Middle East Institute. He focuses on Iraqi Shi'ite politics, Iraqi foreign policy, and ISIS.

The New Middle East, ISIL and the 6th Revolt Against the West

Murat Yeşiltaş and Tuncay Kardaş

INTRODUCTION

It has become commonplace to speak of the map of the Middle East as being rewritten, and regional politics undergoing an ongoing radical transformation since the so-called Arab Spring. Contemporary geopolitical commentaries often endorse a new language to describe the perplexing state of affairs, tethering it to such concepts as 'the new Middle East.' The latter was originally coined by Condoleezza Rice, who, during the latest Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 2006, dismissed the country's suffering as 'the birth pangs of a new Middle East.' (Kaplan 2006) Soon afterward, politicians of various stripes turned it into a slogan; the term also proved appealing to the literati, giving rise to an ever-expanding series of books and articles that have since blossomed in reference to 'the new Middle East.'

M. Yeşiltaş (✉) · T. Kardaş
Sakarya University, Adapazarı, Turkey
e-mail: yesiltas@sakarya.edu.tr

T. Kardaş
e-mail: tuncaykardas@hotmail.com

This chapter aims to provide an analysis of the 'new' in 'the new Middle East.' After a brief perusal of the existing explanations, we argue that what is 'new' is the revolt against the West currently underway in the contemporary Middle East, which is dead earnest about challenging the dominant Western values of statehood and personhood. This chapter identifies the novelty in the politics of radical antagonism, apocalyptic geopolitical imagination, the rebirth of extraterritorial subjectivities, and the politics of resistance, which together shatter the existing political logos. Two particular empirical cases animate our discussion, namely the Arab Spring and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). A case study on the challenges posed by ISIL seeks to illuminate how the organization constitutes the 'sixth revolt' against the Western state system. By providing such groundwork, this chapter also hopes to point to new avenues for further research that would go beyond the confines of narrow, ethnocentric accounts of 'the new the Middle East.'

Debating the New in 'The New Middle East'

When the Arab Uprisings began to dramatically reshape the political spectrum of the Middle East, the term 'new' gained additional purchase in the form of volumes of new titles, including Fawaz Gerges' *The New Middle East: Protest and Revolution in the Arab World*, Shadi Hamid's *Temptations of Power, Islamists and Illiberal Democracy in a New Middle East*, Marc Lynch's *The Arab Uprisings: The Unfinished Revolutions of the New Middle East*, and Paul Amar and Vijay Prashad's *Dispatches From the Arab Spring: Understanding the New Middle East*. Let no one think that publishers were slow to pick up on that trend.

It therefore comes as no surprise that many scholars are grappling to understand, conceptualize, and theorize the new historical transformation by looking at different domains of Middle East politics. There are many different, conflicting arguments though, concerning the nature of the transformation in the Middle East. Most of these arguments are directed by two models of explanation: spatial and temporal models, respectively, that seek to lay bare the sources of the said transformation in Middle East politics. While the first model directly refers to outside forces or external actors with their putative influence in the region, the second model draws a parallel between the past and the present, or an analogy between history and contemporary Middle East politics.

The first model is best represented by Christopher Hill's, *The End of the Arab State*, which focuses on political transformation—the border changes and ideological divisions—and mainly blaming American interventions in the region. On such bases, Hill claims the dissolution of the Arab nation-state (Hill 2014) and accordingly the degeneration of political identity in the Middle East. The resulting vacuum has been predominately filled by sectarian divisions, which have plunged the region into total anarchy. Hill asserts that sectarianism had been present in the region the entire time; however, the rulers, as in the case of Ba'athism in Iraq, had resorted to policies mainly focusing on civic identity so as to bar sectarianism and to preserve Iraq. According to Hill, the USA attacks on Iraq, alongside the Arab Uprisings, became the main catalysts for destroying the region's political unity and opening the path to the old sectarian divisions.

Another argument, focusing mainly on the impact of external actors in the region, is the so-called post-Ottoman syndrome. The latter assertion can be found in the book *Shifting Sands: The Unraveling of the Old Order in the Middle East* by Avi Shlaim, who argues that history is going backward and the roots of the current conflict may be found in the post-1918 peace settlement which was further evoked following the Arab Uprisings (Shehadeh and Johnson 2015). The book shifts the onus mainly onto Britain and France, through the Sykes-Picot agreement, which demolished the old Middle East political order, the consequence of which is the contemporary chaotic state of affairs.

Another contention is articulated by Bobby Salman Sayyid. Analyzing the current order in the Middle East, he asserts that, 'Arab Middle East is part of the idea of this geographical construction through which any order expresses itself or tries to express itself [….] What is clear is that the conflict right now is between the post-Western regional order and the status-quo' (Sayyid 2014, p. 7). Sayyid claims that because it is not in the interest of Western states to allow the regional states to be sovereign and independent, they generally do not support governments that enjoy the support of the people. That is, the issue is not really about democracy or its external promotion, but rather about who is going to best serve the interests of Western powers, an agenda which leaves weak states precariously close to collapse. In such an environment, it is much easier for actors (such as ISIL) to gain control and become stronger by the day.

Considering the second model, which aims to make sense of the perplexing political context of the Middle East by way of finding historical

antecedents, the prominent argument is Hass' *The New Thirty Years' War*. Explicating the Middle East's current political imbroglio, Hass draws a parallel with one of the most devastating periods in Europe's history, namely the 30 Years' War, to contemplate the future of the Westphalian order in the region. From Hans Morgenthau (1967) to Friedrich Kratochwil (1986), many scholars have considered the Westphalia treaty as the turning point for modern international politics. While the treaty itself did not herald the end of the conflicts in Europe (taking into consideration the Balkan wars or the World Wars), a significant principle emerged regarding the recognition of the sovereign equality of states. According to Hass, the 'representative of the Bohemian Protestants' in the modern Middle East, Mohamed Bouazizi, triggered a conflict whose end, even after 4 years now, is highly questionable and vague. 'The Arab Middle Age' is considered to be still in its infancy, an era where chaos and unrest prevail, as they did during the pre-Westphalian era in Europe. Whereas the Europe of the seventeenth century gradually evolved into a state system, moving toward a Westphalian inter-state order and society of states firmly interlinked through institutions of diplomacy, international law, alliances, and inter-state war, the new Middle East has descended into sectarian civil wars and societal anarchy. The religious-sectarian struggles and wars—be it civil or proxy—are the main elements that reveal such a transformation. Hass claims that 'the region's trajectory is worrisome: weak states unable to police their territory; the few relatively strong states competing for primacy; militias and terrorist groups gaining greater influence; and the erasure of borders' (Kratochwil 1986). The master concept of this perspective is the 'Arab Middle Age,' and the analogy is to the 'dark Middle Ages.'

Mohammed Ayoob similarly asserts that the Arab Uprisings incited sectarian clashes in Middle East, as in the case of the Muslim Brotherhood in Tunisia and Egypt. Ayoob too explains the new order in terms of an old experience, namely the 'cold war,' now mainly conducted along two axes: Iran-Saudi Arabia and Russia-USA (Ayoob 2015). The first regional axis—Iran and Saudi Arabia—is mainly based on sectarian, economic, and strategic differences in perspective. Thus, Iran supports Assad's regime, Hezbollah, Shia militia groups in Iraq, and Houthis in Yemen, while Saudi Arabia, feeling threatened by a strong Iran in the region, supports the opposition forces in Syria, the Sunnis in Iraq, and the opposition forces in Yemen. The second axis is perceived mainly at

the global level, where America's support for Saudi Arabia and Israel may be balanced by Russia's support for Iran and the Assad regime.

While these studies shed light on some of the new dynamics of regional politics, limiting analyses to finding different parallels between the present and the past, or even blaming the past for what the Middle East faces today, is simplistic and scarcely captures the complex nature of the new Middle East. Rather than providing a more comprehensive picture, such analyses tend to generate more questions than answers regarding the process of transformation per se. What, then, are the characteristics of the 'new Middle East'?

Understanding the New in 'The New Middle East'

Considering the three pillars of the Westphalian international order (sovereignty, territoriality, and secularism), it can be said that it is these very foundations of order that seem to have collapsed the 'new Middle East,' hence challenging the main contours of modern statehood and regional order. At first sight and from a narrow realist and materialist perspective, the Arab Uprisings have failed to change the overall balance of power in the regional state system. The distribution of power among five regional powers: Turkey, Iran, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Israel, remains basically the same. At a closer look, however, many facets and outcomes of the Arab Uprisings become more visible, which should be taken into account for a better grasp of the 'new Middle East.' If we are to capture what is at stake in the region, and how regional order is changing as a result, we need to broaden and deepen our understanding regarding the complex nature of the transformation of the Middle East.

The initial, complex nature of the region began to manifest itself after the 9/11 attacks. The emergence of the Pentagon's 'New Map' made a clear division between the Core and the Gap, and defined the latter as an inevitable threat, helping to legitimize the Iraqi War in 2003 (Barnett 2015). The US intervention in Iraq contaminated what the Sunni leaders of Ba'athism had tried to hide behind the curtain of civic identity. As the façade was exposed, sectarianism became unavoidable, not only within Iraq but also in neighboring countries. Through a domino effect, stability was jeopardized in other states as well, such as Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. It is within this milieu that one of the striking features of the ongoing transformation in the Middle East becomes apparent: the changing character of state sovereignty. To capture the dynamics of the

latter, it is necessary to problematize the transformation in the whole region in relation to Westphalian subjectivity and its foundations.

The turmoil in the Middle East challenged the Westphalian political order as the states started to dissolve along religious or ethnic lines, to the degree that a 'balkanization of identity' (mostly between Sunni and Shia) occurred. The existing state borders were disputed, mainly as a result of the civil wars, leading to so-called failed states. These events led to a new border politics challenging the existing geopolitical space. On the one hand, a re-bordering process is taking place—as in the Kurdish case—while, on the other hand, a re-territorialization process is concurrently underway—as in the case of ISIL. Further challenging the Westphalian set is the mass migration out of Iraq and Syria toward neighboring and European states, in particular from the conflict areas dominated by ISIL, which in turn is attracting an intriguing reverse migration, the *hijrah* of people flocking to join the so-called Islamic Caliphate in the form of foreign fighters (Malet 2009, p. 9; Kardaş and Özdemir 2014; Hegghammer 2011).

The Changing Contours of State Sovereignty

As many pundits have pointed out, the Arab Uprisings have significantly shaped the ongoing transformations in the Middle East. The foremost impact has been on the nature of universal 'state sovereignty' that came into existence in the region following the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. Particularly after the sudden rise of ISIL as a politico-military entity claiming successful control over considerable parts of eastern Syria and western Iraq, the decline of state sovereignty became prominent (Mihatsch 2014). The rise of ISIL helped to transform a homogeneous and absolute understanding of sovereignty into multiple sovereignties. The decline of state sovereignty is not limited to the emergence of ISIL however, many sub-state military organizations had already challenged it, making the region's state structures more complex and hybrid to begin with. During the first half of the twentieth century, many Middle Eastern countries took pride in identifying themselves as successful nation-states (Iraq, Egypt, Jordan, Turkey, etc.) within the framework of territorial integrity and national unity. The expansion of the European state system (Bull 1985) and the idea of territorial integrity along with it legitimized state control over a specific territory, while nationalism aimed to create a meaningful fusion of the state and society with reference to variants of

context-specific nationalist ideologies and ideologues (Fromkin 2001; Cleveland 2012). The state as the main apparatus of the Westphalian political order in the international system was gradually transferred to the Middle Eastern society of states, a society of states based on the principle of territorial and sovereign equality. It was during the twentieth century that various Middle Eastern states consolidated their power, a power conferred in part through international recognition of their nominal, 'negative sovereignty' (Jackson 1990). However, the Arab Uprisings dramatically shifted the political imagination, questioning the suitability of the classical idea of Western preference of state-centered order over societal and individual concerns regarding justice (Bull 1971, pp. 269–283; Bull 1966, pp. 50–73) in the Middle East (Buzan and Gonzalez-Pelaez 2009) (Yurdusev 2009).

A corresponding predicament of the contemporary Middle East is hence related the distinction in the Western political order between 'negative' sovereignty (the right to be free from external interference) and 'positive' sovereignty (the ability to satisfy the basic needs of the population) (Jackson 1993). For example, while in Africa international society is likely to grant negative sovereignty to entities lacking positive sovereignty, in the Middle East the opposite is increasingly the case, particularly with the Syrian Kurds' *Kobane* defense and ISIL's experiment in state-making as two of the pivotal examples (Balcı 2015, pp. 72–91).

Radical Antagonism in the Post-Westphalian Regional System

After the 30 Years' War (1618–1648), the Treaty of Westphalia laid down the foundations of the modern state. Emerging from the centralized hierarchal authorities (i.e., religious rulers), came the Westphalian system, presenting a decentralized horizontal system of rule, where states were accepted as sovereign equals (Caporaso 2000, pp. 1–28). This sovereign equality, however, in itself was twofold: internal and external. Considering the current situation in the Middle East, it can be said that state sovereignty has been challenged both internally and externally. Internally, it is obvious now that the economic, political, and security matrix of the region has been suffering from erosion. Externally, tasked with exerting influence in conflict resolution efforts functioning as a constraint on states, regional security organizations (such as the Arab League, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, the GCC and so on) have become ineffective in the face of states that are differentially impacted by

conflicts, and hence, support incompatible responses to these conflicts. As a result of regional disorder and fragmentation, regional organizations have become dysfunctional and unable to address regional security challenges in Syria, Libya, Egypt, Iraq, and Gaza. Such conditions are dismantling the mechanisms required for constructing regional order, forcing actors to turn to unilateral preferences or short-term alliances, themselves deepening rather than alleviating the exiting predicaments. It is also obvious that sovereignty in the region is frequently punctured by international military interventions.

One result of the persistent power vacuum in the post-Arab uprising is the phenomenon of the newly emerged, violent, non-state, armed actors that further undermine the institutions, national ideologies, and economic structures of the region's sovereign states. As the Arab Uprisings transformed into security crises, particularly after the military coup in Egypt in 2013 and the intensification of the civil war in Syria, non-state armed actors began to directly challenge the Westphalian notion of the state, placing increasing pressure on the regional system with actions that weaken the region's conventional border forms. A dismal consequence of their emergence is that the conflicts and wars that previously were waged between states have now steeped into social fabrics, while modes of conflict over border security have penetrated deeper within borders, stoking new antagonisms. ISIL, as a violent, non-state, armed actor, serves as a striking illustration at the center of such repercussions. (Hazbun 2015, pp. 55–65)

The Rise of ISIL as 'The 6th Revolt Against the West'

The question of what is new in 'the New Middle East' becomes more visible and intriguing when ISIL is taken into consideration. The rise of ISIL could be seen as symptom of a transformation in which the emergence of non-state, violent actors reflects the limits of state monopoly over violence, legitimacy, and nationalistic claims (Clair 2015). However, in terms of its nominal institutional reformulation of state, ideological revisioning of international politics, radical geopolitical imagination, and extreme code of conduct *vis-à-vis* the existing regional political order, ISIL is more than a pathological consequence of the new transformations; ISIL is a sociological phenomenon rather than a simple geostrategic novelty (Lia 2015, pp. 31–41). Moreover, the establishment of the caliphate is hardly an anachronistic *faux pas*. While the US security

bureaucracy and European politicians of various stripes dub ISIL '*barbarian*' (McRaven 2015) or 'medieval' (Chakelian 2015), some scholars contend that it amounts to a 'revolutionary state' (Walt 2015). Although the organization clearly conducts various appalling terrorist acts, it also represents an experiment in state-making in its imposition of bureaucratic and other governmental structures over Iraq and Syria that not only destabilize the nation-state conventions but also deconstruct the territorial architecture of the existing Middle East order (Gambhir 2015).

We argue that a new revolt against the West is underway in the contemporary Middle East, one that challenges the dominant values of Western statehood and personhood. The term 'the revolt against the West' was perceptively coined by Hedley Bull to make sense of the tensions between order and justice in international society, specifically inequality and its social, political, and economic repercussions (Bull 1985). Bull developed the theme of 'the revolt' initially in reference to the struggles of former colonies against Western dominance in world politics. Its claim to universality notwithstanding, Western international society upholds its hegemonic view of international order and membership criteria for being accepted into the Western society of states (Kardaş 2009). Significantly, the modern society of states has, over time, grown able to make certain forms of state acts either legitimate or illegitimate, as in the case of global disgust with apartheid (Wight 1977, Buzan 2014, p. 17) or of ISIL's woman and child slavery or publicized beheadings of civilians. While up until the nineteenth century, it was impossible for aspiring states to gain acceptance because of their alleged failure to reach a 'standard of civilization' (Gong 2014), the modern Western society of states is awash with its continuing sense of superiority in the parlance of the war on terror, Islamophobia, and the war on extremism, sometimes labeling dissent as 'barbarism' on a par with sterile, Western secular humanism. It clearly declines to engage ISIL with its 'international political/diplomatic culture' (Bull 1977, p. 316) that would normally value preserving the existing order by including even radically different cultures and ideologies through conventions and institutions of diplomatic engagement.

The 'revolt against the West' is a helpful analytical construct to demonstrate how different civilizations joined the international system though the gradual *and* bloody expansion of European principles of international society that forced non-Western peoples to abide by

European conception of the world order. In search of freedom and dignity, the revolt for equal membership into the international society of states was realized, by some, after a grueling historical struggle by non-Western elites to successfully challenge Europe's moral superiority and political prowess (Gong 2014). For Bull, this struggle went through five phases: The first was a legal revolt, 'the struggle for equal sovereignty,' mainly undertaken by Japan, Turkey, Egypt, and China, which not only 'retained their formal independence' but also were seen as 'inferior' to the Western states. In the second 'political' revolt against the West, the former colonies asked not only for legal equality, but also for freedom from colonial domination. The third was the 'racial' revolt against the West, aiming to abolish both slavery and white supremacism, whereas the fourth, 'economic' revolt was staged against inequality and exploitation by Western-dominated global capitalism. The fifth revolt was 'cultural' in the sense that it opposed Western cultural imperialism and its orientalist contention that other peoples of the world should live in Europe's image and historicity, as exemplified in the universalizing of liberal conceptions of human rights.

It can be argued that while still constituting a 'revolt against the West,' the first four phases made effective use of Western conceptions of freedom, equality, and recognition, with some revolting states fully adapting to Western modernity and its patterns of social and political development at the same time, thanks to their Westernized 'suppliant' elites. However, Bull sagaciously claims that being 'a revolt against Western values as such' (Bull 1984, p. 223), the fifth, 'cultural' revolt could seed conflict and disharmony of a different sort. For example, al-Qaeda, as a product of the fifth revolt, particularly after the 9/11, London 7/7, and Madrid 11-M attacks, led a global terrorist resistance against what it saw as the Western hegemony and wars in Afghanistan, its unconditional support for Israel, and corrupt pro-Western regimes such as Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states. Even though al-Qaeda posed serious threats to the Western state system, lacking a central command and control structure, this revolt has proved evasive. After the fifth revolt, we argue, a new revolt has emerged in the contemporary Middle East, challenging the dominant Western political values. The sixth revolt against the West bears serious ramifications and challenges for the future of international society, as it marks a radically different encounter and poses different tribulations than the previous revolts. ISIL is the embodiment of the sixth revolt, and it poses four challenges to international society:

First, it upends the 'domestic analogy' (Sugunami 1989) that holds in its assertion that international society is not analogous to domestic society. That is, unlike in the modern society of states, where secular institutions have the right to make 'primary rules' (how society should behave) and 'secondary rules' (how primary rules are made and enforced) (Bull 1977, p. 133) for ISIL the sources of both types of rules can neither be neither secular institutions nor states, but instead, theology. The adversity and atypical nature of the sixth revolt is such that while ISIL's theology seeks to create a new regional order in which territorial lines are drawn on the basis of religious identity, its politics seeks and demands recognition as a sovereign state in the international system of states (BakeNakedIslam 2015; RedditDebateReligion 2015).

Second, because of its counter-revolutionary tendencies, its vision of international relations is outside the institutions and purview of the Western society of states. It proposes its own vision of *world society* as opposed to the 'universalist cosmopolitanism' of Western *world society* by taking the global population as its target audience with a view to projecting its radical religious identity and model of governance far beyond the confines of the secular society of states (McCants 2015, p. 100). ISIL's vision of Islamic civilization contains a hegemonic conception of international politics in which it believes it occupies the center, with the traditional Islamic view of the world divided between believers and infidels, located in the land of Islam (*Dar al-Islam*) (Hansen et al. 2009) and the land of War (*Dar al-Harb*), respectively (Weiss and Hassan 2015). For instance, the west's most prominent institutions, such as non-intervention and secularism, are simply anathema for ISIL. Hence, the sixth revolt is unique because it poses atypical challenges to certain prominent institutions of international society, namely diplomacy and war. As for the institution of war-making, the use of force by ISIL does not conform to Clausewitz's famous mantra that 'war is the continuation of politics by other means' (Hansen et al. 2009). From Charlie Hebdo (Özdemir 2015; Erdağ 2016, pp. 62–73) to various so-called lone-wolf attacks on the symbols of Western states (Kardaş and Özdemir 2014) to the Ankara Attack that killed 102 (Pamuk 2015), the actions of universal ISIL operatives are 'not followed by diplomatic demands which are usually compromised as part of the usual "give and take" of politics' (Linklater 2013, p. 100).

The third aspect of the revolt against the West is ISIL's *apocalyptic geopolitical imagination*. Its declaration of the caliphate in June 2014

challenged the structure and conception of traditional borders among Arab states and triggered a process of re-bordering alongside the religiously meaningful geography of Syria and Iraq, based on the justification and discourse of *end-times*. This is neither secession nor partition (Faris 2014), but a process of narrating ISIL's own religio-political caliphate as new form of sovereignty (McElroy 2014). The process of re-bordering manifests itself in two distinct ways. First, ISIL externally reclaims the status of the territorial caliphate by physically deconstructing the Sykes-Picot order (Sennot 2014), which defined the terms by which the last caliphate came to an end. Second, it internally re-territorializes its political power and status by way of generating a new geopolitical space by eliminating the symbols (Sykes-Picot) of the traditional order.

The emergent *apocalyptic geopolitical space* practically requires an antagonistic struggle not only against those who are the 'enemies of the Caliphate' but also against any Muslims who present themselves outside the trajectory of *Sunni* Islam. ISIL employs select strategies to legitimate such unwavering discourses of enmity as the true, literal, and inerrant words of Allah, regardless of the changing geopolitical realities facing the regional competitions. This is in part achieved through the use of geography for strategies of radical 'Othering' through the language of *hadith*. That is, even though ISIL adopts the language of the 'end of time' to advance its cause by narrating itself into a 'clash of civilizations' (Salzman 2014) in which the West is reduced to the infidel and permanent enemy, the discourses of 'Other' are manifested in many ways.

The geopolitical imagination and meaning-making strategies of ISIL *vis-à-vis* its enemies, revolving around the conceptions of 'friends and foes,' and 'good and evil' in regional politics, indicate how a non-state military actor's geopolitical mentality works. In part by geopolitically coding its significant Other with reference to a normative reconceptualization of good and evil, ISIL manifests itself as the true representative of the 'Islamic jihad' and justifies its presence/fight/violence as political normalcy, particularly in fighting against other states and non-state military organizations (Walt 2015, pp. 43–45). This process of the rewriting of practical and ideological geopolitical imagination also represents the Caliphate as the political institutionalization of bordering and belonging with a view to protecting 'true Muslims,' both in regional politics and in the cities, where the orders of Caliphate are accepted as supreme rules of Islam. This double meaning-making strategy of dividing state authority and naming places into binary geographies (of good-Muslim

and evil-Others) helps to legitimate the process of radical geopolitical reconstructions in world politics (Berger 2015, pp. 61–71). For example, the prophetic representation of the geostrategic competition over certain cities in Syria (as in the case of the religious representations of *Dabiq*) is an example of how spatial constructions are informed by *apocalyptic* geopolitical thinking (McCants 2015).

For ISIL, to make this kind of geopolitical picture intelligible from the perspective of Qur'anic toponyms, the process of naming spaces in religious terminology is vital; in this way, state and regional borders are (re)defined in accordance with traditional Islamic concepts. Inscribing dualistic names into places constitutes a theocratic intervention in that it helps to dismantle existing local identities. The act of naming therefore does not simply sacralize the topography; it also constitutes the very subject who does the naming. This epistemological strategy of textualizing spaces in dualistic Islamic terms in line with prophetic history also helps to justify and shore up the ontological status of ISIL as the only legitimate fighting force against select infidels (*Murtad*).

The fourth challenge of ISIL is that it runs counter to the very idea of international society because it does not rest on the ontology of states; that is, as in the case of the Kantian (revolutionist) tradition, ISIL's ontology is neither the state nor the individual but an (utopian) idea of the *Ummah*, understood as the unity of Muslim countries (IS 2015), under one single central authority of *Hilafat*. That is, unlike previous revolts, this is not an elite undertaking, a top-down initiative, but one involving a different subjectivity—namely that of the *Ummah* community of believers as a whole, a new multinational subjectivity of inhabitants. The unifying thread of the latter is religious denomination or a utopia, the ideological force of which can be noted in the case of foreign (fighters) citizens flocking to its ranks from all over the world. By declaring a new 'state *within* the state,' with reference to the Islamic concept of sovereignty which is articulated around the idea of the *Ummah*, ISIL considers that there is no division between religion and politics and

that the state should be based upon the Qur'an, following the word of Allah in a unified way, as in the first Caliphate (*Hilafat*) (Saikal 2008). According to the theorizing of the ISIL's state, sovereignty over the entire universe belongs to Allah and Allah alone, while the caliphate, as a worldly institutional reflection of divine sovereignty, is also the representation of Allah as *al-Malik*.[1]

In this theo-political reformulation of state authority, states are hierarchically and unequally ordered in world politics and sovereignty does not belong to a person or a group of people; rather it is redesigned according to a utopian call based on divine rule (Batchelor 2015). By establishing a hierarchically ordered caliphate on religiously defined territorial lines, ISIL completely disregards the territorial integrity and right to sovereignty of surrounding states and nation-states as a whole in the region (Mecham 2015). Therefore, in terms of the political reformulation of the state, ISIL defends its own territorial understanding and the supreme authority of the *Ummah* in world politics, while rejecting the Western state system as an innovation incompatible with Islamic doctrine. The most striking examples of the rejection of the Westphalian political conception of statehood and personhood can be seen in the case of the foreign fighters burning their passports when they first join ISIL in Syria and Iraq (Guardian 2015).

The symbolic and powerful ritual of passport burning (DailyMail 2014) is another testimony to the atypical nature of the sixth revolt, in that it signifies the changing layers of subjectivity away from national identity, seen as a sign of loyalty to a supposedly universal group, and a renunciation of existing identity markers, yet another drawback in the multicultural politics of the European Union. As such, it ignores one of the foundational claims of the international society—namely the society of sovereign equals tied together by the logic of *raison de système* (Watson 1992, p. 14). In short, ISIL challenges almost all of the 'primary institutions' of international society that incorporate the classical

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[1] In order to see how ISIL theorizes the state, see its magazine, *Dabiq* http://media.clarionproject.org/files/islamic-state/islamic-state-dabiq-magazine-issue-7-from-hypocrisy-to-apostasy.pdf; According to ISIL's propaganda discourse *Dabiq*, which lies about six miles from the Turkish border, features in Islamic apocalyptic prophecies as the site of an end-of-times showdown between Muslims and their enemies. See "Why Islamic State chose town of Dabiq for propaganda," *BBC*, Retrieved from http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-30083303.

'Westphalian set,' such as sovereignty, territoriality, war, international law and great power management, nationalism, and human equality.

In Lieu of Conclusion: *The Re-birth of Extra-territorial Subjectivities and the Politics of Resistance*

Within the context described above, ISIL presents a double predicament to world society: While it clearly does not belong to a Westphalian political imagination with its corrosive effect on state sovereignty, it is not a pre-Westphalian, medieval entity either. For it clearly exhibits both a territorial *and* modern ring to state-society relations. For ISIL's ideologues, the state and the divine are two sides of the same coin, in that 'God becomes political, and politics becomes sacred' and, as McDonald argues, 'such sovereignty is completely absent in medieval culture, with its fragmented world and multiple sources of power. Its origins lie instead in the Westphalian system of states and the modern scientific revolution' (The Conversation 2014). As for the state-citizen relationship, ISIL is obsessed with establishing a new Muslim subjectivity, exclusively in conjunction with an Islamic state. As such, ISIL shares what has been a norm for the European state system, that is, '*extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (outside the church there is no salvation), an idea that became transformed with the birth of modern European states into *extra stato nulla persona* (outside the state there is no legal personhood)' (The Conversation 2014).

The challenging new experiment in state-making exemplified by ISIL is not limited to the rise of the Caliphate as a new form of self-stylized sovereign entity. As a result of the armed struggle between state and non-state actors of different ethnic and sectarian political subjectivities in the new Middle East, post-Westphalian venues for collective consciousness are constructed around the discourse of popular resistance (i.e., Kurdish resistance against ISIL, Sunni resistance against Kurds and Shi'a, Shi'a resistance against Sunni, Houthi resistance against Sunni or vice versa). This in turn creates new modes and norms of social and political interaction for the region, which increasingly is witnessing a redefinition of the role and legitimacy of borders, as has been the case with the Syrian Kurds' so-called Rojava Revolution in governance that radically alters both border politics and the politics of modern administration. The new cross-border or transnational re-bordering of political

community and a new conception of homeland challenge the traditional structure of regional territorial order (Aras and Falk 2015).

This new type of territoriality and the antagonistic struggle certainly call attention to the tensions between societal and spatial relations at the regional level. Before the Arab Uprising, the main hegemonic discourse of popular resistance revolved around the idea of creating alternative, homogeneous, territorial national-states for different social groupings while mostly retaining the existing border structures. Today, however, new political subjectivities are being formed around cities (*Musul, Kirkuk, Raqqah*) or even squares (*al-maydan*) as the symbol of a new type of spatial resistance and struggle that acquires alternative political meaning and significance by way of either religious markers, such as *Dabiq* for ISIL, which means embracing the end-times, or nationalist markers (e.g., *Kobane* is a starting point for the PKK's leader Abdullah Öcalan). The complex nature of this ongoing transition hence also includes changes in the 'trans-border patterns of loyalty,' constituting one venue for the 'new' in 'the new Middle East.'

The new political and ideological military antagonisms and popular resistances among different societal groups initiate a rethinking of the traditional abstract formulations and institutional structures of the state, which have been traditionally designed in terms of *hierarchy*, the 'legitimate' use of force, and the rule of law. Under the contemporary experiments, however, state structures tend to stumble and anarchy prevails as the new normal, producing failed states such as Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen. The absolute/collective violence and state of exception replace the rule of law, giving rise to the 'politics of exceptionality' as a technique of government in the region. Such transformations turn states away from security provision as they become instead a source of insecurity, pushing sub-national ethnic and religious groups to form their own security architecture (i.e., Syria, Iraq, and Libya). The resulting struggle of non-state armed groups for control over territory confronts states with a deep ISIL of security and identity. In Iraq, for example, the Kurds, Turkmens, Shi'a, and Sunnis have turned to self-security provision for the sake of their own existence and interests, as a consequence of the weakness of the Iraqi state. Syria, Libya, Iraq, and Yemen are almost a microcosm of the emerging new micro-geopolitical mechanism of survival engaging major actors as well as violent non-state armed actors.

In all, as this study hopes to have shown, the question of what is 'new' in the New Middle East should be scrutinized beyond the confines of

narrow, ethnocentric accounts of 'the new Middle East.' In addressing the increasingly perilous fallouts from what we have named 'the sixth revolt against the West' (such as the refugee flow or the phenomenon of foreign fighters, to name a few) a new epistemological and political approach is due.

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Authors' Biography

Murat Yeşiltaş has completed his BA and MA at the Department of International Relations of Sakarya University, in 2003 and 2009, respectively. He earned his PhD at the Department of Political Science and International Relations at Marmara University in 2012. Yeşiltaş was a visiting researcher at the Department of European Studies and International Politics of Lancaster University between 2008 and 2009 and visiting researcher at Virginia Tech's Institute of Government and International Affairs between 2010 and 2011. He served as an academic advisor for Center for Strategic Studies (SAM) of Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey between 2012 and 2014. Currently, Yeşiltaş is an Assoc. Professor in the Middle East Institute at Sakarya University. He also holds the position of director of security studies at SETA Foundation, Ankara, Turkey. Yesiltas current researches are on critical geopolitics, ethnic/religious radicalization, geopolitics of non-state conflicts, terrorism, and the Kurdish affairs. He is currently working on the following research projects: Kurdish Geopolitical Space: Remaking of the Kurdish Political Subjectivity and the New Kurdish Geopolitical Imagination; the New Regional Security Project (NRSP). His most recent books are *Türkiye Dünyanın Neresinde?Hayali Coğrafyalar Çarpışan Anlatılar* (Where is Turkey Located? Imagined Geographies, Competing Narratives) (2015, Koc University Press) and *Geopolitical Mentality and the Military in Turkey* (2016, Kadim).

Dr. Tuncay Kardaş is Associate Professor of International Relations at the Middle East Institute of Sakarya University. He received his BA and MA degrees from Bilkent University in Ankara; MsEcon (Security Studies) and Ph.D. from the Department of International Politics at Aberystwyth University in Wales in 2006. He is currently serving as the Deputy Director of the Middle East Institute of Sakarya University. His research focuses broadly on sociology of security, foreign fighters, the ISIS, critical security studies, security governmentality, visual semiotics and Turkish Foreign Policy. Dr. Kardas is the co-editor of 'The Borders of Islam: Exploring Samuel Huntington's Faultlines, from Al-Andalus to Virtual Ummah' (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009). His most recent articles appeared in Turkish Studies, Middle East Critique, Insight Turkey, Birikim, Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations, Economics and Management: Current Issues and Perspectives. Dr. Kardaş's current researches are on foreign fighters, Islamic radicalization, and the Kurdish conflict. He is currently working on the following research projects: Turkish Foreign Fighters, ISSDIT: Inter-Societal Security Dilemmas in Turkey, and ISSDIME: Inter-Societal Security Dilemmas in the Middle East. He is the organizer of Crisis and Critique Conferences and an editorial board member of Ortadoğu Yıllığı. His most recent research is titled 'The Inter-Societal Security Dilemma in Turkey: Kurdish Opening' Turkish Studies with Ali Balci published in Turkey Studies.

An Influential Non-state Armed Actor in the Iraqi Context: Al-Hashd Al-Shaabi and the Implications of its Rising Influence

Bilgay Duman and Göktuğ Sönmez

INTRODUCTION

The role of non-state armed actors has long been a major topic in international relations literature, especially due to the increasing number of both armed and non-state armed actors in the second half of the twentieth century. Different definitions of the concept of the non-state armed actor can be found in the security studies literature. Whether these actors would be regarded as terrorist organizations or liberation fighters is also another challenge to be addressed not only within academic circles but also in the international community, further complicating the question of how to approach each of them (Huber and Reimann 2006, p: 1). In this paper, however, the definition which will be embraced is as follows: "[Non-state armed

B. Duman (✉)
Abant İzzet Baysal University, Bolu, Turkey
e-mail: bilgay1907@gmail.com

B. Duman · G. Sönmez
ORSAM, Ankara, Turkey

actors]… operate[s] outside state control, challenge the state's monopoly on coercive force, and who are capable of preventing, blocking or endangering a humanitarian or conflict resolution initiative" (Accord 2005).

Even though the idea of states as the primary actors with rational decision-making capabilities striving for more power and influence enjoyed a decades-old respect in line with the key assumptions of the realist tradition of IR theory,[1] non-state actors have been increasingly playing more and more important roles in world politics and opening up new and broader spaces for themselves. The discussion about the role that is and can be played by non-state armed actors has been more lively than ever especially since the 9/11 attacks after which a terrorist act of an non-state armed actor (NSAA hereafter), namely al-Qaeda, changed the turn of events in the broader MENA region. More recently, with the rise of ISIS, the role of NSAAs and how they can affect international and regional politics has been an ever hot topic. Striving to establish a state-like mechanism, its impact moved beyond Iraq and Syria, where it primarily operates. In the vast literature about NSAAs from al-Qaeda to Boko Haram to Hezbollah, Abu Sayyaf group and ISIS, one deduction can easily be made; NSAAs can seriously affect local dynamics and depending on their capabilities, may engender important consequences for regional and international settings, too. With fewer boundaries and sensitivities, once they can militarily and financially consolidate their position, they can act more freely, faster and with much less damage to themselves compared to states both economically and politically. They are capable of using violence for their goals and in most cases willing to do so, not integrated into formal state mechanisms (a key characteristic

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[1]For some key studies within this context, see Jack Donnelly, *Realism and International Relations*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001; Michael C. Williams, ed., *Realism Reconsidered: The Legacy of Hans Morgenthau in International Relations*; Robert Jervis, "Realism in the Study of World Politics", *International Organization* 52:4, (Autumn 1998), pp:971–991; Fareed Zakaria, "Realism and Domestic Politics", *International Security* 17 (1992), pp: 177–198; William E. Scheuerman, *Hans Morgenthau: Realism and Beyond*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009); Stephen Walt, "The Progressive Power of Realism" in John A. Vasquez & Colin Elman, *Realism and the Balance of Power: A New Debate* (New Jersey: Pearson Education, 2003); Jonathan Monten, "Thucydides and Modern Realism", *International Studies Quarterly* 50 (2006), pp: 3–25 (Donnelly 2000; Carr 2001; Jervis 1998; Zakaria 1992; Scheuerman 2009; Walt 2003; Monten 2006).

of numerous NSAAs, which does not apply to the Hashd), and enjoy a certain degree of autonomy in their political, military, and economic steps (Hoffman and Schneckener 2011). In terms of their relationship with the state on whose soil they operate, they pose critical challenges to two key pillars of the contemporary statehood; the first is the Westphalian concept of undisputed sovereignty of states, and the second is the Weberian approach to the state as having monopoly of the legitimate use of force (Krause and Milliken 2009). Moreover, with their strict ideological, ethnic, religious, and/or sectarian stance, they can even threaten countries' social cohesion as well as territorial integrity.

The particular case of Iraq probably offers more exceptional empirical ammunition to the literature on NSAAs than any other country in the region. Along with terrorist organizations operating on the Iraqi soil, particular groups enjoying a close relationship with the ruling elite, including local tribes and groups organized around particular ethnic and sectarian lines, provide a quite rich empirical material to the accounts focusing on the impact of NSAAs (Rashid 2005). Al-Hashd al-Shaabi,[2] a highly influential NSAA in Iraq stands out as one of the most interesting ones within this context. It does not only act as an umbrella for numerous smaller entities, thus proving its high organizational capability, thanks to its close institutional links to the very establishment of Iraq as being responsible to the Prime Ministry, it also acts as a major force that can frequently play the role of a king maker in terms of Iraq's fight against ISIS. The Hashd, as widely called in Iraq, fights with other local militia and armed groups, too, such as Peshmerga, and occasionally commits human right abuses against the Sunni population of the provinces it "liberates" from ISIS. Therefore, the Hashd is considered both as an important player in Iraq's fight against ISIS and an important destabilizing internal militant actor jeopardizing Iraq's social cohesion and territorial integrity. Even though critics of the group believe that Hashd, with its ruthlessness and its own sectarian agenda, does not differ from ISIS that much (Rudaw 2016; Al Jazeera 2016; The Guardian 2015), it is acknowledged that with its military capabilities, it can act as a major force now and in the future of Iraq.

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[2] The People's Mobilization Forces or Units, a major umbrella organization gathering more than 40 Shiite militia groups.

Therefore, as an important non-state armed actor which is effective on the field, enjoys close ties with the ruling elite, a key actor in terms of the fight among NSAAs in Iraq, and at the center of regional politics thanks to its close ties with Iran, the Hashd deserves a great deal of attention. Rather than as a key insurgent group fighting to challenge the state and replace it as in the case of ISIS, the phenomenon of the Hashd can be understood as a combination of the concept of "militant groups" and "warlords, urban gangs, and criminal networks" according to Krause and Millliken's categorization of non-state armed groups (Krause and Milliken 2009: 205). It also represents "paramilitaries" fighting on the state's side as well as a "proxy fighter" group with considerable amount of support and encouragement from Iran (Thurber 2014: 903–904). However, one categorizes the Hashd, a key deduction from its presence on the field is that its gradual rise to a leading military actor challenges not only the Westphalian statehood which envisages the state's sovereignty on its territory but also Weberian concept of the state's monopoly on the use of legitimate force. This study investigates the ways in which this is achieved and what future steps might be required in order to prevent the organization from posing such threats in the long-term.

In order to analyze the historical background of the group before investigating its ideological positioning and military capabilities, in the first section, a clear picture of the state of affairs in Iraq especially since mid-2014—i.e., the peak point of the ISIS advance in Iraq—will be presented. Thanks to the significant amount of logistical and financial support it received from Iran, in the fragile security environment of Iraq, the Hashd succeeded in imposing itself as a major actor within quite a short span of time. In order to understand the group's rise in such a short span of time, changes in the Iraqi political landscape and security threats needs a closer investigation. Secondly, the Hashd, as a by-product of this new environment, will be looked into in detail. By doing so, in addition to offering an insight into an important NSAA within the Iraqi context, some key assessments will be made regarding the potential risks of the existence of such an entity for the future of both Iraq and the region, and the paper will also offer some insights into the question of how to manage such an actor to achieving stability in the medium to long run.

Making Sense of the Emergence of Al-Hashd Al-Shaabi

When the state mechanism's ability to provide political stability, prosperity, and security is compromised, in general, non-state actors unsurprisingly found a much greater chance to increase their influence. This is also the case for NSAAs to which especially failed or failing state structures open up a vast area to alter the local dynamics once they feel comfortable enough to challenge the state itself (Schneckener 2006). In the Iraqi case, both political crisis and security-related tectonic changes shaped the environment that allowed and even contributed to the rise of the Hashd.

Nouri al-Maliki, who held the office of the Prime Minister twice following the 2006 and 2010 elections, sought to retain the post for a third term. Since it was widely acknowledged that the negative consequences of his political, social, military, and economic policies in the second term led to the rise of ISIS and its expansion of control, al-Maliki failed to receive authorization to form the government, even though his party won 60 more chairs in the parliament than its closest competitor (Wall Street Journal 2014). After a voting in the Iraqi National Alliance, which was composed of the Shiite political groups, Haider al-Abadi was assigned to form the government in August 2014 (Dodge 2014). He completed the government formation process within a month and received a vote of confidence on September 8, 2014 in the Iraqi Parliament's session which was attended by 289 deputies out of the total of 325. The government's program received only 177 votes in favor, which indicated that there were still doubts about the Abadi-led government (Middle East Eye 2015). The appointments for some other ministries, especially the controversial Interior and Defense Ministries, were agreed upon later. The security issue, which is the biggest problem of Iraq, was left unattended at the ministerial level during the critical struggle against ISIS. Previously, no ministers dealing with security affairs had been assigned to their posts since 2012, and the former Prime Minister al-Maliki also retained these posts under his portfolio until the end of his term. Therefore, it led to the monopolization and dominant control of security institutions by Nouri al-Maliki. During the troubled government formation process in Baghdad following the 2014 Parliamentary elections, the ISIS found a fertile ground to reinforce and expand its sphere of control.

In terms of changing security dynamics and the Iraqi security forces' inability to cope with this change, the Iraqi landscape offered quite a

fertile ground for ISIS to expand its influence and military reach. The era following the capture of Mosul by ISIS in June 2014 can be regarded as the manifestation of the security crisis in Iraq. ISIS' advance at the expense of the Iraqi government and the waning power of the government resulted in questioning of the security, stability, and state mechanism of Iraq. Iraqi politics reached a chokepoint as a result of the increasing ISIS activity in al-Anbar, Salahaddin, the south of Kirkuk, and the environs of Diyala and Baghdad following the elections of 30 April 2014 (Bacchi 2015). In such an atmosphere where ISIS was on the rise while the Iraqi security forces proved quite an incapable actor to fight with this challenge, unsurprisingly, NSAAs, with the goal of filling this power vacuum, saw an important opportunity. The Hashd emerged within this context, following the fatwa issued by al-Sistani.

In the face of the inefficiency of the Iraqi army and security forces to prevent ISIS's slaughter of civilians, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the highest Shiite religious authority in Iraq, declared a "jihad" on June 12, 2014, calling all Shiites and Iraqis to fight against ISIS (Ali and Kagan 2014). Thousands of Iraqi Shiites have formed "al-Hashd al-Shaabi/Popular Mobilization Units", based on voluntary participation. Therefore, considering the formation and motivations, al-Hashd al-Shaabi stands out as a key NSAA formed in response to a Shiite call for arms.I In contrast to Hezbollah and Quds Force, the many smaller Shiite militia groups that had been formed after the US invasion of Iraq chose to operate under the umbrella of al-Hashd al-Shaabi.[3] Approximately 90,000 Shiites volunteered for the "jihad" that Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani called for in his fatwa (Mansour 2016). These volunteers were organized into al-Hashd al-Shaabi, which has a clear leverage in the battlefield across the Iraqi countryside.

There are more than 40 known groups in al-Hashd al-Shaabi; however, it is important to mention that there are other local groups present as well. Four major groups are prominent in al-Hashd al-Shaabi, to which many other groups pledge their allegiance. There is no clear number of their fighters; however, rumors say it varies between 10,000 and 25,000.[4]

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[3] See CFR's backgrounders for a more detailed information about the emergence of the Hezbollah and the Quds Force via http://www.cfr.org/lebanon/hezbollah-k-hizbollah-hizbullah/p9155 and http://www.cfr.org/iran/irans-revolutionary-guards/p14324.

[4] Based on the interviews conducted during the field research in Iraq between December 2014 and March 2015.

These groups are Badr Organization, Kata'ib Hezbollah, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, and Saraya al-Salam (Table 8.1).

Among these, the strongest are Badr Organization and Kata'ib Hizbollah of which the first is not listed as a terrorist group by the US, whereas the latter is designated so. These groups are the militia groups, which were already present in Iraq before the fatwa of Ayatollah Ali Sistani. Some of them have become inactive or have chosen to operate within political channels, while others were established after the former groups had become inactive. Some militia groups within al-Hashd al-Shaabi were established in order to protect the sacred Shiite sites in

Table 8.1 The groups according to their size under the umbrella of the Hashd

Large	Medium	Small		
Badr Organization (Brigades)	Kata'ib al-Imam Ali	Hezbollah the Mujahideen in Iraq	Saraya al-Jihad	Liwa al-Shabab al-Risali
Kata'ib Hizbollah	Haraqat al-Nujabba	Faylaq al-Wa'ad al-Sadiq	Liwa Youm al-Qaim	Liwa al-Sadeqeyn
Asaib Ahl al-Haq	Saraya Ashura	Kata'ib Al-Imam al-Hussein	Liwa Dhu al-Fiqar	Liwa al-Qaim
Saraya al-Salam (The Peace Brigades)	Quwwa Shaheed al-Sadr	Kata'ib al-Imam al-Gha'ib	Hizbollah al-Sairun	Liwa al-Imam al-Qaim
The Khorasan Brigades		Kata'ib Ansar al-Hijja	Liwa Assadullah Galip	Liwa al-Qaria
Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada		Kata'ib al-Ghadab	Liwa al-Montadar	
Abu Fadel Abbas Brigade		Kata'in al-Difa al-Muqaddas	Muqawama al-Islamiya Liwa al-Youm al-Maw'ud	
		Kata'ib Ruhallah	Haraqat al-Abdal	
		Kata'ib Ahrar al-Iraq	Saraya al-Zahra	
		Kata'ib al-Tayyar al-Risali	Hizbollah al-Abrar	
		Kata'ib al-Shaheed al-Awal: Quwwa al-Buraq	Liwa Ammar ibn Yasir	
		Kata'ib al-Shaheed al-Awal	Liwa al-Imam al-Hasan al-Mujtaba	
		Kata'ib Ansar al-Aqida	Kata'ib al-Fatah al-Mobin	

Syria and fight for Bashar al-Assad. Besides, there are new groups that were formed after Ayatollah Sistani's fatwa. Even though Kata'ib Sayyid Shuhada and Kata'ib Imam Ali have fewer fighters, they are active in almost all battlegrounds, unlike the other groups, which have a limited extent of activity. Their area of dominance differs in provinces. For example, Badr Organization is said to be the most extensive Shiite militia group, though its area of activity is limited to the provinces north of Baghdad. Asaib Ahl al-Haq and Saraya al-Salam are stronger in Kerbela and Najaf compared to the other groups. Asaib Ahl al-Haq and Hizbollah are more active in Basra, and Asaib Ahl al-Haq is dominant in Muthanna. Six units of al-Hashd al-Shaabi militias around Kirkuk consist of 3750 fighters from the residents of Kirkuk. Almost all these militia fighters are from the Shiite Turkmen districts and villages such as Taze Khourmato, Daquq, Beshir, and Amirli, and all of their leaders are Turkmens.[5]

Even though a monolithic and permanent decision-making mechanism for the whole group is nonexistent due to the fact that each group under the Hashd's umbrella has its own agenda, leader, and banner, two figures appear to be essential in terms of decision-making processes as well as assuming the ability of acting on behalf of the Hashd as a whole, namely Abu Mehdi al-Mohandes and Hadi al-Amiri. Jamal Jaafar Ibrahim, who is known as Abu Mehdi al-Mohandes, commands al-Hashd al-Shaabi in the battlefield (Sowell 2015). He manages the field operations of al-Hashd al-Shaabi on behalf of the Iraqi National Security Council. Abu Mehdi al-Mohandes was elected as a member of the Iraqi Parliament in 2006 from the Dawa Party under the name Jamal Jaafar Ibrahim.[6] Hadi al-Amiri, the leader of the Badr Organization, an influential political party and the former militia wing of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, has gained popularity and increasing influence over al-Hashd al-Shaabi. Therefore, with a pro-Iran stance in general and thus highly influenced by Sistani's discourse and particular speeches, on the ground, these two figures can be named as more capable to set the agenda, though cohesion should still not be taken for granted.

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[5] Based on the interviews conducted with anonymous sources during the field research in Iraq between December 2014 and March 2015.

[6] See Global Extremist Registry, Jamal Jaafar Ibrahimi a.k.a. Abu Mahdi al-Mohandes on http://www.counterextremism.com/extremists/jamal-jaafar-ibrahimi-aka-abu-mahdi-al-mohandes.

The objectives of al-Hashd al-Shaabi are declared as to fight and oust ISIS from the Iraqi territory, to protect the country, to protect the sacred sites including mosques, to liberate the Iraqi people, and to assist the Iraqis who cannot fight.[7] However, a monolithic decision-making structure or a military mechanism is not present under the Hashd's umbrella. Even though there are efforts to create a common identity under al-Hashd al-Shaabi, each group holds on to its own banner. No individual group controls al-Hashd al-Shaabi on its own, which complicates the question of a permanent decision-making mechanism. For instance, al-Hashd al-Shaabi recently launched operations and took control of Samarra, Jurf al-Sakhr, the outlying villages of Tuzkhurmato, the district of Amirli, Beled, the region of Baghdadi in al Anbar, the surroundings of Kirkuk (Taze Khurmato, Daquq), and lastly Tikrit. Not all Shiite militia groups have taken part in all these operations. Therefore, it is also important to note the potential for intra-group clashes within al-Hashd al-Shaabi. Whereas pro-Iran and pro-Iraq groups differ over their backers as well as their interpretation of Shi'ism and the religious authorities they follow, they also occasionally experience tension on the ground. For instance, due to the US participation, Saraya al-Salam first declared that it would not take part in the Tikrit operation, defying the Hashd's desire to lead the operation as a whole, causing a several months of halt of the operation (Anadolu Agency 2015; Rudaw 2015). Similarly, in Tuzkhurmato, clashes within the Hashd were covered by several news agencies reporting from the village (BasNews 2016).

The Implications of the Rise of Al-Hashd Al-Shaabi at Different Levels

As a leading non-state armed actor in Iraq in the fight against ISIS, the implications of the rise of Hashd can be analyzed at three levels, namely state, intrastate, and interstate/regional level. In general, NSAAs have the potential to negatively affect state's authority and the monopoly of the use of legitimate force, whereas their rise can also significantly affect the intergroup fighting in a particular country as well as broader regional power structure. The Hashd seems no exception to this overall picture,

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[7] Information received during a meeting with the Iraqi commanders that are assigned to al-Hashd al-Shaabi, Baghdad, March 2015.

rather it offers a useful case study of how NSAAs have an impact at each of these three levels.

Therefore, a closer look into the impacts of the very existence and the rise of the Hashd in relation to the power and sovereignty of the Iraqi central government, the fight against ISIS and the Iranian influence over Iraq and even Syria will be required first. In order to do so how the Hashd challenges Iraqi sovereignty and statehood, and thus, how the Iraqi government puts an effort to institutionalize its relationship with the Hashd will be investigated initially. Following this, the group's fight against ISIS and its emergence as a key actor in the fight against ISIS will be looked into. After that, the group's strict Shi'a ideological stance from the very formation of it following al-Sistani's call for a Shi'a jihad and the groups' close ties with Iran and how its rise helped Iran exert influence over Iraq and Syria will be discussed. By conducting an analysis at these three levels, a comprehensive holistic grasp of the phenomenon of the Hashd and the implications of its emergence, rise, and current position will be attained.

To begin with, the Hashd's impact on the Iraqi statehood, sovereignty, and social cohesion has been enormous so far. It has not only challenged the state's monopoly of the use of legitimate force by implying itself as a key military actor, but also its strict adherence to Shi'a interpretation of Islam and human rights abuses against Sunnis in different provinces further deepened the already fragile sectarian dividing lines. In the post-2014 era, the Iraqi government suffered from weaknesses in the very state mechanism itself along with the failures it repeatedly experienced in its fight against ISIS. The Iraqi government was confronted with the advance of ISIS toward the Shiite holy sites, including Samarra. Following that, the Shiite militia groups increased in number, while the Iraqi government simultaneously sought to convince the Sunni tribes living in the ISIS-controlled territories to join the fight against ISIS, by providing them with material and military assistance. This strategy was reminiscent of the US strategy in 2007 against al-Qaeda. Within this context, some Sunni tribes, who took part in the Sahwa or Awakening Councils, which was formed as a part of the US strategy against al-Qaeda and transferred to the control of the Iraqi government, joined al-Hashd al-Shaabi, while other Sunni groups have sought recently to form military units designated for themselves, such as al-Hashid al-Watani. There are even some small Christian and Ezidi groups fighting alongside al-Hashd al-Shaabi against ISIS (McCary 2009; Benraad 2011; Frantzman 2016; Rudaw 2015; Ekurd Daily 2015).

In order to manage its quite complex and threatening relationship with the Hashd, the Iraqi government has been forced to adopt a new strategy for the post-ISIS period. In terms of how to institutionalize the link between the Iraqi government and al-Hashd al-Shaabi, several different steps have been taken. Firstly, there were efforts for the institutionalization of al-Hashd al-Shaabi under the Iraqi Prime Minister's National Security Council. Therefore, the official authority on behalf of al-Hashd al-Shaabi was the Iraqi National Security Adviser Falah Al-Fayyad (O'Connor 2015). Then, the office of Prime Ministry urged the Hashd to be directly under its command as a key anti-terrorism force, further contributing both legitimacy and prestige of the group as well as its autonomy. At that point, the state mechanism had more control over the decision-making processes of the Hashd, whereas recent autonomy it achieved made the group act independently and even treat the Iraqi security forces as equal counterparts. Parallel to these developments, the Iraqi Council of Ministers has adopted a resolution for providing a salary to the fighters in al-Hashd al-Shaabi (Sowell 2015). It is known that not all militias within al-Hashd al-Shaabi receive salaries, only those fighting in the front and the unemployed. There are also some people among al-Hashd al-Shaabi ranks, who are civil servants or wealthy people, and it is claimed that they will return to their daily lives once the ISIS is defeated. Al-Hashd al-Shaabi provides a source of income for those people, who are unemployed. However, it is not clear how many people are in the ranks of al-Hashd al-Shaabi. The speculated figures range from fifty to ninety thousand, though no clear data exist on how many people receive salaries. It is claimed that approximately 65–75% of al-Hashd al-Shaabi members receive salaries, which amount to 875,000 Iraqi Dinars (approximately 680 US dollars) per person. Of the total amount, 125,000 Dinars is cut for food expenses and the net salary is 750,000 Dinars (580 US Dollars).[8]

Regarding the efforts to institutionalize the link between the central government and the Hashd, there are several plans concerning the future of al-Hashd al-Shaabi as an integral part of the Iraqi security forces. There are speculations that some militias of al-Hashd al-Shaabi will be employed as soldiers or policemen within the Interior Ministry or

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[8] Based on the interviews conducted with anonymous sources during the field research in Iraq between December 2014 and March 2015.

Defense Ministry after the ISIS is eliminated. However, there is currently no legal preparation for it. On the contrary, there are plans to integrate al-Hashd al-Shaabi into the Iraqi National Guard, which will provide protection for individual provinces by recruiting its own citizens within the context of the "Haras Watani" law.[9] As a recent move in terms of institutionalization efforts, with the decision of the Council of Ministers, the Hashd came under the authority of the Prime Ministry, although still as an independent unit. Regarding the financial aspect, an exclusive budget for the Hashd will be allocated. This decision by the Council of Ministers was recently approved by the Parliament. According to the proposal and the statements made by MP Faleh Al-Khazali, 122.000 fighters of the Hashd will receive salaries out of a total of 140.000 fighters, a latest estimate also echoed by Falah Al-Fayyad (Alalam 2016; NRT 2016). Still, even if al-Hashd al-Shaabi is integrated into the Iraqi security forces after the ISIS is eliminated, the groups will most likely maintain their individual identity in terms of ideology and politics. They might seek a greater role in regional administrations even if they do not take part in the government, which would in turn cause the central government structure to evolve into one with a looser nature and increased localization.

Al-Hashd al-Shaabi's fight with ISIS, as a fight between two NSAAs with different ideological, organizational, and methodological characteristics, has also had important implications. This fight not only engendered hyper-localized conflicts in several parts of Iraq, but also significantly increased the Hashd's ability to directly control the areas it "liberated" from ISIS. This direct control, obviously poses great challenges for the future of the Iraqi statehood and territorial integrity. The Hashd's human right abuses, especially against the Sunni population of these areas, also threaten Iraqi social cohesion, which is an essential part of achieving stability and security in Iraq with its diverse ethnic and

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[9] Haras Watani is based on the idea that each province should have its local protection forces. One of the biggest reasons for founding Haras Watani is the practices of the Iraqi army and security forces in Sunni regions and their inability to protect the people during the ISIS advance. As it is well known, after ISIS captured Mosul, the Iraqi security forces abandoned their posts and ISIS captured all the Sunni regions without a fight. In addition, after the emergence of al-Hashd al-Shaabi, the Iraqi government brought Haras Watani to the agenda, in order to nullify the reactions of Sunnis. The Iraqi government aims to include al-Hashd al-Shaabi within the umbrella of Haras Watani to appease the opposition; but debates continue regarding the structure and powers of Haras Watani.

religious population. Even though the groups fighting under the banner of the Hashd were formed in order to reinforce the Iraqi security forces, they came to be viewed as the main body carrying out the fight against ISIS and came to acquire the control in the battlefield. Iraqi officials state that these militias, who are at the forefront of the fight against the ISIS, are asked to hand over the land they took from ISIS to the Iraqi Army. Nevertheless, they have become the actual governor of many areas in terms of security and administration, with the support of the government. Relying on the power and influence of the organization, they not only find the chance to keep what they were already doing with a new legal shield, but also to have access to the areas and thus expand their "businesses" in the parts of Iraq mostly inaccessible to them before.

From the leading figures within the Hashd to its close links to Iran as an umbrella militia organization, the links between the Hashd and Iran have the potential to engender regional consequences, too. Abu Mehdi al-Mohandes, who is also a resident in Iran, is claimed to be the contact person between Iraq and Iran and serves in the office of the Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamanei.[10] The role of Iran in these militia forces has been a matter of controversy. Since the operations of the Iraqi government against the ISIS have begun, Qasim Suleimani, commander of the Quds Army of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps, is reported to have taken part in these operations. On the Internet and social media websites, there are photos of Qasim Suleimani taken during operations. It is even claimed that the majority of al-Hashd al-Shaabi operations against the ISIS are supervised by Abu Mehdi al-Mohandes and Qasim Suleimani. In addition, it is known that many Iranian commanders serve in the operations and support the militias in training and operational planning. Iranian officers provide training to al-Hashd al-Shaabi in Iraq. These officers, who are called "military advisors" by Iran, sometimes directly participate in operations. Hadi al-Amiri, the head of the Badr Organization and the commander of the Tikrit operation, declared that approximately one hundred "Iranian advisors" supported the operation for Tikrit (YDH 2015). The fight against ISIS has acquired a regional

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[10] Abu Mehdi al-Mohandes is being held responsible for a series of assaults in Kuwait in the 1980s, with the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps connection. He has close relations with Qasim Suleimani, commander of the Quds Army of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps. He is alleged to have complicity in the bomb attacks against France and American embassies in Kuwait, vehicle bomb attacks against the Amir of Kuwait and plane hijacking.

and international character with ISIS's advance in Iraq and the forma-
tion of al-Hashd al-Shaabi. Meanwhile, Iran has been directly involved in
Iraq, while the USA has declared its anti-ISIS strategy, which envisages
material support for the forces that fight against ISIS. More than 60
countries, including Turkey, have started cooperating in the anti-ISIS
struggle.[11] However, since Qasim Suleimani, commander of the Quds
Army of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps, and other Iranian
commanders have taken part in anti-ISIS operations, controversies have
emerged regarding the relationship between Iraqi politics, the Iranian
influence, al-Hashd al- Shaabi, and the militia groups under its umbrella
(O'Connor 2015). The group's international and regional legitimacy is
overshadowed by Iran's growing influence through material, social, polit-
ical, military, logistical, and operational support (Washington Institute
2015). It is well known that the Sunni Arabs regard al-Hashd al-Shaabi
negatively, partly stemming from Iran's influence over the group.

CONCLUSION: STATE AND NSAAS IN THE IRAQI CONTEXT

This paper has so far tried to discover how the Hashd's existence and rise
have had an impact in terms of first, the Iraqi politics and security, second,
the fight with ISIS and its aftermath, and last but not least, the Iranian
influence in the region. Drawing from brief insights into all three levels, it
would be quite valid to argue that the phenomenon of al-Hashd al-Shaabi
perfectly fits into the conceptualization regarding the NSAAs embraced in
this study. It operates outside state control, whereas the state constantly
keeps trying to explore more effective ways to institutionalize its link
with it; with its military capabilities and operations so far, it challenges the
state's monopoly on the use of legitimate force and with its strict sectarian

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[11] See the Global Coalition's website for more information, www.theglobalcoalition.
org. These are the countries that have joined the coalition: the USA, Albania, Australia,
Austria, Bahrain, Belgium, the UAE, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Canada, Croatia,
Greek Cypriot Administration, Czech Republic, Denmark, Egypt, Estonia, Finland, France,
Georgia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Great Britain, Spain, Iceland, Iraq, Italy, Ireland,
Japan, Jordan, Kosovo, Kuwait, Latvia, Lebanon, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Macedonia,
Moldova, Montenegro, Morocco, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Panama,
Oman, Poland, Portugal, Qatar, South Korea, Romania, Saudi Arabia, Serbia, Singapore,
Slovakia, Somalia, Sweden, Taiwan, Turkey and Ukraine. In addition, the European Union
and the Arab League support the coalition.

ideology, it occasionally endangers the already difficult task of achieving social cohesion or at least the ability to coexist in such a diverse society as Iraq.

Even though there are some attempts at providing an institutional framework in order to prevent these militia forces from engaging in criminal or gang-like activities, many factions in Iraq have worries that al-Hashd al-Shaabi might pose serious problems to an extent that in the post-ISIS era, al-Hashd al-Shaabi might demonstrate numerous parallels to what ISIS had done previously with a different sectarian mindset but quite similar methods. Its fight against ISIS proved not only that the Hashd is an effective actor in this fight, but also that its successes engender localized power structures, where provinces are controlled by the Hashd and where the central government's political power is challenged. Plus, without a convincing and comprehensive solution to the institutionalization problem, the Hashd's military advances question the state's monopoly of the legitimate use of force, a key pillar of the modern statehood. For now, Haider al-Abadi has been unable to exert his control upon al-Hashd al-Shaabi, despite his efforts. There are also vociferous concerns in Iraq regarding efforts to control al-Hashd al-Shaabi by Nouri al-Maliki, former Prime Minister, for his own goals. The Hashd's rhetoric and human rights abuses against the Sunni population of the places it controlled also has the potential to further inflame an already fragile relationship between the Sunni and Shi'a of Iraq. It does not seem possible to gain legitimacy for al-Hashd al-Shaabi in the eyes of the Sunni people considering the groups' previous sectarian human rights abuses (Haddad 2015; Global Security 2016; IBT 2015; Human Rights Watch 2015a, b; Rudaw 2016). Moreover, as it was mentioned earlier, even though al-Hashd al-Shaabi seems to be an integrated entity that fights against ISIS, in battlegrounds, each group carries its own banner and obeys its own commander. It is likely that conflicts will arise from within al-Hashd al-Shaabi, too. The Iranian link, whereas providing Iran with a highly effective military tool on the ground, significantly increases the Iranian leverage over Iraq and possibly in the future, Syria. Further doing so in a region where Iran is already a key player would have direct impacts on the regional power dynamics, too.

All in all, the case of the Hashd reveals the Iraqi state mechanism's realist approach to its military strength and the difficulties it experiences throughout its campaign against ISIS. Rather than challenging an actor that challenges the state's monopoly on the use of force, the state permits

it to do this more freely and even with encouragement, calculating the actor to be a more effective tool. The relationship between the Hashd and Iraqi government, however, carries a high risk of damaging its state-hood even while providing it with a higher chance of survival. The state makes a serious sacrifice in terms of its authority over the interest groups on its soil as well as jeopardizing centralization efforts. This relationship with the state and an NSAA is also noteworthy since the state does not respond to the emergence of an NSAA with force and leverage (as real-ists would expect), to bargain with it (the key institutionalist expectation) or try to persuade it or diffuse its norms (as constructivist would argue) (Hoffman and Schneckener 2011: 608). Still, the Hashd itself is a clear case of how an NSAA can "hijack" the whole or some portion of the state's area of control once the state suffers from failed structures, key weaknesses and/or if that particular state has to rely on a certain NSAA in order to consolidate its own security and stability. In order to man-age this relationship in a way that does not threaten the central govern-ment's sovereignty, territorial integrity, social cohesion, and monopoly of the legitimate use of force, especially in the post-ISIS period, there seems to be further initiatives. Without searching out a permanent and com-prehensive institutionalized solution to the question of the future of the Hashd and its relationship with the state, a strong and stable state mecha-nism will be subject to constant challenges. The Hashd or similar groups might well be needed in an environment which provides fertile ground for the development of other NSAAs, coupled with a questionable mili-tary capability to deal with them, as in the case of ISIS.

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Authors' Biography

Bilgay Duman is currently undertaking his doctoral study at the Department of International Relations (Ph.D) in Abant İzzet Baysal University since 2011. He wrote his postgraduate thesis on "The Turkmens and Kirkuk in post-Saddam Period". His articles and interviews have been published in various media agencies

and organizations, on national and international press. In addition to a great number of conferences he attended, he has frequently carried out field studies in the Middle East, and he has also taken part in international watchdog teams and served as a UN electoral watchdog during the elections in Iraq and Afghanistan. He continues to serve as a Middle East Specialist in ORSAM.

Göktuğ Sönmez received his bachelor's degree in international relations at Bilkent University, his master's degree in international relations at London School of Economics (LSE). He received his PhD at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London. His research areas are international relations theory, Turkish foreign policy, energy politics, and radicalization and violent extremism. He works as a visiting researcher at the Security Studies Program at ORSAM.

New Methods in Old Bottles:
The Strategy of Non-State Armed Actors
in the Middle East

Operationalizing the Vision of Building a New Caliphate: From Al-Qaeda to the Islamic State (IS)

Farhad Rezaei

INTRODUCTION

From the inception of nuclear age, scholars, intelligence experts, and policy makers have engaged in a robust debate about how to prevent nuclear terrorism. The emergence of jihadi groups which are known to search for nuclear and radiological (NR) material, and growing of the supply side NR material from inchoate attempts at smuggling to a more organized market in fissile and radiological material, has given the debate a tone of urgency. This combination of factors has arguably increased the likelihood of a spectacular attack by terror groups in the not-so-distant future.

While there is a broad consensus that such an onslaught is forthcoming, most of it expressed in generalized statements, often of a declaratory nature. The demand side, which covers the identity and the operational profile of the putative violent non-state armed group jihadi terror groups, the so-called end-users, has received less scrutiny with most devoted to Al-Qaida. There is relatively little research that links the supply and demand sides of

F. Rezaei (✉)
Center for Iranian Studies, Ankara, Turkey
e-mail: farhadrezaei79@gmail.com

the complex process through which a terror group would need to traverse to operationalize its intention to use NR means as a terror force multiplier.

Using the emergent methodology of open source intelligence (OSI), this research will fill the knowledge by providing a rigorous analysis of this process. A key hypothesis of this work is that violent non-state armed groups are eager to use a NR weapon to expedite the new Caliphate because it provides an extreme form of force multiplier. The related hypothesis is that a maturing market in illicit materials increases the chances for the acquisition of such materials and fabrication of NR weapon by the violent non-state armed group, so that they can operationalize their vision of building a new Caliphate.

The paper is the first of its kind, attempts to provide a systemic analysis of the prospects of jihadists to create a conflagration with the West via a NR attack. While there is a consensus that theological-strategic doctrine of the groups calls for a global conflict to expedite the new Caliphate, there is a little understanding about the actual mechanics and the economics of such an endeavor. By filling some critical gaps in the understanding of the theological-strategic doctrine of these groups, the article intends to provide a better understanding of the ways in which the jihadists can operationalize their vision of building a new Caliphate. A large-scale war with the West is an essential part of their plan, and a NR attack is, in their estimation, the only way to get the West mobilized.

A Nuclear and Radiological Attack: A Real Game Changer

In one of the ironies of history, the end of the Cold War had diminished the chance of an all-out nuclear war, but increased the odds of a nuclear or radiological terror attack. As Benjamin Schwartz, a former official in the Department of Defense put it: "Today, the risk of a single atomic bomb detonating in a city like Dubai, New York, Singapore, or Washington, D.C. is higher than at any point in history." The reason for this assessment is based on a straightforward calculation: A nuclear device is the ultimate force multiplier for radical terror groups while chemical and biological attacks are difficult to manage and are considered not "spectacular" enough (Schwartz 2012, pp. 731–732).

This calculus did not escape policy makers and scientists in charge of nuclear issues. As early as the 1960s, concerns were raised about proliferation to non-state actors. Having described some of these fears, Graham

Allison noted: "There is no particular reason that the maker [of the device] need to be a nation. Smaller units could do it—groups of people with a common purpose or a common enemy" (Allison 2005, pp. 1, 8).

Though not always publicized, the threat of a handful of individuals acquiring sufficient materials to perpetuate an attack in densely populated areas has preoccupied the highest level of the US government and the intelligence community for decades. But anxiety about such a scenario intensified after September 9/11. When immediately after the attack a source codenamed Dragonfly informed American intelligence that al-Qaeda had smuggled a nuclear device into the USA, National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice described it as a "problem from hell," evoking a previous comment referring to the "sum of all our fears" (Schwartz 2012, p. 733). Graham Allison, a renowned scholar who served as an Assistant Secretary of Defense for Policy in the Clinton administration, addressed the issue in *Nuclear Terrorism: The Ultimate Preventable Catastrophe*. The 2004 book concluded that a nuclear catastrophe can be averted by implementing the Three Noes—no "lose nukes," "no new nascent nukes," and "no new nuclear weapon states." Should the Three Noes be breached, Allison put the probability of a nuclear terror attack between "inevitable" and "highly likely" (Allison 2005, pp. 1, 8).

Though Allison was confident that the Three Noes were attainable, a few years later, Benjamin Schwartz, a former official in the Department of Defense, noted that Allison's Three Noes turned into three Yeses, making a spectacular attack by "malign [terror] actors" plausible: "Today, the risk of a single atomic bomb detonating in a city like Dubai, New York, Singapore, or Washington, D.C. is higher than at any point in history" (Schwartz 2012, pp. 732, 1032, 1043).

Both Presidents George W. Bush and Baraka Obama emphasized that nuclear weapons in the hand of terrorists were the single most important security threat facing the nation. In his 2009 address, Obama called a nuclear or radiological terror attack a "game changer, the single most important national security threat that we face." It would "destabilize our security, our economies, and our very way of life" (The White House Office of the Press Secretary 2009). The 2010 Nuclear Review Posture listed nuclear and radiological terror along with the more traditional security challenges. The changing threat assessment prompted another analyst to note that a terrorist Armageddon, once a domain of fantastic apocalyptic literature, "is now the subject of prediction of scientists" (U.S. Department of Defense 2010; Schwartz 2012, p. 732; Wuthnow 2010, s. 8). Still,

there is considerable amount of disagreement on the scope and impact of such an attack. The reason for different estimates stems from the technological complexity of nuclear and radiologic terror weapons.

The Science of Nuclear and Radiological Weapons

Nuclear scientists point out that an attack featuring a quantity of either highly enriched uranium (HEU) or plutonium (Pu) in a populated area should be considered catastrophic. Two variants of the so-called improvised nuclear device (IND) can be used. The first, a crude IND, is essentially modeled on the bombs dropped on Japan in 1945. It is a gun-type device that was used in Hiroshima—a projectile made of subcritical fissile uranium is fired rapidly into a target that contains another subcritical mass of fissile uranium. The gun design is simple and easy to fabricate, but the critical mass of uranium needed is relatively large. The second type of a crude IND is based on the implosion method used in the Nagasaki bomb whereby a sphere filled with either HEU or Pu is compressed by a converging shock wave resulting from the detonation of a surrounding layer of high explosive.

Quiet clearly, the two methods suggest some crucial trade-offs for the would-be terrorists. But the amount of material needed to start a reaction is significant and, together with the assembly mechanism, would result in a large and clumsy device weighing up to one ton. Though the nuclear reflectors can lower the weight of the bare minimal amount of fissile material, their fabrication is not trivial. Reflectors made of beryllium are considered most efficient, but they are not available in the form needed and they are difficult to adapt. The plutonium core assembly is more maneuverable, but is considered probably beyond the skills of terrorist end-users.

A sophisticated IND is designed to overcome the problems inherent in positioning a crude device. Its small size—fabricated with a diameter of about 1–2 ft and a weight of about one hundred to a few hundred pounds—makes it readily transportable in the trunk of a standard car. Technical advances since 1945, including reduction in size and weight, as well as increase in yield, have made the sophisticated design possible. Nevertheless, the type of skills needed for the fabrication of a sophisticated model is judged to pose a barrier for would-be terrorists. Put in statistical terms, the probability of deploying such a device is not high at present, but cannot be ruled out.

Given these odds, terror groups may want to utilize radiological materials. There is a large selection of radioactive isotopes, but only a few are good candidates for terror use: cobalt-60 (60Co), strontium-90 (90Sr), yttrium-90 (Y90), cesium-137 (137Cs), iridium-192 (192Ir), radium-226; (226Ra), and plutonium-238 (238Pu).

Two types of radiological terror attacks are possible. The simple radiological device (SRD) involves placing a radioactive material in a public place. This so-called discrete source method calls for either placing a radiological material in a solvent to create an aerosol or burning it to trigger vaporization. The second, known as a radiological dispersal device (RDD) or "dirty bomb" uses conventional explosives to disperse radiological material. Since discrete source attacks are stealthy enough to avoid detection at an early stage, large numbers of unwitting members of the public can ingest or inhale the material.

Projections of the consequences of a real attack were significantly more ominous. In 2002, the Federation of American Scientists (FAS) approximated the impact of three dirty bombs using different materials in different locations. For instance, calculations indicated that a cobalt dirty bomb detonated in one spot in Manhattan would contaminate the entire borough for years (Allison 2005, pp. 57–58; Federation of American Scientists 2002).

This specific type of a scenario, not to mention the even more severe impact of an IND, has preoccupied the highest level of US government and the intelligence community. Recalling his tenure as the CIA Chief, George Tenet wrote that "one [terrorist] mushroom cloud would change history." In his 2010 address, President Barack Obama called nuclear terrorism "the single most important national security threat that we face." It would "destabilize our security, our economies, and our very way of life" (Tenet 2007, p. 280; Allison, A Failure to Imagine the Worst 2010).

While the problem has been well articulated, preventing terrorists from shopping for illicit material is difficult. In fact, in spite of decades of US efforts to institute safeguards, the supply side of the terror equation has actually expanded. In 2013, David Albright, the Head of the Institute for Science and International Security (ISIS) asserted that "the scourge of illicit nuclear trade appears to be worsening and if left unchecked, it could emerge as one of the most significant obstacles to combating the future spread of nuclear weapons" (Albright et al. 2013).

The Supply Side of NR Materials: Progress Toward a Mature Market

Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, a haphazard business in stolen nuclear materials had emerged. The initial round involved mostly insiders desperate to augment their income or small-time local operators who searched for a new businessmen opportunity.

Still, the data includes only incidents where diversion of illicit materials was intercepted, either in a sting operation or serendipitously. Some observers suggest that the lists represent only about 20% of all probable illicit traffic, but the true number is impossible to calculate.[1] More worrisome, the decline in the number of cases reported may merely indicate the more sophisticated operations of a maturing market. A large body of research indicates that in the past 2 decades a "third generation of criminal gangs … of increasing power and complexity" has incorporated terror supplies into their more traditional business such as drugs, counterfeits, and human trafficking. In a world where boundaries between criminal syndicates and terrorists became dangerously blurred, "drug runners and terrorists became partners in crime." In the realm of nuclear and radiological smuggling, these global networks bring together "suppliers, intermediaries and end-users." As Tenet famously observed, "In the current market place if you have a hundred million dollars, you can be your own nuclear power" (Dorsch and Schweitzer 1998, pp. 165–194; Naim 2005, p. 121; Hard 2003, pp. 822–844; Stricker 2010, pp. 85–106).

While the terror-criminal nexus is global in scope, certain regional hubs hold a particular attraction for the Islamist groups. Research indicates that three nodes, in particular, offer supply side advantages—the South Asian connection, the North Caucuses connection, and the Turkish connection.

Centered on Pakistan, the South Asian node has played an important part in helping nuclear proliferators. The "father" of the Pakistani bomb, Abdul Qadeer Khan who created the so-called nuclear bazaar and some even more ideologically oriented like Chaudhry Abdulla Majid, a nuclear expert at Pakistan's Institute of Nuclear Science and Technology, and Sultan Bashiruddin Mahmood, a high level official in the Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission (PAEC) and a devout Muslim highly popular for his scientific interpretation of the Koran, travelled to Afghanistan

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[1] The author's efforts to get an answer from the database managers have failed.

for meeting with al-Qaeda officials to discuss a nuclear device to create a weapon for the Ummah to deter Western powers and change the international system to reflect the renewed greatness of Islam.

More than a decade later, anxiety over the Pakistani program has hardly subsided. The country boasts one of the world's fastest-growing arsenals, with weapons stored on bases and in facilities spread across the country (Dalton and Krepon 2015). To prevent an American "denuclearization" action and possible sabotage and theft by others, the Pakistani authorities have frequently rotated nuclear weapons and components either by helicopters or by vehicles, augmenting the traffic generated by routine movements for maintenance and upgrades. Instead of using armored and well-defended convoys, the strategic plans division (SPD) has preferred the subterfuge method whereby components are moved in civilian-style vehicles vans on congested and dangerous roads without noticeable defenses (Goldberg and Ambinder 2011; Kugelman 2014).

In addition, Pakistan had apparently embarked on the production of tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs)—small assemblies designed to help in a conventional war against a numerically overwhelming enemy. Because of their compact size and sophisticated assembly, TNWs are a prize choice for nuclear terrorists (Kugelman 2014). To make matters worse, nuclear weapons belonging to Pakistan are not equipped with standard permissive action links (PALs)—electronic or mechanical devices to protect against unauthorized use (Corr 2005, pp. 127–147; Fitzpatrick 2014).

Poised to take advantage of the chaotic and poorly secured nuclear arsenal are the South Asia criminals—terror groups. The currently banned Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), which was behind the Mumbai attack in 2008, has sought to obtain fissile material, according to the Nuclear Threat Initiative (Qudrat Newspaper 2015).

Despite the fact that the USA invested $100 million in improving nuclear defenses, future prospects are not entirely clear. Pakistan is a fragile country whose central government has struggled to project its control over large swaths of territory. The military and, especially, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) are assumed to be infiltrated by Islamist sympathizers. The possibility that a "new" Khan or Mahmood would emerge within the nuclear establishment cannot be ruled out, and the prospect of an "inside job" is high on the list of dangers. Pointing to a truly nightmarish scenario, some observers warn that Pakistan may disintegrate and its central authority vanishes, opening the nuclear stockpile for grabs (Fitzpatrick 2014; Cohen 2011; Goldberg and Ambinder 2011).

Next in line is the North Caucasus node where terror has intersected with the criminal enterprise in a variety of ways. According to newly published research, in the conflict zones of Chechnya, Abkhazia, and North Ossetia conditions for generating the terror-crime nexus were particularly fertile. Having no resources or outside support, the insurgency groups had to rely on drug smuggling and other illicit activities, an endeavor greatly helped by the evaporation of law and order. Geographical proximity to the Russian Mafia, a leading criminal player, turned the region into a high-profile route in nuclear and radiological trade. By all accounts, criminal syndicates have been behind the thefts of fissile and radiological materials in Russia and the former Soviet Republics. Strong organized crime groups in Russia, Central Asia, and the Caucasus have established sophisticated mechanisms for smuggling weapons and drugs that could be simply adapted to trafficking of nuclear and other radioactive material. Having experience in avoiding detection, knowledge of safe routes, protection by corrupt officials, and established infrastructures helps organized crime groups in smuggling of nuclear and radiological material (Cornell and Jonsson, Conflict, Crime, and the State in Post-Communist Communist Eurasia 2014; Lee 1999, p. 78).

The Chechen Islamists have repeatedly publicized their interest in acquiring fissile or radiological materials. In November 1995, in an apparent publicity stunt, Shamil Basayev phoned a TV station to announce a canister with cesium left in Ismailovsky Park in Moscow. In September 1999, Islamist fighters associated with the Ibn al Khattab faction attempted to steal a container of nuclear waste material from the Radon Special Combine factory in Grozny. In another find, the Khattab forces came upon a burial place of cesium and cobalt isotopes and, in October 1999, they took possession of a storage container with medium to low quality nuclear waste (Bodansky 2008).

Network analysis indicates that the Chechen Islamists have forged a number of direct paths to the Middle East. In the last few years, the local Salafi Jamaats became radicalized, paving the way for close relations with key regional players. In addition, the split within the Chechen-based Jaish al Muhajireen wal Ansar (JMA) in Syria forced some 500–800 fighters under the command of Amir *Salahuddin Shishani* and the military emir Abdul Karim Krymsky to join ISIS. Although Russia declared ISIS to be criminal group in February 2015, there is no evidence to suggest that Moscow has tried to prevent CE militants from traveling to the Middle East (Voennoi Obozrevatel 2015; Sagramaso 2012, pp. 561–595).

With its well-established drug smuggling networks, the Turkish node offers easy access to would-be NR shoppers. Between 1993 and 2006, Turkish authorities recorded 75 seizures of radioactive materials including 17 kg and 142 g of weapon grade uranium, four glass tubes containing 500 g of cesium-137, one tube and 291 g americium, unspecified amounts of antinomy, bismuth, and 1856 g of scandium (International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)). The records of the year 2009 shows six cases of smuggling that founded nuclear, radioactive, chemical, and biological materials, as well as selenium, copper iodide, and mercury with industrial usage (Radikal 2010).

On June 19, 2015, state-run *Anadolu News Agency* reported the arrest of two Georgian citizens who tried to enter a crossing in northeastern Turkey, carried 1.24 kg of cesium in two glass tubes and 48.23 g of mercury-like substance in six tubes valued at $2.5 million (Hurriyet).

Finally, there are NR shopping opportunities outside the three nodes. Mothballed nuclear project in Africa is one possible venue. A mysterious break into Pelindaba, a South African storage facility for its abandoned nuclear program, on November 8, 2007, attracted world attention. The four attackers were described as "technically sophisticated"; they fled after being discovered, but were never apprehended.

Libya gave up its nuclear program in 2003, but after Muammar Gaddafi was killed in October 2011, some 6400 barrels of yellowcake uranium were discovered near his stronghold of Sabha. According to a local militia commander, the security vacuum in the country has attracted the attention of ISIS and al-Qaeda seeking to acquire nuclear materials (Akhbar Libya).

Theft of radiological material provides another opportunity. According to the IAEA, as of December 2013, a total of 2477 incidents were reported to the IAEA by participating states. Of those 2477, 424 incidents were unauthorized possession and related criminal activities, attempts to illegally trade or use of nuclear material or radioactive sources. There were 664 reported incidents involving the theft or loss of nuclear or other radioactive materials and a total of 1337 cases involving other unauthorized activities, including the unauthorized disposal of radioactive materials or discovery of uncontrolled sources (IAEA 2014). According to IAEA, 146 cases of missing or unauthorized use of nuclear and radioactive material were reported to the agency in 2013 with similar numbers have gone missing in 2014 and 2015 (IAEA 2014).

But these numbers may be skewed upwards because of the current methods or recording the incidents, according to Matthew Bunn, an expert

in nuclear terrorism at Harvard University. Bunn noted that "there are about 20 cases of smuggling of plutonium or HEU that are well-documented in the public record." He argued that "there are many hundreds of cases involving radioactive materials, but these are not well-sorted into ones of real significance" (Bunn 2015).

Overall, stockpiles of weapon grade uranium are better guarded today, but not beyond the reach of putative terrorists who may be able to avail themselves of some of the former Soviet HEU that went missing and have not being recovered (Zaitseva and Steinhäusler 2014). The record of the Islamist terror groups demonstrates their deep commitment to create an Armageddon style event. As George Tenet put it, "the terrorist groups are endlessly patient" in their desire to change history (Tenet 2007, p. 280).

The End-Users: Violent Non-state Armed Group

Compared to the large body of literature on the rationale underlying state proliferators, there is very little theoretically oriented research on the motives of non-state players such as terror groups to seek nuclear or radiological weapons. As indicated, terror actors, like states, would like to use NR as the ultimate force multipliers to achieve their goals. Since nuclear forensics is hardly foolproof, the prospect of escaping attribution and thus retribution adds to the allure of such weapons. In this sense, terror end-users can be conceptualized as rational players akin to state proliferator.

But if the means are within the parameters of a rational calculus, the goals of the jihadi terror actors offer a range of difficult to classify scenarios. On the one end of the spectrum, terrorists could use a NR event to cause mass casualties, create widespread economic havoc, and inflict profound psychological trauma on the target population. On the other end, some terror players have considerate a spectacular attack as an ideal way to precipitate an Armageddon.

AL-QAEDA

Fouad Hussein, who interviewed a number of Islamists imprisoned in Jordan in the late 1990s, including Abu Musab al Zarqawi, wrote a book about al-Qaeda's blueprint for restoring the Caliphate. Hussein revealed a seven-stage path toward the "definitive victory," that is the Caliphate by 2020. According to al Zarqawi and his colleagues, by that time the

rest of the world would be so beaten down by "Muslim power" that the Caliphate would be a resounding success (Hussein 2005).

Abu Musab al-Suri (aka Mustafa bin Abd al-Qadir Setmarian Nassar) a Syrian Islamist and a key leader and strategist of the global jihadist movement offered a similar postulate. In his book, *The Call for a Worldwide Islamic Resistance*, al-Suri discussed jihad for the twenty-first century. As one commentator put it, al-Suri wanted to "bring about the largest number of human and material casualties possible for America and its allies, a plan that involved jihadist obtaining WMD" (Suri 2004, 2002, p. 383; Islamist Movements 2014).

Osama bin Laden's well-known efforts to procure nuclear and other weapons of mass destructions as a way to continue the next stage of global jihad followed al-Suri's strategy. Al-Qaeda tried to buy uranium from South Africa, fabricate its own devices, and even look for "off the shelf" products. It reportedly negotiated with the Chechen mafia to buy tactical nukes and with Russian crime figures to obtain the material for a radiological bomb (Lee 2006, pp. 25–32). In August 2001, Bin Laden met with Mahmood and Majeed to ask for help in assembling a nuclear or radiological device.

In 2002, Jose Padilla, an American convert to Islam known as Abdullah al-Muhajir, was arrested for planning a radiological attack. Before returning to the USA, Padilla spent time in al-Qaeda camps in Afghanistan and Pakistan where he was allegedly trained in building a dirty bomb. In 2005, the British terrorist and al-Qaeda member Dhiren Barot started his training with al-Qaeda to carry out terror strikes, including an alleged radiological attack (Risen and Shenon 2002; Gardham 2006).

Still, American intelligence analysts believed that even in hiding, bin Laden was highly keen in carrying out a truly spectacular attack. In 2010, Mowatt-Larsen, by then a fellow at the Belfer Center at Harvard University warned that al-Qaeda did not abandon its goal of a mass event (Mowatt-Larssen 2010; Kimery 2010). There is no doubt that Ayman al Zawahiri who took over when bin Laden was killed in May 2011 would have liked to deploy a nuclear or radiological device in order to outshine 9/11. All the more, so because by that time al-Qaeda had faced tough competition over recruits and resources from its two spin-offs: al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Indeed, the newer and more aggressive groups seemed to be better positioned to carry out the NR mandate.

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)

Formed in January 2009 through the merger of al-Qaeda in Yemen and al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia, AQAP considered highly active and dangerous, grew from 200–300 fighters in 2009 to more than 1500 in 2015 (Alarabiya 2015). Virtually, all of the group's doctrine was drawn from the same theoretical writings which guided al-Qaeda. Abu Musab al-Suri's writings were said to influence Anwar al-Awlaki, an American jihadist, who became a prominent leader of the group after returning to Yemen in 2004.

From the outset, AQAP demonstrated technological proficiency. Two sophisticated attempts by AQAP on October 29, 2010, and May 2012 to blow up airplanes demonstrated a high level of engineering and organizational talent. In both incidents, Anwar al-Awlaki was behind the bombing attempts, and the bombs were constructed by the skilled bomb maker Ibrahim Hassan al-Asiri (Schmitt and Shane 2012; Alomanaa 2014; Dodd et al. 2010; The Telegraph 2010).

AQAP published step-by-step instructions on a do-it-yourself plan to make a dirty bomb on its Internet site named *Alma'sadah Al-Jihadiah.* A member of the group known as the Mujahid shaykh Abu Al-Harith Al-Sawahiri provided a step-by-step instruction for making a dirty bomb, starting from tear gas canisters to higher-grade bombs, including those using uranium, on the site. The site has also posted an excerpt form of a fatwa justifying the killing of foreigners in the Muslim countries (Al-Matrafi 2005).

To avert such danger, the USA launched a sustained counterterror campaign against AQPA. Al-Awlaki and many top leaders such as Nasir al-Wuhayshi, Said Ali al-Shihri, Ibrahim al-Rubaysh, Nasser bin Ali al-Ansi, and Harith bin Ghazi al-Nadhari were killed in drone strikes, but Ibrahim Asiri is still on the loose. He was said to be training others to create a strong technical cadre that would not only augment AQAP's bomb making effort, but also take his place in case of his death (Yemen Street 2014).

The growing civil war in Yemen has complicated counterterrorism operations and taken the pressure off the AQAP. The chaos may give AQAP another opening, a chance to ramp up terrorist plotting against the West, while also asserting itself as the defender of Sunni Muslims across Yemen. The vacuum allowed AQAP to grab territory and to focus on rebuilding its strength to restart its terror operations around the world. Additionally, Yemen's civil war could be the ideal theater where a deadly and dangerous alliance between al-Qaeda and ISIS may emerge.

Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)

Originally known as al-Qaeda in Iraq, the franchise was headed by Abu Musab al Zarqawi who had little fealty to al-Qaeda. While in prison in Jordan, al Zarqawi, as noted, nourished a more ambitious, even apocalyptical vision for the jihadi movement. Like the Syrian revivalist, al Zarqawi wanted to establish a Caliphate in the Middle East first and then invite jihadist fighters from around the world to fight the infidels (Hashim 2014, pp. 1–20).

After the American invasion in 2003, al Zarqawi moved to Iraq where as the Head of al-Qaeda in Iraq, he staged a series of highly brutal attacks against American forces and Shi'i alike. Abu Muhammad al Maqdisi, his former mentor, and bin Laden denounced al Zarqawi for his spectacular acts of terror, especially against the Shi'i, granting him to title of the Emir of Iraq. American forces killed al Zarqawi in 2006, and his successor, Abu Omar al-Baghdadi declared himself to be the Emir of the Islamic State of Iraq (Islamist-Movements 2015).

Abu Omar was killed in an American strike in 2010, paving the way for Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi al-Husseini al-Hashimi al-Qurashi (Ibrahim Awad Ibrahim al-Badri) to assume the leadership of al-Qaeda in Iraq. Taking advantage of the civil war in Syria, al-Baghdadi expanded operations into Syria, where, in 2013, he announced the founding of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) also known as the Arabic name Daesh (Al-Awsat 2009).

Under al-Baghdadi, ISIS moved closer to fulfilling its plan of a spectacular attack using WMD, especially nuclear and radiological ones. At the theological level, through al Zarqawi, al-Baghdadi was in tune with the Islamist revivalists who sought to create a Caliphate and who proclaimed the coming apocalypse. According to the prophetic methodology of the Caliphate, the final Armageddon—like battle between the armies of Rome, a reference to Western powers, led by the anti-Messiah, and the jihadists would be fought in Dabiq, in northern Syria, conveniently located in ISIS territory (McCants 2015).

Apocalypse aside, violence against the West was considered an essential part of ISIS strategic thinking, an idea first articulated by Abu Bakr Naji, author of the book *Idārat at-Tawaḥḥuš: Akhṭar marḥalah satamurru bihā l 'ummah* which provided a strategy that jihadists could follow to create a new Islamic caliphate. Naji urged to use extravagant violence to manage the affairs of the Islamist state. The book, dubbed the Islamist Mein Kampf, was very popular among ISIS leaders who have

applied it to daily conduct in the territories under their control. But Naji also advised al-Baghdadi and his colleagues to attack the West to draw it into a counteroffensive in a wide swath of Muslim land, a conflagration expected to generate masses of jihadi volunteers. But al-Baghdadi was under no illusion that small-scale terror would provoke the West since, as al-Suri had alleged, even bin Laden's 9/11 attack was not big enough to trigger a war between the civilizations. In any event, al-Baghdadi and the top leaders became convinced that nothing short of a NR event would befit the Caliphate (Suri 2004; Naji 2004).

Writings in the ISIS magazine *Dabiq*, named after the location of the Islamist Armageddon, reflected this thinking. For instance, an article "The Perfect Storm," apparently written by the captive journalist John Cantlie in May 2015, declared that ISIS had every intention of striking the USA on a grand scale using a nuclear device or some other unspecified devastating means. Cantlie added that the onslaught against America will surpass all "the attacks of the past" (Cantlie 2015, pp. 74–79). According to Ahmad Rashidi, a British medical student who spent time with ISIS before escaping "ISIS is planning something bigger than 9/11" … they want to do something more, better than the World Trade Center" (Chandler 2015). Indeed, Abdullah Ahmed al-Meshedani, a member of the highly secretive six-man war cabinet, issued a manifesto proclaiming weapons of mass destruction to be a high priority for ISIS. The document, seized by a unit of Iraqi Special Forces in March 2014, was apparently distributed among top commanders to familiarize them with the ISIS NR doctrine (Amoore and Kerbaj 2014).

Much as ISIS was clearly articulated the theology of a spectacular conflagration, its plans to obtain the necessary weapons have been quite hazy. Having some WMD expertise, Haji Bakr (Samir Abd Muhammad al-Khleifawi), a former colonel in the Iraqi army who was imprisoned in Camp Bucca with many of the future ISIS leaders, sets up a special unit for procuring and fabricating WMD. But Bakr was killed in January 2014 by a rival group. His unit has continued to operate under conditions of extreme secrecy (Naji 2015; Ali Mandi 2015).

Compared to its "sister" organizations, ISIS has been well positioned to implement its apocalyptical plans. After occupying Mosul, ISIS confiscated 40 kg of law enriched uranium (LEU) from Mosul University in July 2014. While LEU is not suitable for an IND per se, ISIS-allied Web sites claimed that the Islamic State has used the material to construct a dirty bomb. ISIS jihadists engaged in an online discussion about

the destructive power of the alleged bomb and the devastation it would wreak on London.

Pakistan, a top destination in the network of nuclear smuggling, has received a lot of attention from the organization. The Pakistani media reported that a group of ten commanders from ISIS visited Baluchistan to seek an alliance with Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Baloch freedom movement. The commanders arrived a few weeks after Maulana Fazlullah chief of a group of TTP voiced support for the Islamic State and swore allegiance to its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (Nawaiwaqt 2014).

The nuclear manifesto offered a much more ambitious but an unrealistic procurement plan. Al-Meshedani wanted to buy nuclear weapons from Russia in exchange for control of the oil fields in Iraq. Alternatively, he urged its members to plan for war with Iran to obtain Tehran's nuclear secrets (The Economic Times 2014).

Whatever strategy ISIS would use to obtain its doomsday weapon, "The Perfect Storm" article and other sources indicate that the organization has amassed a considerable fortune of approximately 2 billion dollars. According to Cantlie, ISIS has more than enough resources to purchase nuclear weapons, fissile, or radiological materials from traffickers or corrupt officials in Pakistan or elsewhere" (Johnston 2014; Shafaqna 2014; BBC 2015; Cantlie 2015). Even after a new round of intensive Western attacks on the self-proclaimed Caliphate spurred by the November 14, 2015, terror attack in Paris, ISIS is still considered a highly serious terror player. Both French intelligence sources and a secret British intelligence report noted unspecified ISIS threat of a dirty bomb, in addition to chemical and possibly biological attacks (McKeown 2015; Withnall 2015). For instance, Jamie Shea, deputy assistant secretary general for emerging security threats at NATO, has warned that there is a "justified concern" that jihadists are trying to attain chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear weapons and try to develop new methods of evading security measures such as bombs implanted in human bodies and hacking driverless cars to launch attacks in Europe (Whitehead 2016).

According to the official, the group may be splitting in two, with one part trying to protect the caliphate and the other concentrating on setting up terror cells in Europe (Whitehead 2016). It may call upon one of its European cells to fabricate a "dirty bomb" to launch an attack. Evidence demonstrates that the group can operationalize a nuclear attach if they left unchecked. For example, after the Brussels attacks, the jihadists secretly filmed a senior Belgian nuclear industry official outside his

home, fueling fears they were looking at ways of how to obtain such sub-stances (Middleton 2016).

Conclusion

The analysis of the writings of the jihadist revivalists leaves little doubt that a nuclear or radiological attack on a Western city, preferably in the USA, is an essential part of the Caliphate project. More troubling, NR terror is not conceived as an eschatological event, but a rational strat-egy to provoke a massive Western retaliation followed by a recruitment bonanza. As the theologians who inspired ISIS see it, the multitudes of Islamist fighters would then face the West in apocalyptical battle of Dabiq.

AQAP and ISIS, in particular, have shown keen interest in perpetu-ating a spectacular attack which could overshadow 9/11 by a signifi-cant magnitude. Undoubtedly, a stolen "off the shelf" device or one manufactured by a sympathetic nuclear scientist like A.Q. Khan would have been ideal for a mega event. Barring such a low probability event, homegrown manufacturing is apparently the most realistic route. Given these high technological barriers, Islamist terrorists would probably do better in assembling a radiological device. Radiological materials are easier to obtain and have been trafficked along the networking nodes of Southeast Asia and North Caucasus. Whether a dirty bomb would satisfy the requirement for a spectacular mass attack is not clear, though "the Perfect Storm" article seems to allow for such a tactic. It is probably safe to assume that the terror groups have not made a final decision on the issue.

With solid intelligence on the nuclear and radiological subject less than optimal, it is hard to discern the progress made on the NR pro-gram, let alone provide a firm timework. A stringent intelligence effort is needed to analyze and prevent nuclear terrorism, arguably the defining threat of the twenty-first century.

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Author Biography

Dr. Farhad Rezaei is research fellow at Center for Iranian Studies (IRAM) in Ankara, Turkey, where his research focuses on Iran's foreign policy. He is the author of *Iran's Nuclear Program: A Study in Proliferation and Rollback* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016). His writings have appeared in *The National Interest, Middle East Policy, British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, Insight Turkey, Journal of International Affairs* and *Asian Affairs* among others. In addition to Iran's nuclear program, his forthcoming book is *Iran, Israel and the United States: The Politics of Counter-proliferation Intelligence.*

The Making of European Foreign Fighters: Identity, Social Media and Virtual Radicalization

Tuncay Kardaş and Ömer Behram Özdemir

Introduction: The Uncharted Territory of Foreign Fighters

United Nations put the number of foreign fighters who joined the civil war in Syria around 30,000 (*Politico,* May 2016). For instance, according to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), militants in Iraq and Syria in 2014 had about 20,000–31,500 fighters on the ground, 2500 of which are foreign fighters joined from major Western European countries (Web 1 2014) while about a dozen Americans are known to be fighting in Syria (Web 2 2014) and several hundred are believed to have joined from Russia (Web 3 2014). Speaking to mollify the public anger at the beheadings of two American journalists at a UNSC meeting he presided, Obama claimed that 'Our intelligence agencies estimate

T. Kardaş (✉) · Ö.B. Özdemir
Sakarya University, Serdivan, Turkey
e-mail: tuncaykardas@hotmail.com

Ö.B. Özdemir
e-mail: omerbehram@gmail.com

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that more than 15,000 foreign fighters from more than 80 nations have traveled to Syria. Many have joined terrorist organizations such as al Qaeda's affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra (which is now rebranded as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and cut ties with al-Qaeda), and IS,[1] which now threatens people across Syria and Iraq' (Web 4 2014). President Obama expressed his sheer concern by stating that 'What brings us together today, what is new is the unprecedented flow of fighters in recent years to and from conflict zones, including Afghanistan and the Horn of Africa, Yemen, Libya, and most recently, Syria and Iraq.'[2]

The Syrian crisis continues to be a hotbed of international politics and a matter of national security in Europe ever since the emergence of thousands of European fighters who joined Syria's civil war. The US and European governments are particularly frantic about the prospect of return of fighters who are not just some marginal IS[3] sympathizers but also experienced members. They are British, French, German, and Belgian *citizens*. It is the alarming return of these citizen fighters back from the battlefield to European homeland that is sending shivers, igniting debate, and indignation. Many British citizens have already returned home from the Syrian War theater (*Al Jazeera*, April 2016). The London-based 'International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation' holds that the current mobilization of jihadists in Syria is the most significant phase in comparison to 'every other instance of foreign fighter mobilizations since the Afghanistan war in the 1980s.' The media too is awash with sensational headlines feeding on such fears, as a recent one reads: 'UK fears homecoming of London Boys fighting in Syria' (Web 5 2014). Similar news often hit the headlines of German and French media as well, sounding the alarms mostly for domestic consumption. It is not just the media that airs such fears, senior officials and top politicians share and spread them too. For example, US President Obama has recently macro-securitized the issue by stating that 'In the Middle East and elsewhere, these terrorists exacerbate conflicts; they pose an immediate threat to people in these regions; and as we've already seen in several

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[1] Islamic State. While the organization calls itself Islamic State, ISIS and ISIL are often used by European and US sources, respectively. Curiously, there is little progress in naming of the nature of the beast.

[2] Ibid.

[3] IS is the most radical extremist group among others fighting in Syria, whose human resources partly depend on foreign fighters.

cases, they may try to return to their home countries to carry out deadly attacks' (Web 6 2014). British ex-PM David Cameron also asserted that those British citizens and other nationals fighting alongside Islamist insurgents such as IS in Iraq and Syria 'posed the biggest threat to Britain's national security' claiming that 'the number of foreign fighters in that area, the number of foreign fighters including those from the UK who could try to return to the UK is a real threat to our country' (Web 7 2014). The British Home Office's annual report titled 'The United Kingdom's Strategy for Countering Terrorism' also sounded alarms by declaring that 'There are now hundreds of foreign fighters from Europe in Syria. And when UK residents return here there is risk that they may carry out attacks using the skills that they have developed overseas (Web 8 2014). In a similar vein, ex-British Home Secretary Theresa May –now she's the British PM—also held that extremists "of a Jihadi mindset" are using the Syrian civil war "as a nursery" before returning to Britain as trained terrorists' (Web 9 2014). Similar concerns can be readily discerned from other European capitals. In 2014, French Interior Ministry estimated that nearly 700 French citizens have travelled to Syria to join the Syrian War since the conflict began and interestingly it tends to be a family trip as about 15% of them are women with their children, accompanying their husbands (Web 10 2014). Today, the figure is at least 1800 according to serious studies on European foreign fighters (*The Soufan Group*, December 2015: p. 12). Many people think that these and other youngsters—who now possess an ineluctable war-fighting experience—have mainly been trained at the camps of some of the most extremist groups operating in the world such as the IS or Jabhat al-Nusra. Rehabilitation of these émigrés, who are almost automatically taken as a homeland security threat, is now one of the pressing preoccupations of US and European administrations (Web 11 2014).

But how could a young thrill-seeking Frenchmen—living an otherwise mundane life—choose to fight a voracious foreign war, far away from home? How can a British citizen be so radicalized that he becomes a suicide bomber and attacks a regime which does not constitute a direct threat to him/her or the UK? Similar questions abound and Europeans desperately need answers. As this study hopes to show, the European citizens' praxis of fighting in the Syrian Civil War can be better grasped by employing a threefold analytical framework of identity (agency), motivations (culture), and means of the radicalization process (structure). The next section begins with an examination of the identity and motivations

of the European citizen fighters before investigating the impact of social media on the radicalization process. After examining Turkey's borders as a vital gateway for foreign fighters to enter the fray in Syria, the last section presents a discussion of the findings and offers an outline of possible solutions for ending the imbroglio of foreign fighters.

WHO ARE THE 'POTENTIAL TERRORISTS?' THE POLITICS OF NAMING

The study of foreign fighters in Syria is still in its embryonic stages and therefore it is necessary not to generalize all the available figures under some *cliché* typologies or facile labels such as the politically motivated and highly vague 'potential terrorist' label.

In effect, the high profile UNSC meeting—presided by ex-US President Obama in 2014.[4] —had passed a resolution specifically on foreign fighters and worked out a definition, which coins the term *foreign terrorist fighters* defined as those:

> 'individuals who travel to a State other than their States of residence or nationality for the purpose of the perpetration, planning, or preparation of, or participation in, terrorist acts or the providing or receiving of terrorist training, including in connection with armed conflict'.

Although broad in its sweep, this definition is nonetheless perfunctory and hardly able to capture the complexity of the phenomenon. In their stead, this study defines foreign fighters as violent private volunteers taking part in wars or civil insurgencies in which they have otherwise no pre-given proclivity based on material interest and organizational or civic affiliation. We argue that these contingents 'horizontally' disseminate a form of 'populist pan-Islamism' rather than generic Islamism. They can hardly gather under umbrella terms since theirs is a 'discrete actor category distinct from insurgents and terrorists' (Hegghamer 2010–2011: p. 35).

The first case of suicide attack by a British citizen in Syria took place in Aleppo in February 2014. Abdul Waheed Majid (*nom de guerre* Abu

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[4]A testimony to its political significance is the fact that this has been Obama's second UNSC meeting which he presided. The first was on the spread of nuclear weapons in 2009.

Suleiman al-Britani) committed a suicide attack against the Assad forces in a joint operation by Jabhat al-Nusra and Islamic Front to free Aleppo Central Prison (Web 13, *BBC*, 11 February 2014). He was not the first to shock the British public by getting himself killed in action. British citizens Mohammed al-Araj (23), Ibrahim al-Mazwagi (21), (Web 14, *The Telegraph*, 22 November 2013) Ifthekar Jaman (23) (Web 15, *BBC*, 17 December 2013), and Anil Khalil Raoufi (20) (*alias* Abu Layth al-Khurasani.) (Web 16, *BBC*, 13 February 2014) were all killed in Syria in the last 6 months this year. The Internet is full of disturbing footages showing the French jihadists operating in the Syrian countryside, 'whooping, laughing and shouting in French as they drag the bodies of the slain civilians and fighters accused of supporting Assad' (Web 17 2014). The said video was aired on 20, March 2014 in a documentary titled 'Le quotidien de jihadistes en Syrie' (The daily lives of jihadists in Syria) on the French BFM TV station featuring 'the exploits of an IS brigade comprised of about 40 French and Belgian jihadists in Syria.' Furthermore, two French citizens Nicolas Bons and his brother Jean-Daniel Bons recently died fighting in Syria on the frontlines of IS (Web 18, *Le Parisien,* 6 January 2014). Unlike the British examples above, Bons brothers were raised in a Catholic family and had ethnic French parents. They were Christian Frenchmen who converted to Islam and travelled to Syria to fight for one of the most extremist jihadist groups. Another convert Terrence Edward a.k.a. Abu Usama al-Irlandi (an Irish IS fighter) commited a suicide attack near Mosul against Iraqi Army and Shiite militias (*Guardian* November 2016). IS' foreign fighter network even reached Scandinavians such as Swedish fighters (*Long War Journal*, April 2016). Consequently, though main perpetrators are of non-European ethnic origins, it would be erroneous to mark their ethnic origin as the main pull behind their act. Rather, it is the radicalization *process* they are subjected to that contributes to their dangerous journey, which explains why, for example, their family members (brothers and sisters) do not share their radical thoughts and feelings.

In all such examples, a simple question springs to mind: Why do they join the ranks of the hardline Salafist groups such as the IS? While the public ponders, French and British states feel they have to find an answer quickly. In fact, almost all European governments are concerned and increasingly edgy due mostly to possible homeland security implications of the return of foreign fighters back to Europe.

What are the Motivations?

The easiest way to make a fighter out of the 'armchair mujahid surfer' and enlist him/her into the ranks abroad is by combining the use of Internet with the use of classical religious legal prose to highlight *takfir* (anathematization of fellow Muslims) and the duty of jihad against them and unjust rulers with a view to helping the oppressed Muslims (Ulph 2009: pp. 295–296). Indeed, gruesome images of the Syrian Civil War, merciless massacres by the Assad regime, and the lack of empathy and support by Western ('far enemy') *and* Muslim ('near enemy') countries are the reasons that motivate these women/men to fight in Syria (Web19, *The Washington Institute*, April 2013). For instance, an American foreign fighter *alias* Abu Hureyre al-Amiriki—who was killed in a suicide attack— was believed to be radicalized simply for what he saw: Assad getting away with incessant killings of innocent Muslims (*BBC World News*, 15 September 2014). An adviser to the French government, Mathieu Guidere seems also of the same view thinking that gruesome images and videos from Syrian conflict available on the Internet have a mobilizing impact on the young French citizens (Web 20, *BBC*, 20 August 2013). This helps to explain why extremist groups such as IS are very active on the social media with updated Facebook pages, YouTube videos, and pro-organization Twitter accounts. Hussam Najjar *nom de guerre* 'Irish Sam'—a half Libyan a half Irish fighter—who first fought against Colonel Gaddafi in Libya before fighting Assad has also been subject to such a jihadi–Salafist radicalization process on the net. Najjar surmises that he joined the ranks after seeing of *rape* as a war tool used by Gaddafi forces (Web 21, *Vice*, 14 May 2013). In many cases, the Internet acts as 'radicalization-accelerant' in the very least.

On a deeper psychological level, it is worth mentioning a research on 2032 foreign fighters, which found that potential recruits 'have an unfulfilled need to define themselves,' which help them turn to violence because of what they are seeking: revenge seekers, status seekers, and identity seekers (Venhaus 2010: pp. 8–11). Arguably, these are partly what fighting in Syria offers: for 'revenge seekers' it is an outlet for venting frustrations regarding the oppression of Muslims at the hands of their rulers. For 'status seekers,' it provides reputation and prestige both in the Syrian War theater and European homelands through duplicating the images of war fighting on the Internet. For 'identity seekers,' it provides recognition in and beyond local community. For 'thrill seekers,' it fulfills

an appetite for adventure in distant places instead of the monotonous and dry daily routine of life (Web 22 2014).

An equally important reason is that 'war makes jihad' through its social environment shaping those who join it (Hughes 2009: pp. 173–189). In other words, a fighter who just wants to help rebels may turn into a radical fighter having other goals during fighting. Witnessing 'disproportionate military force against civilians' and getting exposed to the radical ideology of rebel forces at the battlefield constitute two powerful sources of radicalization.[5] Similarly, self-identification with and re-authentication of *da'wa* through the Internet that proliferates jihadi–Salafist concepts such as '*jahiliyya,*' '*martyrdom,*' '*jihad,*' and ideological primers such as the resurrection of the ideal of political '*Caliphate*' all have the potential to serve a powerful alternative to both Western 'man-made legal systems' and despotic Muslim leaders of the region who are blamed for the Syrian Civil War. Thus, the British fighter Ibrahim Mazwagi mentions in a video posted in YouTube that he has left a comfortable lifestyle for helping fellow Muslims in Syria (Web 23 2014). Another British fighter Ifthekar Jaman tells that he has come to Syria to fight for reestablishing the Caliphate (Web 24 2014). Yilmaz, a Turkish-Dutch IS fighter, who was a soldier in Royal Netherlands Army, claims he has come for helping 'the oppressed' (Web 25 2014). While Jaman says he holds no desire to return and operate in the UK, Yilmaz says he is in Syria only for the Syrian people and he could have even joined Dutch Army, had it come and helped the oppressed people. In short, while Jaman and Yilmaz give different answers to the 'why' question asked above, they refer to the same 'hypergood' (Taylor 1992: 63) helping 'the oppressed' against the unjust by establishing an alternative polity through use of force.

WHAT'S IN A NAME? THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY, SOCIAL MEDIA AND VIRTUAL RADICALIZATION

The making of European fighters in the Syrian War is partly dependent on the effective uses of the Internet aiming to reinvigorate a particular type of Islamist activism. In line with Al-Qaeda single narrative (Vergani 2014: pp. 604–617), the latter feeds on a scheme of revenge that constructs Islam as a monolithic religion facing a monolithic antagonist.

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[5] Ibid, p. 187.

This narrative of social jihad is in turn perpetually echoed through digital social media outlets that surpass traditional local authority figures (e.g., community elders and mosque) mainstream newspapers, radio, and terrestrial television broadcasts in conveying its message faster and ceaselessly to millions of its target audience (Web 26 2014).

The specific avatars used by foreign fighters are particularly instructive. Many use a *nom de guerre* starting with an Arabic name, ending with identification such as 'Abu X al-Britani' or 'Abu Z al-Turki.' Using letters (as in 'Abu X') may give the fighters the clout of secrecy against possible future threats directed to the person or family. On the other hand, identifications such as 'al-Britani' could also be read as reflecting the need to accentuate the universal projection of jihad from the European homeland. It is also striking that the effect of Arabic in such usages is still strong. That is, in addition to the chosen *nom de guerre,* there are other Arabic terms which must be taken into account. For instance, foreign fighters often make use of such adjectives as *ghurabaa* (strangers) or *muhajir* (immigrants) highlighting their link with the Islamic lexicon (*The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center*, December 2014: p. 7).

Research shows that foreign fighters are mostly young men in their twenties and educated.[6] It is therefore unsurprising that the fighters produce some popular front names and figures and use social media to garner support. Pop figures prove attractive for the aspiring fighters, for example the German ex-rapper Denis Cuspert (*alias Deso Dogg*) became a sensation for the young European fighters. A 'gangsta rapper' who had four albums, he was already famous for his anti-American position before he abandoned his musical career after his conversion to Islam. Importantly, it was his strong relations with the Salafist groups in Germany such as *Millatu Ibrahim* that directed him into the Syrian Civil War. Using his *nom de guerre* 'Abu Talha al-Almani,' Cuspert did not just join the war as a foot soldier; he has also transformed his pop fame into a virtual weapon for use in the Syrian War (Web 27, *Vice*, 20 September 2013). While his photos from the frontlines handily circulate in the social media, his 'nasheeds' that praise the Syrian jihad have been even more popular in the Salafi Internet forums (Web 28, *CNN*, 18 November 2013). Thickening the plot was his wounds taken in an air

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[6] Ibid., pp. 28–29.

strike by the Assad regime (Web 29 2013). In September 2013, a video of him circulating on the YouTube shows he was in a serious condition because of his wounds after getting a cardiac massage to be saved (Web 30 2014). The video triggered rumors about the death of *Deso Dogg*'s, while some German Salafi Web sites denied his death (Web 31, *Islah Haber*, 24 November 2013). Even though Cuspert's narrative was very attractive by itself, it was *Deso Dogg*'s social media experience that made the story ever more popular and potent. Just like Yilmaz Cuspert joined the ranks of IS too after his early days in Syria.

In many cases, both the rebels and the foreign fighters in Syria make significant use of social media such that vigorous use of the Internet sites such as Twitter, Instagram, Ask.fm, and Facebook has been an effective tool for propaganda war. By 2007, more than 4500 jihadist Web sites was disseminating Salafist radical ideology by, for example, sponsoring jihadi chat forums that mainly featured discussions about Muslim youth in search for identity and the 'role of young Muslims in the modern world' (Riedel 2007: pp. 24–41). As Gilles de Kerchove argues, social media has considerably facilitated the flow of foreign fighters into the Syria war front, who tend to be 'narcissists' flaunting, for example, their AK-47s in selfies or uploading videos directly from the combat zone into Tumblr or YouTube, rap and propaganda videos and clothing (Web 32 2014).It is not only the European governments that are edgy about the online media, but also the secretary General of the Council of Arab Interior Ministers Mohammed Kuman is concerned with the content of digital media, since such platforms make available free spaces to radicalize (Web 33 2014).

Rebels fuse jihad with social media. Internet Web sites like 'Sham Center' are zealously involved in what can be called 'social jihad' by producing effective visuals and spreading the idea(l) of fighting in Syria (Web 34, *Setimes.com*, 2013). The European fighters post almost everything from the frontlines including the capture of military vehicles with guns, but they make sure the whole incident is framed within a passionate storyline (Web 35, *Vice* 2013). *Chechclear* is (the nickname of) a Dutch fighter who has an active Tumblr blog where he posts from the Syrian frontlines. The importance of social media for foreign fighters is *literally* captured in a photo that includes a gun, a knife, and a smart phone, showing how 'half of global jihad is social media' (Web 36, *Middle East Online,* 2013). In regard to the militant discourse and stunning killing methods, it is reasonable to assume that extremism has fast become a mainstream attraction for foreign rebel fighters.

Additionally, media attention is evident in the news so far abundantly documenting how Syrian Civil War has turned into an attractive war theater luring youngsters all over the world, including women and girls. The case of Austrian teenage girls Samra Kesinovic (16) and Sabina Selimovic (15) is noteworthy. They traveled to Syria and joined the rebel forces (*Al Arabiya* 2014) showcasing once again how 'war makes jihad.' War also helps to make jihadi by, inter alia, generating attractive goals that can inspire potential fighters from across different age groups. Crafty use of media outlets and self-promoting slick media productions combined with recruiting preachers on the ground, jihad may look doable and 'cool,' for its message reaches out to the young 'mujahid wannabes' faster and easier than traditional education (Web 37 2014). Surely, one of the main functions of the digital media is that it provides the necessary means to reach the contact persons particularly at the border zones who would then help transfer foreign fighters to the war theater. However, it is necessary, as shown above, not to reduce the impact of the social media to recruitment facilities.

Social media is not functioning as a passive transmitter between already established (secure) individual selves. Learning and unlearning through digital media is a process which involves more than reproducing neo-jihadism or recycling its 'single narrative' (Vergani 2014: p. 611). For example, it introduces and facilitates the reinterpretation of that narrative by imbuing it with native hybrid symbols, identities, and individual life stories. For instance, ICSR's comprehensive report '#Greenbirds: Measuring Importance and Influence in Syrian Foreign Fighters' focuses on the effect of social media on foreign fighters' self-education and recruitment patterns drawing on the fighters' social media profiles. The report finds that most foreign fighters in the social media in 2014 were pro-IS (55%) (*ICSR* 2014: p. 11). ICSR classifies their accounts by their nationalities finding out fighters from UK in the lead (17.9%) with French (11.6%) and German (11.1%) fighters lagging behind them on the list.[7] The overall finding of the report suggests that Twitter accounts and Facebook pages prove to be effective on foreign fighters. In regard to the popular Facebook pages among foreign fighters, it is possible to

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[7] Ibid.

discern pages of popular Salafi preachers such as Ahmad Musa Jibril, Musa Cerantonio, and Sulaymaan al-Ulwan, all of which become 'cause celebrity' among jihadi media networks by their rhetoric, charisma, and stance in the Syrian Civil War.

While some have supported Syrian jihad indirectly and anonymously, others such as Musa Cerantonio—speaks clearly about his support for IS. Born to Christian parents, Cerantonio is an Australian citizen with Irish and Italian roots, who was seen as a fine young preacher before he converted to Islam at the age of 17. He did not shy away from suggesting that IS is the only option for a true Islamic rule over Syria while often posting full of pro-IS posts on his Facebook page, some of which were titled as 'ISIS gaining in Raqqah,' 'ISIS moving into Baghdad,' 'Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi,' and 'Jabhat al-Nusra defectors to ISIS.'[8] What is significant is that Cerantonio has his comparative advantage put to effective use when it comes to reaching out the youngsters and the newly converted Muslims. The latter identify themselves comfortably with Cerantonio, which in turn make him more effective in new possible foreign recruitments. To be sure, it is not just individuals who help transfer others into the war theater. For instance, Kronos report on Dutch fighters in Syria groups finds out that *Sharia4Holland* and *Sharia4Belgium*— which are believed to be peaceful social groups and active in Belgium and Netherlands—have been active on recruitment. According to the report 'Inside The Jihad, Dutch Fighters in Syria,' both leaders and members of these groups' inner circles have already traveled to Syria to join the fight (*Kronos* 2013: p. 7).

In all, it is necessary not to couch the matter in journalistic accounts such as the so-called Jihad Cool or twitter jihad though. Foreign fighter activity should be seen as a 'genre of symbolic communications' rather than either a diversion or favorite pastime activity (Nicholas and Baines 2009: pp. 227–241). The symbolic importance here is readily granted by the Salafists themselves. It is possible to capture this symbolism in the discourse of veteran figures. For instance, while al-Qaeda's chief Ayman al-Zawahiri claimed that 'More than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media' its chief propagandist and the emir of the Global Islamic Media Front (*nom de guerre*, Saladin II) urged the faithful Muslims to unite to 'Set up squadrons of media jihad (holy war) to

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[8] Ibid. p. 27.

break Zionist control over the media and terrorize the enemies' (Web 39, *Middle East Online* 2005).

Turkey's Border Security and Foreign Fighter Flow

To be sure, it is not just online facilities that help make the foreign fighting experience possible. The European fighters' journey to Syria has acquired a certain itinerary pattern. Their standard travel plan was to fly to Turkey from home countries and cross the Syrian border mostly with the help of smugglers before they join the armed groups (rebels or IS) mostly in north Syria. With its massive 911-km border with Syria—which is very difficult to control—Turkey had become a transit route for the European foreign fighters. As a strong supporter of Syrian opposition—especially of FSA—for Turkey, the flow of foreign fighters into Syrian War theater at first was not a security issue or political problem. However, with the IS expansion in north Syria and the growing Salafi–jihadi influence in the opposition ranks, the US and European governments' threat perceptions regarding Turkey's role have changed. Particularly, in the second half of 2013, popular media outlets were awash with queries most typically asking 'Do Turkey supports extremists?' Turkey could not ignore or dismiss out of hand such misgivings for long. For, inter alia, the perception that 'Turkey supports extremists' is anathema to its struggle to dissociate its Islam-friendly government from allegations of aiding and abetting religious terrorism.

By the end of 2013, Turkish officials took first serious steps to prevent foreign fighters entering Syria. According to Der Spiegel, by the end of 2013, officials sent more than 1000 potential European rebel fighters back to their countries (*Zaman* 2013). In early 2014, Turkish Army hit an IS convoy and the government began to target IS by increasingly construing it as a threat to homeland security (*Sabah* 2014).

It can be argued that in the first years of Syrian Civil War the presence of a common enemy (Assad Regime or YPG) encouraged Turkey to turn a blind eye to the foreign fighter movement at its borders however it is also quite difficult to secure such a long border. Besides, there exist socioeconomic reasons that help foreign fighters to find agents for human transfer at the Turkish borders, turning it a gateway to the Syrian War theater. According to the existing data from Turkish Ministry of Development, Turkish cities on the Syrian border are not on top of Turkey's development list. Among six cities (Şırnak, Şanlıurfa-Hatay-Kilis-Gaziantep, and

Mardin) only Gaziantep appears the most developed (faring the 30th) in the 81 city lists (Web 40 2014) while others lag far behind Gaziantep.[9] Even so, the latter finds smuggling as an output of war industry, particularly for those in dire economic conditions. So much so that by May 2014 Turkish government decided to erect a wall on parts of the Syrian border for security reasons and preventing smugglers (*Reuters* 2014). By providing support to rebel groups in Azaz—who are fighting against IS—Turkey continued its fight against IS. And in 2016, with the success of Euphrates Shield—a military operation against IS—Turkey cleared IS from the whole border area. It was a major blow for IS' foreign fighter flow and a success for Turkish border security policy.

Discussion: The War, the Net and the Self

It is true that many gruesome videos of European jihadists in Syria posted on the YouTube are sending shivers and igniting debate. However, the woeful discourse of 'the return of the European fighters' by European politicians is adversely interiorizing threats and insecurity of the Syrian War front. In an effort to contain domestic spillover of the latter, European governments construct both the Syrian War and its ostensible European accomplices as part of the uncontrollable realm of the 'foreign otherness,' distinct from the safety of 'domestic sameness.' This double move of exteriorizing the causes of war and yet interiorizing its threats is an unhelpful move. For at least the claim that the terrorist threat posed by the return of European fighters is produce of 'foreign' factors (e.g., an inbuilt religious extremism) needs careful scrutiny. The tendency of governments to focus on the distinction between the 'domestic' (European) nationality of the fighters and their 'foreign' (Salafi) ideology belies the complicated nature of the process of radicalization documented above. As this study hopes to have shown, the latter defies easy categorizations and their attendant dichotomies of inside–outside or modern and pre-modern (Web 41 2014). These fighters have neither been religious extremists *ex nihilo* nor have they necessarily got an inbuilt tendency for terrorism. It would, therefore, be simplistic to

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[9] Kilis 63rd, Şanlıurfa 73rd, Mardin 74th, Şırnak 78th and Hatay 46th.

entertain the idea that taking part in the war would necessarily make the fighters 'potential terrorists' for the domestic community.

Do the European fighters present a homeland security threat? According to a Soufan Group study, at least 5000 foreign fighters from west European fighters joined the fight in Syria and 3700 of them are citizens of just four countries (France, Germany, Belgium, and the UK) (*The Soufan Group* 2015: p. 12). And so France and England are collaborating to protect themselves against such a threat (Web 42 2014). Indeed, a possible extremist spillover onto Europe has become a nightmare for the European powers. Scandinavian countries Norway (Web 43, *Ice News* 2014) and Sweden (Web 44 2013) too are concerned about the similar threats emanating from Syria returnees.

Despite officials and politicians often sounding alarms, it would, nonetheless, be incorrect to assume these fighters would automatically pose threats to domestic society once they return home. There are also foreign fighters in Syria who do not want or plan to attack their home countries upon their return (Web 45 2014). It would, therefore, be inaccurate to presume all the fighters would turn against the authorities of their home countries. For instance, Aaron Zelin claims that foreign rebel fighters were representing less than 10% of all rebels in Syria and that it would be simply wrong to lump together all the foreign rebel fighters as members of al-Qaeda and IS because there were many foreign fighters who joined the fight with their own distinct agendas (Web 46, Zelin 2013). Some of them clearly feel the UK is their home and that the idea of jihad in the UK is surreal *(BBC)*. Still, the alarmist tone is often shored up institutionally. For instance, the EU Counter-terrorism Coordinator Gilles de Kerchove is adamant that even if not all fighters can be classified as radical they will nonetheless 'become radical fighters and their return will be a serious threat for homeland security' (Web 47, *Vice* 2013). Expert scholars such as Thomas Hegghammer, on the other hand, thinks that Western fighters mostly prefer to fight far away from home and that they do not have a tendency to fight in the West (Hegghammer 2013: p. 12). But if we compare them to their Turkish counterparts, we can also say that European foreign fighters mostly prefer to join IS rather than Syrian opposition groups. In the case of Turkish foreign fighters, individuals who have past war experiences (such as Somalia, Afghanistan, Bosnia, or Chechnya) mostly prefer to join Jabhat al-Nusra instead of IS. This is arguably related to the AQ's historical experience in various wars and with its more complicated vetting

process. A fighter with no internal contacts, no qualification, and low-level of ideological background has very little chance to join Jabhat al-Nusra. This vetting process may lead many European fighter candidates to join IS according to some European foreign fighters (*New York Times* 2015). An AQ recruit who has internal contacts with an organization and high military qualification may create some direct threats to his/her homeland but Jabhat al-Nusra's policy for years shows that the group's main goal is toppling the Assad regime in Syria and so far they have not had calls to attack the Western targets unlike IS. So even if fighters who are jihadi veterans seem to pose a threat, the main threat are likely to be 'lone wolf' attacks which are mostly committed by fighters or sympathizers who had no battleground experience before.

Containing the Radicalized Self

Even if not all foreign fighters are threats to home countries and other states, the need to contain the radicalized self is self-evident. A recent UNSC Resolution voted 15–0 in favor of a legally binding resolution under Chap. 7 calling on 193 UN member nations to harshly criminalize for their citizens to travel abroad to fight with and recruit for terror groups. However, as ex-President Obama himself highlighted at the meeting 'resolutions alone will not be enough. Promises on paper cannot keep us safe. Lofty rhetoric and good intentions will not stop a single terrorist attack. The words spoken here today must be matched and translated into action' (Web 48 2014).

Leaving aside the 'lofty rhetoric,' how can a radicalized self be contained? Perhaps, it is better to start with the basics: Containing the threat of the returnee fighters should go beyond summary prosecution, revoking citizenship, or determining guilt by simple association. Instead, European governments are hard pressed to understand and engage with those returnees. A two-tiered online and offline approach is due here. First offline, a much needed dialogue with the virtual Ummah should start with discarding the myths that militant extremism is *caused* by religion, lack of education, or poverty. In many cases discussed above, 'the root cause' approach to terrorism (Jackson et al. 2011: pp. 9–29) simply does not readily relate to above examples. De-radicalization policies and programs must focus on innovative ways to reintegrate foreign fighters into civilian life. Potential foreign fighters should be socially made less vulnerable to misinterpretations of the religious texts and selective

passages that are used to justify violent behavior. Instead, they should be exposed to the plurality of Islamic commentary and scholarship of 1,400 years for doctrinal restoration. Importantly, the latter effort should run parallel to the efforts of experts in addressing 'the depths of personal need and the peculiar nature of adolescent development that make al-Qaeda's message resonate with young men' (Venhaus 2010: p. 18).

Secondly, countering online radicalization should include both 'positive' and 'negative' measures. The 'negative' measures include denying access to information and other materials published by extremists. However, this should be done with great care. Indeed, removing, IP or content filtering, hiding, or blocking Web sites can get democratic governments caught between a rock (the need to protect society from harm) and a hard place (the loss of legitimacy due to the attempt to limit free speech and censorship) (ICSR 2009: pp. 14–22, 42–48). Crucially, negative measures by the governments run the risk of fueling a sense of exclusion and impression that Muslims' freedom of expression is exclusively targeted. Positive measures, on the other hand, include alternative religious messages or attractive forms of content that could counter, challenge, and ultimately neutralize extremists' political messages. Overall, the practical objective should be reducing the extremists' 'audience share' on the Internet. Some positive measures are quite insightful such as funding community projects such as the 'Black Country Imams' scheme, which aimed training domestic clerics and promoting positive Muslim self-awareness, community resilience, and civic participation; however, the downside is that these projects mostly revolve around Muslim communities, which in turn could make Muslims feel they are *the* 'problem.'[10] According to a recent survey, a majority of young British Muslims could not feel able to 'discuss extremism and terrorism freely in the presence of authority figures, even in universities[11]'.

Understanding the processes of radicalization and the perverse effects of non-action by European governments in the face of grave consequences of Syrian War is a prerequisite for preventing the potential threat posed by the European fighters. It is also necessary to address the reasons for the participation of Europeans in the Syrian War such as the humanitarian crisis and war crimes 'festered' by the Western

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[10] Ibid., p. 46.
[11] Ibid., p. 19, ft. 47.

inaction in Syria or the alienation and marginalization and the result-
ant disconnect with home states and societies (Web 49 2014). The
proposed alternative to this understanding is likely to be further social
marginalization and state action by the governments that would include
the withdrawal of their European passports making them stateless.
Such a 'blanket-ban' would be tantamount to what Derrida calls 'auto-
immune process' whereby Western democratic governments adapt a
'vicious circle of [domestic] repression,' that is 'producing, reproducing
and regenerating the very thing it seeks to disarm' (Derrida 2003: 99).
Ironically, this might even make the European governments resemble
the very regimes they criticize (Derrida 2005: 40) such as the Syrian
regime in the name of protecting themselves against the threat posed by
the 'potential terrorists.'

Conclusion

It is increasingly the case that the Internet-enabled networks replace ver-
tically integrated hierarchies as the dominant form of social organization,
for the traditional authority figures seem to have lost their grip on the
identity construction and practices of young Muslims (Stemmann 2006:
10(3)). In other words, instead of (territorially focused) political and
social activism, the new norm constructs self-isolation, personal (digi-
tal) education, and radicalization of the Self out of the 'armchair muja-
hid surfer.' Indeed, thanks to the digital social media platforms, the latter
easily embarks upon a self-radicalization process enabled by 'the space of
flows' that is 'isolating and subduing the logic of experience embodied
in the space of places' (Castells 2014: p. 171). The new logic sidesteps
the mosques and other conventional social spaces that undertake face-to-
face interaction, promote education, and offer regulation. Many terrorist
groups are recruited by small-group activism and through the Internet.
The emergent global jihadi-hypertext is a techy 'fourth world' embodied
by jihadi chat forums, video clips, manuals, DIY munitions productions,
and volumes of doctrinal–educational Salafist materials that make up the
content of around 6000 Web sites, which espouse radical ideologies and
generate a 'virtual Ummah' of believers living a 'double rupture' with
the corrupt West, traditional/mainstream Islam, and rulers (Thomas
2009: p. 247). The new Muslim defender of the virtual Ummah can
then easily withdraw into his radicalized self in order to unleash hell in
the name of the oppressed Muslims, regardless of national and regional

differences. As for the necessity to contain the radicalized self, it is necessary to realize that both online and offline measures will take considerable social and political effort to bear fruit and delicate social reintegration among others, just as it will take years 'to degrade and ultimately destroy the terrorist group known as ISIL' (Web 50 2014).

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Who Are the British Jihadists in Syria? *BBC*.

Authors' Biography

Dr. Tuncay Kardaş is Associate Professor of International Relations at the Middle East Institute of Sakarya University. He received his BA and MA degrees from Bilkent University in Ankara; MsEcon (Security Studies) and Ph.D. from the Department of International Politics at Aberystwyth University in Wales in 2006. He is currently serving as the Deputy Director of the Middle East Institute of Sakarya University. His research focuses broadly on sociology of security, foreign fighters, the ISIS, critical security studies, security governmentality, visual semiotics, and Turkish Foreign Policy. Dr. Kardas is the co-editor of "The Borders of Islam: Exploring Samuel Huntington's Faultlines, from Al-Andalus to Virtual Ummah," (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009). His most recent articles appeared in Turkish Studies, such as Middle East Critique, Insight Turkey, Birikim, Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations, and Economics and Management: Current Issues and Perspectives. Dr. Kardaş's current researches are on foreign fighters, Islamic radicalization, and the Kurdish conflict. He is currently working on the following research projects: Turkish Foreign Fighters, ISSDIT: Inter-Societal Security Dilemmas in Turkey, and ISSDIME: Inter-Societal Security Dilemmas in the Middle East. He is the organizer of Crisis and Critique Conferences and an editorial board member of Ortadoğu Yıllığı. His most recent research is titled "The Inter-Societal Security Dilemma in Turkey: Kurdish Opening" Turkish Studies with Ali Balci published in Turkey Studies.

Ömer Behram Özdemir is a researcher at Sakarya University Middle East Institute, Turkey. He got his MA degree with his thesis 'Secessionist Movements in Europe: ETA and IRA.' His studies currently focus on Syrian Civil War, non-state armed actors, radicalism, and violence in the Middle East. He is currently working on Turkish Foreign Fighters Project. His articles have been mostly published in Turkish Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, Middle East Analysis, Al Jazeera, Middle East Eye, Middle East Monitor, The New Turkey, and Daily Sabah.

What the ISIS Crisis Means for the Future of the Middle East

Burak Kadercan

INTRODUCTION

Since its meteoric rise to global infamy by mid-2014, the group that now calls itself the "Islamic State" (or, Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, also known as ISIS) has occupied a central place in the minds of policy-makers and analysts, establishing itself as international public enemy number one (Cockburn 2014; Warrick 2014; Stern and Berger 2015; McCants 2015; Byman 2015). In so many ways, ISIS has also constituted a source of embarrassment for the security community (Brooks 2015a, b). First, very few, if any at all, of the same experts who are quite literally obsessed with the group today foresaw the rise of ISIS to prominence in Iraq and Syria until it actually happened. Second, despite all the intellectual energy devoted to understanding "what ISIS really is" (or, what it really wants),

B. Kadercan (✉)
Naval War College, Newport, USA
e-mail: burakadercan@gmail.com

not to mention the accumulation of considerable data on the group, we still do not understand the organization significantly more than we did in mid-2014. Consequently, there is little agreement in the security community over the true nature of ISIS and the proper strategy to effectively "degrade and destroy" the organization (WhiteHouse 2014).

ISIS remains unpredictable and inexplicable for two main reasons. First, the existing frameworks utilized to explore "what ISIS really is" are not appropriate for a holistic assessment of the organization, prompting analysts to mistake ISIS' tactics or propaganda for its political objectives. Second, an almost exclusive emphasis on trying to understand ISIS per se distracts from the symbiotic and complex relationship between ISIS and the bigger regional crisis that gave birth to the organization in the first place.

This article draws attention to three interrelated dynamics that may help students of international politics make sense of ISIS (Kadercan 2015a, b, c). First, ISIS is best seen as a "process," not as a static "thing" that can be easily identified.[1] The challenge, then, is to uncover the mechanisms through which the group energizes its ever-evolving strategy. Second, understanding ISIS' strategic resilience requires evaluating the group's state-building and power-projection strategies in the context of regional dynamics. ISIS' successes and failures, and most certainly its future prospects, cannot be divorced from the ongoing, multidimensional crisis in the region.

Third, thinking of ISIS as a "process" also makes it necessary to consider the groups' impacts on the greater Middle East with respect to two interrelated dimensions: sectarian tensions and the impacts of the group on existing ethnic relations in the region, especially in the context of the so-called Kurdish question. The impacts of ISIS on the region, in particular, can be analyzed with respect to two key dimensions. First, ISIS is a project that aims to transform the political and human terrain in Iraq and Syria; its leadership is consciously adopting strategies that aim to remake the territories it controls in its own image, while also destabilizing the entire region. The second dimension is rarely discussed: The rise of ISIS created numerous challenges as well as opportunities for all relevant actors. Concerned with the challenges and ever-anxious to take advantage of the opportunities, the regional actors are playing an active

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[1] I thank Alex Wendt for suggesting this terminology.

role in reshaping the Middle East, a region that will most likely look considerably different in the next decade.

The remainder of the essay unfolds in four sections. The first section offers a brief historical narrative outlining the rise of ISIS. Second, I examine the existing frameworks that are utilized to analyze the group, underlining their weaknesses and strengths. The third section evaluates ISIS' strategic resilience in the context of the regional dynamics. In the fourth section, I examine the ways in which ISIS has been reshaping regional dynamics, especially with respect to sectarian and ethnic relations.

A History of Violence

Until mid-2014, security analysts (scholarly or otherwise) and global media either ignored ISIS or collapsed it under numerous organizations affiliated with al-Qaeda (AQ). In less than a year, ISIS captured an estate as big as the UK across Syria and Iraq, establishing itself as a geographic reality and an unprecedented challenge to regional stability in the Middle East. ISIS' penchant for publicizing its acts of violence (Zech and Kelly 2015) (which has been appropriately called "jihadist porn") and its mastery of social media (Gates and Podder 2015)—not to mention, its institutionalization of slavery and ethnic cleansing—has rendered the group global public enemy number one, even forcing AQ to publicly distance itself from its offspring.

The origins of ISIS can be traced to the Jordanian jihadist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, previously a minor AQ associate who was famously denied even a basic audience from Osama Bin Laden in the late 1990s, partially due to Zarqawi's reputation as an unrefined hothead with a past colored by substance abuse and petty crime. During the course of the late 1990s, Zarqawi ran a paramilitary training camp in Afghanistan that was loosely associated with AQ. In 2001, Zarqawi fled to Northern Iraq during the US-led Operation "Enduring Freedom," seeking refuge with Ansar al-Islam, a radicalized Kurdish group. There, he founded Jamaat al-Tahvid wa-l-Jihad (JTWJ) and, anticipating the potential for a jihadist insurgency, moved his operations to Baghdad right before the US-led invasion in 2003. Zarqawi's JTWJ gained itself a reputation for brutality and effectiveness, most notably through its attacks on the UN headquarters in Baghdad, various Shia mosques, and civilians. Zarqawi's initial exploits in Iraq also highlighted his two-pronged trademark: sectarian targeting

and publicized savagery (especially beheadings). Zarqawi's trademark gained him notoriety and an increasing following, but also motivated Osama Bin Laden, who did not share Zarqawi's penchant for sectarian violence, to keep a distance between AQ and Zarqawi.

Eventually, Zarqawi's increasing profile and continuous appeals to AQ-central for formal affiliation prompted Osama Bin Laden to commission JTWJ as AQ in Iraq (AQI) and Zarqawi as its leader in October 2004. Until Zarqawi was killed in 2006 in a US air strike, the Zarqawi-led AQI wreaked havoc in Iraq, simultaneously exploiting and inflaming sectarian tensions in the region (Naylor 2015, pp. 279–290). In fact, the drift between AQ-central and AQI (which would eventually evolve into ISIS) can be traced back to this period. Zarqawi's brutal methods attracted criticism from AQ-central, expressed most notably in a letter sent by AQ's [then] second-in-command Ayman al-Zawahiri in 2005 (Ensor 2005). In the letter, Zawahiri, albeit in a diplomatic and quasi-formal fashion, warned Zarqawi that AQI's sectarian strategy (not to mention its targeting of Sunnis) was damaging AQ-central's reputation. A second, yet less pronounced, point of contention involved the issue of "governance." While Osama Bin Laden and Zawahiri openly opposed the idea of forming Islamic quasi-states before conditions became ripe (Bin Laden feared that a premature attempt at statehood would eventually hurt the prospects of founding a caliphate down the road), Zarqawi showed great interest in establishing a form of territorial governance based on an extremely strict interpretation of *sharia* rule.

Following Zarqawi's death, the new leadership under Abu Omar al-Baghdadi announced that AQI would change its name to Islamic State in Iraq (ISI). In reality, the title of "state" was adopted to cover the increasing weakness of the group and ISI's "statehood" existed only in its title. During this time, the USA launched the "awakening" (*sahva*) campaign that involved co-opting the Sunni tribes in the Anbar region, who were already feeling the brunt of AQI/ISI's increasing brutality and intolerance of any form of dissent. In 2010, ISI, now a shadow of its former self and having retreated to terrorism (as opposed to insurgency and claims over governance), lost its key leadership, including Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, in an alliance airstrike. At the time, a common assumption was that ISI had been finally beaten into submission.

In 2010, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who was virtually unknown to intelligence agencies at the time, assumed the group's leadership. Different from Bin Laden and Zarqawi, there is still little known about Baghdadi.

According to ISI(S) propaganda, Baghdadi was a professor of Islamic studies (with a PhD) and a veteran of the fight against the USA. There exists no hard evidence to support the latter claim, but it is established that Baghdadi, just like most other key ISIS operatives, spent time in a US-run prison, in his case, Camp Bucca, from February 2004 until his release 10 months later. For many analysts, Camp Bucca was where ISI(S) was born from its ashes. In the words of an ISIS affiliate:

> [W]e could never have all got together like this in Baghdad, or anywhere else… Here, we were not only safe, but we were a few hundred meters away from the entire al-Qaida leadership… Bucca was a factory. It made us all. It built our ideology. (Chulov 2014)

Under new management, ISI rebuilt itself between 2010 and 2012. Taking advantage of the feeling of disenfranchisement among the Sunni population in Iraq (a result of Bagdad's policies that alienated the very same Sunni tribes that had contributed to the pacification of ISI between 2006 and 2009) and the civil war in neighboring Syria, ISI launched a two-pronged initiative in Iraq and Syria in 2012. In Iraq, the group initiated what has come to be referred as the "Breaking Down the Walls" campaign, where ISI rescued hundreds of jihadists and former Baathists from Iraqi prisons; these individuals then constituted the backbone of ISI(S)' military and intelligence operations, as well as its state-building efforts. Recognizing the opportunities that the civil war offered, ISI also sent a task force to Syria under the command of Abu Mohammad al-Julani, whose group adopted the name Jabhat al-Nusra (JN).

Riding on the wave of its increasing influence in Iraq as well as the impressive performance of its Syrian affiliate, the group adopted a new name, ISIS, in April 2013 and immediately declared that Jabhat al-Nusra was its branch. JN reacted to this declaration by taking the issue to AQ-Central. AQ leader Zawahiri, acting as a mediator, weighed in on the behalf of JN, which amplified the tensions between AQ and ISIS. Suffering a reputational setback as a result of the JN–AQ debacle, ISIS launched its "Soldier's Harvest" campaign in Iraq (which entailed targeting of Iraqi security personnel through systematic ambushes and/or assassinations) and openly switched to "territorial" aims in both Iraq and Syria, with the intention to not only capture and hold but also to govern territory there. Its territorial aims eventually led to clashes with other rebel groups in Syria, most notably with JN in Raqqa and Aleppo from

August 2013 onward. In January 2014, ISIS expelled both JN and the Free Syrian Army (FSA) from Raqqa, designating the city as its de facto capital. Note that ISIS was still considered to be an "emirate" at this stage. In February, ISIS and AQ renounced any remaining ties, drawing attention to the growing polarization among the jihadist groups operating in Iraq and Syria.

In June 2014, after establishing a stronghold in Syria, ISIS launched its boldest attempt, taking over Mosul and announcing a caliphate in the immediate aftermath of the battle, also formalizing the struggle between ISIS and AQ (as well as its Syrian affiliate, JN) (Zelin 2014; Holbrook 2015; Turner 2015; Malik, et al 2015). In September, the USA forged a multinational alliance against the group, which then embarked on airstrikes in Iraq and Syria. Despite numerous attempts to "degrade" the group, ISIS is still alive and kicking, defying earlier predictions about its ever-approaching demise.

Making Sense of ISIS: Four Ways to Look at ISIS

ISIS' rise to global infamy immediately triggered questions about appropriate strategies for tackling the group. Broadly speaking, the strategies proffered to defeat or pacify ISIS have ranged from pursuing a containment policy (so that ISIS either "implodes" or becomes "socialized" into the modern state system), (Walt 2015) to a "hammer and anvil strategy" that draws on local allies and airpower, (Pape et al. 2015) to putting Western boots on the ground in order to literally destroy the organization (French 2015). The viability or effectiveness of these strategies, in turn, depends on a simple question: What is the best way to think of, or conceptualize, ISIS? The existing answers boil down to four competing interpretations: ISIS is best seen as a terrorist organization (or an al-Qaeda redux), a band of medieval fanatics bent on utopian and otherworldly ideals, an insurgency, or a proto-state (Fromson and Simon 2015).

ISIS as AQ Redux

An early interpretation of ISIS suggested that the organization was either a "jayvee team" of AQ or the next step in the evolution of transnational jihadist terrorism. While this perspective has lately become less popular, there are still a number of reasons to take it seriously. First, the

organization's jihadist ideology, at least to an extent, resembles that of AQ. Second, just like AQ, ISIS makes heavy use of terrorist attacks, reinforcing the relevance of the interpretation. Third, ISIS also appears to be interested in franchising its brand, a tendency that has been the trademark of AQ from its inception.[2] If ISIS is in fact an AQ redux, analysts should further study AQ's ideology and strategic playbook, and policy makers should focus on breaking ISIS' network of franchises/alliances as well as cutting external financial support, while also treating the threat more in terms of a counter-terrorism effort (Bouzis 2015).

However, it would be a mistake to think of ISIS as an AQ redux (Cronin 2015). First, "jihadist ideology" is simply too broad of a term with little real analytical purchase. In relation, while both organizations share a penchant for a global caliphate at the ideological level, their organizational structure and short-term goals are essentially different. Most notably, AQ is a network and ISIS is decidedly a territorial entity that can literally "live off the land" with respect to the resources, both financial and human. Furthermore, while AQ has long maintained that the caliphate should be founded in the future (and only when the conditions are ripe), ISIS, defying AQ's criticisms and warnings, has already established a polity that it calls a caliphate. Of equal importance is the sectarian element; while AQ has long underplayed the confessional differences among Muslims, ISIS is decidedly sectarian, defining Shias as their primary target. Furthermore, AQ's "franchising" has been highly selective and has involved some degree of oversight. For ISIS, franchising is carried out almost indiscriminately, as the organization seems more interested in receiving as many *bayah*s (pledges of alliances) as possible from all over the world and less in preserving the "purity" of its brand. Furthermore, there is little, if any, evidence suggesting that ISIS exercises oversight over (or provides direct support for) its "affiliates." In sum, despite the organic association between AQ and ISIS, the latter can hardly be defined as an incarnation of the former.

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[2] We should not underestimate the impacts of "intellectual stickiness" on debates over strategy and policy. Like organizations that refuse to change their practices in the face of rapid change, analysts who have invested their intellectual acumen on AQ for a decade and a half may be tempted to overplay the association and similarities between AQ and ISIS, which is easier to do if both are collapsed under some unifying global jihad theme.

ISIS as a Cult of Medieval Fanatics

A popular interpretation of the group emphasizes ISIS' ideology as a key to understanding its true nature and strategy. While there is some variation in analysts' approach to ISIS' ideology, this perspective is most lucidly expressed by Graeme Wood in his controversial *Atlantic* article entitled, "What ISIS Really Wants" (Wood 2015). Wood pushes forward two central arguments. First, ISIS should be analyzed on its own terms, not in the broader context of global jihadism or through the frameworks applied to AQ. Second, ISIS' goals and strategy are best understood in the context of its "medieval religious nature." ISIS, in this narrative, is primarily a "religious group" comprised of fanatics who are bent on facilitating the end of days, while also preparing for an apocalyptical battle in the town of Dabiq in Syria (McCants 2015). The consequent advice is twofold. First, the West should keep bleeding ISIS white in Syria and Iraq through air strikes and other forms of indirect strangulation; the hope is that, as a flawed and irrational enterprise, ISIS will eventually implode. Second, more distinctively, since the primary threat is "religious," the West should also combat ISIS on theological grounds. Wood then suggests that non-violent interpretations of Salafism (a belief system that emphasizes an extremely puritan reading of early Islamic texts) should be empowered at the expense of the violent branch championed by ISIS (Schmid 2015).

ISIS' success owes much to its ideological appeal, which makes it essential to study its ideology, in particular to understand why ISIS remains very attractive to foreign jihadists. However, this perspective should also be approached with great caution. First, the existing research suggests that ISIS is not necessarily "creating" a surge in the supply of global jihadists by inspiring dormant jihadists, but is in fact taking advantage of a recent boom that preceded its rise to infamy in 2014 (Jones 2014). Even then, it is difficult to suggest that it is ISIS' ideology per se that is acting as the magnet; it is also likely that ISIS' military exploits and ability to control territory constitutes the main attraction. Second, focusing exclusively on "ideology" can prompt analysts to mistake propaganda for strategy. Considering that ISIS has excelled in strategic communications, it would be prudent to look beyond the discourse that ISIS is marketing, as the content of its

propaganda and strategic communications is hardly likely to hold the key to its strategic thinking.[3]

Furthermore, a closer look at "who ISIS is" undermines the "ideology/religion all the way down" interpretation. Behind ISIS' success lies an alliance between jihadists and Baathists, who play a crucial role in strategic planning, running military and communication operations, and building institutions (Tønnessen 2015). Baathists from Saddam Hussein's defeated regime see ISIS as their only means for survival and the best vehicle for reestablishing their dominance in Iraq. The existence of this alliance suggests that we are facing not a homogenous group of fanatics whose eyes are fixated on otherworldly prizes, but pragmatic agents who are more than willing to combine an inflammable ideology with military and administrative know-how (Patel 2015). Put bluntly, we should not be concerned about millennial fanatics who are preparing for the end of days, but rather about the persistence of a quasi-state run by an alliance of jihadists who have learnt from the mistakes of AQ, and Baathists who know how to work the human and political terrain on limited resources. Mistaking them for a cult of savage fanatics would be a mistake. In sum, jettisoning religious ideas and ideologies from analyses concerning ISIS is not the best idea, but neither is essentializing them (Porter 2009).

ISIS as an Insurgency

A third, dominant interpretation looks at ISIS more in terms of a traditional insurgency (Huang 2015; Lynch 2015a; Lynch 2015c; Kalyvas 2015). The logic behind this interpretation is straightforward: While ISIS may shock and awe global audiences with its barbaric acts and its revolutionary ideology, it is not the first group to do so in modern

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[3]There is also a tendency to over-emphasize a number of texts written by strategic thinkers of the jihadosphere, most notably "The Management of Savagery," dated 2004 and translated into English by William McCants, retrieved from https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2010/08/abu-bakr-naji-the-management-of-savagery-the-most-critical-stage-through-which-the-umma-will-pass.pdf. While these texts are important, their influence on ISIS' state-building and power projection strategies should not be exaggerated. The Chinese strategic thinking does not follow Sun Tzu in every aspect, and the Western states' strategy is not a direct application of Clausewitz's On War. We can learn from such texts, but, we have little reason to believe that they constitute magical keys for unlocking ISIS' strategic thinking.

history. In the end, ISIS can be thought of as an insurgency with 30–50 thousand fighters, and, just like all insurgencies, it focuses on destroying the existing political order and building new institutions as well as securing legitimacy to establish and sustain its authority.

In general, an insurgent group may have revolutionary or territorial objectives. Revolutionary insurgencies are best represented by Maoist thinking and practice, where insurgent groups aim to take over state institutions and remake the social and political order in the image of their own ideology. A territorial objective is usually associated with nationalist independence movements, whereas an insurgent group, claiming the title of spokesperson for an ethnic/national group, aims to carve out a discrete and predetermined piece of real estate from existing state(s). The implication of such an interpretation for developing a strategy to defeat the organization is straightforward: Employ the best practices that fit the situation from the existing counterinsurgency playbook(s) (Kilcullen 2009).

ISIS-as-an-insurgency interpretation, however, has three limitations. First, ISIS' strategy runs counter to two principles that lie at the heart of insurgency groups in the modern age: The group does not shy away from alienating local populations through extreme forms of suppression and brutality, and it shows great interest in holding and fighting over territory. Second, ISIS' objectives do not completely match those of previous insurgent groups. It goes without saying that ISIS, refusing any adherence to nationalism or the nation-state form, is not interested in carving up a discrete piece of real estate from an existing state, say, along the lines of the Kurdish insurgent group PKK that has been fighting the Turkish state for more than three decades. Furthermore, while ISIS' ideology and political objectives can most certainly be called "revolutionary," it currently does not seem interested in (or capable of) toppling the regimes in Baghdad or Damascus, as, say, a Maoist insurgency would be. The third and relevant dynamic involves considering where ISIS stands at the moment: The three-stage approach to insurgency and counterinsurgency models that emanate from Maoist thinking—with its emphasis on (i) strategic defense; (ii) stalemate; and (iii) conventional offensive—does not apply to ISIS. ISIS has already established its authority in parts of both Syria and Iraq and is acting more like a state than an insurgency. Two points are relevant. First, if "ISIS proper" is dismantled and drawn out of main population centers, it may readjust its operations and strategy, so it can be seen as a full-fledged insurgency, *à la* the Taliban circa

fall 2001, but this is not the case at the moment. Second, it may still be possible to define ISIS in terms of an insurgency, but such undertaking requires that we need to redefine the term and its reflection, counterinsurgency.

ISIS as a Proto-State

An increasingly popular interpretation about the group's nature and trajectory is that ISIS is an exercise in state building and, therefore, it is best to think of it is as a proto-state (Al-Tamimi 2014). Behind this interpretation lie two factors. First, ISIS is decidedly territorial, controlling territory and defining its very existence in terms of such control. Second, ISIS is interested in governing and administering, which involves the systematic and institutionalized provision of public goods. In fact, just like most proto-states throughout history, ISIS is acting as a "stationary bandit" (Olson 2000), raising revenue through extortion, kidnaping, and smuggling, while controlling natural resources. In return, ISIS provides a modicum of security and "protection," as well as public goods that range from subsidized bread to free education and health (Al-Tamimi 2014). ISIS also polices the streets and even manages traffic. Overall, ISIS has proven itself a capable, if brutal, Leviathan, especially in a terrain that has been scarred by intra-communal violence and anarchy.

The strategic implications of this interpretation are open to debate and can be categorized into three different perspectives. First, a number of analysts suggest that ISIS can be defeated only through a large-scale conventional war, which means what is required at the end of the day is boots on the ground (Nye 2015). The second perspective, usually associated with neorealist IR scholar Steve Walt, maintains that even if ISIS graduates into "full" statehood, there is not much to worry about, as the group will then be "socialized" into the international system and its ideology will fail to spread (Walt 2015). The most sensible approach, therefore, is to contain ISIS and deter any further aggressive behavior. A third, and popular perspective, involves assumptions about the faulty and self-destructive nature of ISIS' statehood: ISIS is destined to implode in the face of piecemeal territorial losses (and its failure to expand further), as well as shortcomings in its provision of public goods (Lynch 2015b). Under such circumstances, the best way to tackle the group is to contain and strangulate it, allowing the gradual loss of support for the group, not to mention financial meltdown, to take its toll.

It is true that the revenue ISIS raises from its activities (assumed to be 1–3 million dollars a day) is not all that much for a "state" ruling over 6 million people. The assumption that ISIS will eventually implode, however, misses one crucial dynamic: A stationary bandit needs to sustain a "standard" in its services only when it faces competition from other bandits. Simple market mechanisms are at work: unless other political actors in the region offer competitive services, ISIS can rule those lands on the cheap. Given that the Baathist leviathans have either fallen or retreated from ISIS land, there is little reason for optimism about ISIS' impending implosion.

Upon close inspection, the conventional thinking about ISIS' proto-statehood reveals itself to be misleading, if only partially. The notion of "proto-statehood," in particular, assumes a specific end point toward which the group might be moving, usually implicitly identified as a modern state as most international relations scholars understand the term. However, we have little reason to think that ISIS wants to evolve into a modern state; the group's discourse and institutional practice suggest that it aims to become "something else." For one thing, ISIS' reading of the history of the modern state is akin to that of a critical theorist who would argue, and rightly so, that the modern state is in fact a Western artifact that was either exported to or imposed on the rest of the world during the last century or so, with varying degrees of success (Ashley 1986; Mendelsohn 2015). Under this interpretation, ISIS' penchant for creating a "different" kind of state does not derive solely from religious considerations; ISIS owes much of its initial success to a simple dynamic: the model that ISIS promotes is more in sync with the present-day realities of the terrain, making it easier and more practical to build a sectarian mini-empire in the midst of two failed states and rising ethnic/sectarian tensions, not to mention geopolitical competition among regional actors (Kaplan 2015).

The analysis above suggests that ISIS neither intends nor categorically needs to provide the degree and quality of public goods that is required of a modern state to stay afloat. Put differently, the assumption that ISIS cannot sustain itself as a state-like institution in the long run because people under its rule will be too displeased with the quality of services and eventually rise up is a little too optimistic.

In sum, while the different frameworks that are currently being used by analysts and scholars can help us explore different components of ISIS, they all suffer from a number of shortcomings. While a

comprehensive treatment is beyond the scope of this essay, the inadequateness of the existing frameworks suggests that an alternative way to examine ISIS may involve treating the organization not as a static "thing," but as a "process" best defined as the "interrelation between structures and actors that changes the characteristics of both of them in time" (Franke and Roos 2010). Such an approach may help students of international politics better analyze the interaction between the actors behind ISIS' actions and the strategic environment in the region. A first step toward that direction, in turn, would be to emphasize the relationship between ISIS and its regional dynamics.

Putting the "ISIS Crisis" into Regional Context

ISIS emerged and remains a regional threat not because it was too powerful or because its potential opponents were too weak. It succeeded because its capable regional opponents have few incentives to individually or collectively arrest its development and destroy the group. ISIS can afford to present an uncompromising and fanatical front partially because it has little reason to believe that the USA and its Western allies will put boots on the ground in Syria and Iraq. While recent polls suggest an increasing inclination for military action against ISIS, it will be difficult for the US government to put US "boots on the ground" in the Middle East, especially after a decade spent in Afghanistan and Iraq. European states such as France, in turn, may have greater reason to get more directly involved in the region especially after the Paris attacks of November 2015, but they simply lack the resources to do so. It follows that short of an unexpected change of "hearts and minds" in the Western world (most notably the USA), Western involvement in the region will likely remain limited to air strikes and "fighting through auxiliaries" (Kadercan 2015d).

Under such circumstances, ISIS also does not appear to be overly concerned about other regional actors. The Iraqi government has yet to recover the reputation it buried in Mosul. Furthermore, Baghdad's heavy reliance on Shia militia and Iranian support, which reached new heights during the battle over Tikrit in March 2015, inadvertently empowers ISIS by fueling the Sunni–Shia rift on which the organization feeds. The ever-volatile Shia–Sunni tensions, in turn, prompt the argument that what is required in the region to deal with ISIS is neither Western nor Shia boots on the ground, but Sunni ones (Nye 2015). However,

there is little reason to think that states like Turkey, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, in the absence of a direct threat from ISIS or externally provided stimulus (which may involve compromises or "carrots" provided by the Western powers), will put boots on the ground to defeat the Islamic State. First, there are the obvious economic and human costs that would be associated with such an undertaking. Second, ISIS does not currently present a *direct* military threat to these states. Third, because these countries are overwhelmingly Sunni, they are arguably more susceptible to ISIS-coordinated terrorist attacks on their soil, (as evidenced by the recent attacks in Suruç and Ankara in Turkey), a threat which would become more likely in case of a direct intervention. Furthermore, almost all militarily-capable Sunni powers (by which I mean the countries that are overwhelmingly Sunni and usually associated with conservative governments) have complicated interests in Syria and Iraq. Turkey's ISIS policy, for example, is heavily influenced by its position against the Assad regime as well as its concerns about the possibility of a Kurdish state in Syria and/or Iraq.

Syria's Assad regime, in turn, remains another competitor for ISIS. While the Syrian military has extensive experience in battling jihadist groups, motivating Assad to tackle ISIS would be difficult for two reasons. First, Assad's weakened forces are tied up fighting the FSA and non-ISIS jihadist groups like JN. Second, Assad would be unwilling to concentrate his forces and attention on ISIS unless the West commits to a settlement, where the regime remains intact and the FSA is liquidated. Considering that Assad has been demonized in the West for years, and countries such as Turkey adamantly oppose any reconciliation with the Syrian regime, this would be a very hard pill to swallow for the USA and its allies.

Russia's involvement in the region from Fall 2015 onward also raises questions about the fate of ISIS. However, Russia's interests in the region lie primarily with keeping the Assad regime alive, not with defeating ISIS per se. Motivated by preserving a client polity, if not a full-blown nation-state, in its strategic outpost in the Eastern Mediterranean, Russia is indeed targeting the insurgent groups—including but most certainly not limited to ISIS—that it deems as enemies of the Assad regime. Under such circumstances, and given its current priorities, there is little reason to think that Russia would concentrate its efforts on destroying ISIS.

The Kurds appear to be a motivated and capable fighting force, especially in the wake of the successful defense of Kobani and liberation of Sinjar. However, not only are the existing Kurdish military experiences and capabilities best suited for territorial defense, but also the Kurds' strategic priorities are to preserve what is deemed as Kurdish homeland and to gain recognition as a capable and legitimate political entity. Even if the West can incentivize the Kurdish forces to go on the offensive against ISIS through promises of further recognition and support for an independent Kurdish state, Kurdish incursions into regions that are deemed outside of the Kurdish homeland would inevitably provoke ethnic tensions and elicit harsh responses from numerous regional actors.

In particular, Turkey is deeply concerned with the emergence of an autonomous Kurdish polity on its southern border, especially one with organic ties to its nemesis, the PKK. Similarly, the Peoples' Protection Unit's (YPG) increasing military might, when combined with the fact that the Syrian Kurds took over a number of strategic towns where Sunni Arabs comprise the majority of the population, is fueling ethnic tensions between Kurds and Arabs. For example, while Western audiences applauded the capture of Tal Abyad (a Sunni Arab majority town) by the YPG forces in June 2015 as a strategic success, the development also created suspicion among the Sunni populations in the region. Furthermore, the rise of the YPG (and the PKK) also raises questions about the prospects of a greater Kurdistan in Iraq and Syria, which would be a big concern not only for Turkey, but also for Baghdad and Iran. Overall, these factors limit the geographical reach and effectiveness of Kurdish forces in the struggle against ISIS.

This leaves Iran as a wild card. Even if Iran opts for a more direct involvement in the conflict and helps bring down ISIS, the resulting "victory" may set the stage for a post-ISIS sectarian firestorm that could drag the region into a multi-theater transnational conflict. Iran's involvement in the Syrian civil war is a case in point. When the Iranian government—informally—sent its elite Quds forces to fight alongside Assad a couple of years ago, Tehran inadvertently empowered a narrative that portrayed the civil war as a Sunni–Shia conflict (despite the fact that the Assad regime has considerable Sunni support). In addition, countries such as the USA, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey have strong incentives to check and contain Iran's increasing clout and influence in the region, further limiting the extents to which Tehran can go vis-à-vis its involvement in the struggle against ISIS.

The analysis above points toward a general trend: ISIS benefits not only from the weaknesses of its individual competitors, but also the spider web-like conflicts of interest among them. Almost all of the actors invoked above would prefer to see ISIS degraded and destroyed; however, not only do they prefer that other actors bear the costs of tackling ISIS head on, but they are also highly motivated to prevent other regional actors from gaining ground (both militarily or in terms of influence) at their expense. This dynamic provides the organization with the opportunity and time it needs to build the kind of state it seeks.

How the Islamic State Is Reshaping the Middle East

The claim that ISIS is reshaping the Middle East is hardly hyperbole. The group is changing the political landscape of the entire region, fueling old tensions while also triggering new ones. In particular, the organization is simultaneously posing new threats and creating new opportunities for regional actors, motivating them, either out of fear or interest, to play a more active role in the remaking of the Middle East. Broadly speaking, the ISIS crisis is remaking the sectarian and ethnic dynamics in the region.

Fueling the Sectarian Divide

ISIS is fueling sectarian tensions in the Middle East in two ways: directly through its actions and indirectly by fueling a discourse/rhetoric that portrays the dynamics of political competition and cooperation primarily in sectarian terms. The "direct" method is obvious and follows the original vision of the group's founder Zarqawi. By defining its power projection and state-building efforts in sectarian terms, ISIS aims to fuel regional tensions by targeting Shias and, by implication, provoke a Shia backlash against the Sunnis. ISIS then feeds off the resulting cycle of enmity, fear, and violence, presenting itself as the chief protector of Sunni populations in conflict-ridden areas.

While ISIS' "actions" receive considerable attention, there is still relatively little discussion about the discursive component of the group's strategy. The group's sectarian strategy, when conceived in terms of its strategic communications campaign, suggests ISIS wants regional and global spectators to think that the main problem in the region is the perennial Sunni–Shia conflict. It follows that thinking of solutions to the

ISIS crisis in terms of the sectarian divide only helps the Islamic State market its rhetoric more effectively. Dormant sectarian tensions have exacerbated the conflict in Iraq and Syria. However, sectarian divides are consequences—not causes—of state failures in these countries. As long as they functioned, the Baathist regimes under Bashar al-Assad and Saddam Hussein brutally and effectively kept intra-communal sectarian tensions under control. The rise of sectarian cleavages in the wake of these regimes' collapse in authority should not be surprising. As political theorist Thomas Hobbes reminded us almost four centuries ago, in times of anarchy, people tend to coalesce around any identity or idea that might help them.

Following Hobbes' insights, one can easily argue that the Sunni populations living under the ISIS' rule are concerned primarily with avoiding victimization and anarchy, rather than avoiding Shia rule per se. Indeed, there are still sizeable Sunni populations living in Assad-held territory in Syria and under Baghdad government (which is usually associated with policies that favor Shias over Sunnis) in Iraq. Considering the existing sectarian divides, facing Shia-dominated armed forces most certainly create an element of fear for Sunnis. But it is the actions of those forces that confirm the sectarian fears while also creating a cycle of enmity and distrust between the Sunni and the Shia.

Take the example of Syria, where the civil war has come to be interpreted in overwhelmingly sectarian terms. It is true that Bashar al-Assad and the leading cadres of the Syrian military, bureaucracy, and intelligence are Alawites, who comprise roughly 13% of the population. The overwhelming majority of the population (around 70–75%) is comprised of Sunnis. However, the rhetoric that the Assad regime is built on sectarian victimization and suppression does not necessarily reflect reality, as Sunni economic and political elites have played an important role in the Assad regime since its inception in 1970. In addition, Assad also shied away from sectarian rhetoric by appointing a Sunni prime minister in 2012 and broadly framing the Syrian civil war in terms of the secular-jihadist struggle.

None of this changes the fact the Assad is a ruthless dictator who has killed many of his own people. Because Assad drew upon Iran's elite Quds Force, Shia militia from Iraq, Hezbollah, and the violent paramilitary forces known as Shabiha, he has contributed to the narrative that the Assad regime is bent on eradicating Sunnis. Still, it would be a mistake to view Assad in the same way that the jihadist groups, including

ISIS, portray him. Assad can still claim support from the majority of the populations still under his rule who prefer a repressive autocratic regime over jihadists and anarchy.

Misreading the true nature of the Assad regime in particular, and the complicated and multifaceted nature of the regional crisis fueled by state failure in general, would further embolden the sectarian narrative that a number of jihadist groups including ISIS have been promoting for almost a decade, at least since the time of Zarqawi's AQI. That being said, there is little reason to be optimistic about the role of sectarian enmity and violence in the region. Over time, it is likely that the sectarian narrative promoted—quite aggressively—by ISIS will evolve into a self-fulfilling prophecy, ossifying the sectarian rift in the region.

ISIS and the "Kurdish Question"

ISIS is transforming ethnic relations in the region, especially with respect to the fate of the Kurds. The so-called "Kurdish question"—the fact that while they can easily fulfill the criteria for nationhood, Kurds have long been denied self-determination and have been "trapped" and divided inside the borders of four sovereign states (Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran)—has been one of the most persistent yet relatively ignored puzzles of the Middle East during the century that followed the demise of the Ottoman Empire in 1923. All this changed with the rise of ISIS. As global audiences were quite literally shocked and awed by the organization's much-publicized brutal acts and strategic dexterity, not to mention the speed of its initial territorial expansion, the Kurds also began to make headlines, first as victims of the barbaric hordes of the self-proclaimed Caliphate, then as its most capable and willing adversaries.

In this context, any analysis of the implications of ISIS for the Kurdish question should start with a simple recognition: Speaking of "the Kurds" as a homogenous and unified political and military entity does not make analytical sense. There are three relevant paramilitary groups to speak of: *Peshmerga* in Iraq; the PKK operating in and in reference to Turkey; and the YPG, the military arm of the Syrian Kurds. Of the three, *Peshmerga* appears to be the most powerful actor, and also the most prudent one. Empowered by the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), *Peshmerga* can draw on not only well-supplied and well-equipped forces, but also legitimacy in the international sphere. Note that there exists a very good reason behind *Peshmerga*'s prudence, or defensive posture, *vis-à-vis*

ISIS: The KRG already governs the Kurdish-majority areas in Iraq and is recognized as a capable political entity that has established a beacon of stability in the heart of the Middle East. The KRG, acting more like a "realist" state than anything else, understands that any attempt to take over more territory or to claim outright independence will trigger an immediate—and most likely, harsh—reaction from a multitude of regional actors, including Turkey, with whom the Iraqi Kurds have established a robust relationship.

All the KRG needs to do at this stage is to keep calm and carry on, waiting for the day when its de facto near-independence will pave the way, if gradually, for *de jure* sovereignty. That is, if the Iraqi Kurds ever decide they can be better off all on their own. The same prudence also accounts for *Peshmerga*'s reluctance to actively participate in the defense of the Syrian town of Kobani. Not only would it be too costly to send forces into the heart of ISIS land, the KRG would also run the risk of appearing as the "Prussia of greater Kurdistan" [circa 1860s], a revisionist force that aimed to create an expansive Kurdish state that could carve up territories from Syria, and even Turkey and Iran down the road.

The PKK and the YPG, in turn, are close associates with organic ties. Both organizations are "hungrier" than the KRG, as they have yet to consolidate their power in their respective domains and establish some sense of self-sufficiency and security. They also share a similar left-leaning political ideology. While it is safe to assume that these organizations act in tandem, there are also differences between the two. First, while the PKK is considered a terrorist organization, the YPG has established itself as a legitimate militia whose main intention is to defend Kurdish populations in Syria.

Second, while the PKK is forced to remain on the run as an insurgent group, the YPG is part of a political establishment that governs territory. In 2012, Syria's Assad regime decided to let go of the Kurdish-populated areas in northern Syria without a fight, freeing resources to tackle its more immediate enemies elsewhere. Assad's decision triggered what is now known as the "Rojava [Western Kurdistan] Revolution," which led to the creation of self-governed Kurdish "cantons" in Syria, protected by the YPG. ISIS' implications for the Kurdish question, in fact, are better conceived in terms of the consequences of the Rojava Revolution.

So, what are those implications? ISIS presents the Kurds with threats and, while few talk about it, opportunities. The threat is real and straightforward: ISIS does not hide its intentions to either eradicate or

subdue the Kurdish populations in Iraq and Syria, and has already caused considerable suffering to the Kurds. That the suffering is real, however, should not detract from the opportunities that ISIS provides to the Kurdish groups in the region. We can talk about four key areas.

First, ISIS quite literally presents an existential threat to the Kurds and by doing so incentivizes them to unite under a common banner. Second, the YPG's struggle with ISIS in Syria has provided the Kurdish national-ist movement with a multitude of national myths and heroes, especially in the context of the successful defense of Kobani (which relied on heavy air support from the USA). Kobani now inspires countless Kurds and will most certainly play a crucial role in bringing them together by provid-ing an array of symbols of sacrifice and heroism. Third, the fact that ISIS has established itself as international public enemy number one, when combined with the ineffectiveness or unreliability of alternative auxiliaries such as the Iraqi army and the Shiite militia, has allowed the YPG and *Peshmerga* in particular to benefit from direct Western support, defined in terms of equipment and air support. This support will likely have long-term consequences for the said groups.

The fourth opportunity that ISIS provides to the Kurdish groups involves legitimacy and popular support. The Kurdish groups have already taken advantage of the global media's eye on the ISIS crisis and the resultant international disdain for the jihadist group by launch-ing a strategic communications campaign that presents the Kurds as an exceptionally capable (ethnic) group that is fighting the barbaric hordes in the name of humanity and civilization, not necessarily for a national-istic cause (note that these objectives need not be mutually exclusive). Second, the sense of legitimacy that the YPG derives from its fight with ISIS is also being used strategically to "whitewash" the PKK's reputation as a terrorist organization. Put bluntly, after a century of being ignored, the Kurds have captured not only the international spotlight, but also near-unanimous ideational support in the eyes of Western audiences.

In sum, for these Kurdish groups, ISIS presents both an existential threat and a unique, if costly, opportunity to push forward their agenda for political autonomy and the creation of a greater Kurdistan. The pros-pects of such an outcome, in turn, are bound to create further tensions in the region, not only among states such as Turkey and Iran, but also among Sunni Arabs in Syria and Iraq who may be concerned with an expansionist Kurdish nationalist agenda.

Conclusion

In addition to the existential and ideological threat it poses on the ground, ISIS poses an unprecedented challenge to students of international politics. The group can be seen as a transnational terrorist organization, a cult of religious fanatics, an extremely resourceful insurgent group, or an exercise in state building. In so many ways, ISIS contains elements that are associated with all these interpretations, yet it cannot be placed in any one of the relevant conceptual and analytical boxes. As an ever shifting and evolving process, the group still remains elusive.

So, how should we approach the debate on ISIS? First, we need to start framing the threats and challenges posed by the Islamic State not only in terms of the group itself, but also in the context of the broader regional crisis that led to its meteoric rise. ISIS was born out of a decade-long political crisis in Iraq, and came of age by feeding off of state failure in Syria. Tackling the group without considering the complicated and regional nature of the crisis will either lead to strategic failure or an outcome, where the Islamic State is "destroyed," only to be replaced by an even bigger and more complex challenge to international security. We should stop obsessing with "how to fight ISIS" and think harder about how to deal with the broader regional crisis that ISIS represents. Second, we should base our arguments on realistic assumptions about regional actors' motives and capabilities. Thinking more realistically about what makes the relevant actors tick is necessary for assessing which options are viable, and which are not, in the face of a complex and time-sensitive crisis.

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Author Biography

Burak Kadercan is an Assistant Professor of Strategy and Policy at the US Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island. He received his PhD in Political Science from the University of Chicago in 2011. He is also a Senior Associate at the Center on Irregular Warfare and Armed Groups (CIWAG). His research agenda lies at the intersection of IR theory, international security, political geography, and international history. He specializes in two broad topics. The first is the study of territory and territoriality in the context of international politics. The second topic involves the relationship between state-formation (or state failure) processes and production of military power. The cases he examines range from the Ottoman Empire to the so-called Islamic State (ISIS), or private military and security companies in the present-day Iraq and Afghanistan. His research has been published in International Security; International Theory; Review of International Studies; International Studies Review; Territory, Politics, Governance; and Middle East Policy.

Conclusion: The State of the Non-state Armed Actors in the Middle East

Murat Yeşiltaş and Tuncay Kardaş

The Middle East has often been a headline grabber, and its pressing issues frequently ignite debate and controversy. While the former is already a vague concept with no clear territorial, political, or cultural borders, we have seen the evolution of even a vaguer concept: the "New Middle East." Debates over the latter especially came to the fore with the dramatic rise of non-state armed actors (NSAAs) and the prospect of their proliferation which threatens to subvert the conventional components of regional order. Academic studies for understanding such armed actors are scarce, while journalistic accounts abound polemical exchanges often win the day. This volume sought to fill this gap with three aims. First, it sought to understand the changing nature of violent geopolitics in the Middle East particularly in the context of the Syrian civil war and the gradual decline of the Iraqi state structure. Second, it explored the

M. Yeşiltaş (✉) · T. Kardaş
Sakarya University Esentepe Kampusu, Serdivan, Turkey
e-mail: yesiltas@sakarya.edu.tr

T. Kardaş
e-mail: tuncaykardas@hotmail.com

impact of non-state military actors on the contemporary socio-political transformations in the region. Third, it addressed the question of how the rise of the non-state armed actors in the Middle East reshaped and transformed the nature of state sovereignty, violent conflict, political and social borders.

The advent of non-state armed actors in the Middle East is closely related to the security crises following the Arab Uprisings particularly after the military coup in Egypt in the summer of 2013 and hyper-localized of the civil war in Syria. The spillover effects include the challenges to the Westphalian norms of "the state" placing increasing pressure on the regional dynamics with actions that weaken the conventional borders. In addition, the new local socio-political antagonisms and geopolitical dynamics in the region accelerate the exodus of millions of civilians fleeing the Syrian War theater into the neighboring and European Union countries. The exodus itself has started to change the social fabric of the receiving states. Other related concerns will also continue to occupy the agenda of international, foreign, and domestic policy making elites as well social and economic actors operating in the Middle East.

The emergent transformations have not only challenged the global and regional order of states but also force the existing scholarship to develop new approaches that can explain the crucible of recent events in the Middle East. Likewise, there is an urgent need for alternative approaches that put the analytical and theoretical foci on such pressing issues as the strategies and operational logic of violent non-state actors, proxy wars, new terrorist states, societal insecurity, socio-economic changes such as migrant outflows and sectarian radicalization. In relation to the latter, certain dramatic changes have been taking place in the Middle East following the Arab Uprisings, such as the deepening of the Sunni–Shi'a division and conflict from Iraq and Syria to Yemen and the youth demands for a proper share of economic dividends in the face of soaring unemployment rates. All of these help to drive the rise of extremist religious groups and a new wave of warring social groups unsatisfied with the current state of affairs yet unable to change their immediate situations. It is therefore no coincidence that the non-state armed actors stepped in those failed states (Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya) where the state building process was historically incomplete and the need for a social contract was evident.

Main Findings

In all, this volume has reached five consequences regarding the relationship between the rise of non-state armed groups and the regional transformations in the post-Arab spring era. First, the corrosive economic, political, and security structures of the Middle East have gone through radical loss or erosion of trust and efficacy. It is within such a shaky context that the proliferation of the violent non-state armed actors has radically undermined state institutions, governance structures, and regional security arrangements. The historical–political competition between regional state elites is radicalized into becoming a friend–enemy competition between societal actors. The conflicts that were previously waged between states and across political borders are now taken deep into social borders, which are increasingly delineated along ethno-sectarian lines. ISIS serves a striking illustration at the center of such repercussions. The rise and fall of the former is likely to result in a new "complex territorial system" for the region. Therefore, as this volume showed, the threats and challenges posed by ISIS and other NSAAs should be understood not only in terms of the groups themselves, but also in the context of the broader crises pertaining to the great power interventions and global political economy. The ISIS was born out of an international political crisis in Iraq and come of age thanks in part to the decline of state structures.

Second, as a result of the ongoing struggle among different ethnic and sectarian political subjectivities and their representation under the umbrella of the non-state armed groups, a new collective consciousness is constructed around the "discourse of resistance" (i.e., Kurdish resistance against ISIS, Sunni resistance against Shi'a, Shi'a resistance against Sunni, Huthi resistance). This in turn sets the stage for a new form of social interaction that easily upsets the regional balance of power, which is increasingly defined around the role and legitimacy of existing borders and precarious socio-political structures across the region. Therefore, the new cross-border interactions give rise to a new concept of territoriality shattering the fundamental structures of existing regional order. In this new terrain, the rethinking of local identities, territorial and social borders should be couched in the *cities* (Kobane, Musul, Dabiq, Kirkuk, and so on) and *squares* as the new symbols for political and geopolitical arrangements. The complex nature of this ongoing transition and the changes in the "trans-border patterns of loyalty" helps the

proliferation of the non-state armed actors in the Middle East. It is necessary to rethink the conventional institutional structures of states that have been designed in hierarchical terms within the state around the idea of monopoly of the use of violence over an internationally recognized territory. As this volume has shown, the advent of the NSAAs has led the state structures to turn into anarchy, absolute violence to spike and "state of exception" to become a technique of political rule. Due in part to the proliferation of the NSAAs, the public spaces are marked with ethno-religious radicalization and extreme violence.

Third, the militarization of the NSAAs takes place through the gendered power relations which help to provide not only domestic but also international legitimacy, new forms of authority and protection. The enrollment of women and girls as warriors inside NSAAs has certain appeals to the female sense of equality, of being taken seriously, respect, and liberation (as was the case in Syrian Kurds' Kobane War experience discussed in this volume). The women and girls are functional not only because they provide labor force or logistical support but also because they demonstrate the "depth of power and determination" of the armed group as well as being a powerful symbolic move in "sustaining the groups" claim on legitimacy and, hence, power.

Fourth, the advent of NSAAs has profound implications for the micro-dynamics of warfare including the recruitment patterns (as in the European foreign fighters in the Syrian civil war), the methods of violent extremism (as in the cases of ISIS), and political representation (as in the PYD). The non-state military actors have their own peculiar territorial logic. While the ethnic NSAAs have a strong nationalistic territorial imagination, the religious NSAAs have apocalyptic territorial imagination in which borders are not strictly defined. Thus, we are better equipped to further the study of politics of territoriality in the context of the NSAAs and establish innovative links between political geography and critical geopolitics.

Fifth, the paradoxical nature of the relationship between security provision and the state is further heightened by the NSAAs. The state's transformation from a security provider to a source of insecurity and the emergence of the latter as a response to such a transformation have pushed sub-national ethnic and religious groups to set up their own governance mechanisms (as in Syria, Iraq, and Libya). The resulting struggle turns many states into "failed states." In Iraq, for example, as the Kurds, Turkmens, Shi'a, and Sunnis turned to secure their own interests,

the weakness of the Iraqi state increased. Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya are almost a microcosm of the emerging "micro-geopolitical struggle of survival" involving all the major actors.

The Next Stage

For many public figures (Zbigniew Brzezinski or Leon Panetta) as well as academics, there has been a growing interest in comparing the Westphalian experience with the recent state of affairs in the Middle East. Although it might be tempting to compare the contemporary Middle East to the Westphalian experience, the two experiences differ. While the 30 Years' Wars was fought between major powers of the time, the contemporary Middle East witnessed many proxy wars led by outside imperial interventions. The false promise of Westphalian analogy does little to help us understand the current state of affairs and transformations in the region. Overall, it seems difficult to redress the damage done by the NSAAs in the short term. It is clear that in the long run, the region will have to build extraterritorial dispute mechanisms and a working system of collective security. However, it should also be stressed that the role of regional institutions in providing the latter services and regional stability has already diminished. Although tasked with exerting influence through conflict resolution efforts and placing constraints on states, regional organizations (The Arab League, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, GCC, etc.) have failed in these two accounts and thus become almost obsolete. Regional disorder and fragmentation run parallel to the dysfunctional regional organizations that are simply unable to redress regional insecurities in Syria, Libya, Egypt, Iraq, and Gaza. All these conditions undermine the mechanisms required for reconstructing regional order, building extraterritorial dispute mechanisms and a system of collective security forcing actors to turn to unilateral preferences or short-term alliances.

The study of the politics of NSAAs could establish an innovative link between international relations and comparative politics. As the contributing articles underlined, the new dynamics of conflict at one level would almost certainly have an impact on the other level. Therefore, further research would need to specify and study the conditions under which internal politics of legitimacy and regional/international interventions are mutually reinforcing. It would then be more plausible to shed more light on the non-state sources of political legitimacy and what the latter tells about the structure and mechanisms of the regional system of state in general.

Practical as well as analytically oriented works on the NSAAs, as in the present volume, are urgently needed to grasp the ideological, operational, and tactical codes of armed groups in the wider theater of civil wars. The latter and other violent geographies are ultimately related to the political economy of Middle East. Only through such academic engagements can we hope to gain solid understandings about the novelty of non-state armed actors and about the future conflicts.

Authors Biography

Murat Yeşiltaş has completed his BA and MA at the Department of International Relations of Sakarya University, in 2003 and 2009, respectively. He earned his PhD at the Department of Political Science and International Relations at Marmara University in 2012. Yeşiltaş was a visiting researcher at the Department of European Studies and International Politics of Lancaster University between 2008 and 2009 and visiting researcher at Virginia Tech's Institute of Government and International Affairs between 2010 and 2011. He served as an academic advisor for Center for Strategic Studies (SAM) of Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey between 2012 and 2014. Currently, Yeşiltaş is an Associate Professor in the Middle East Institute at Sakarya University. He also holds the position of director of security studies at SETA Foundation, Ankara, Turkey. Yeşiltaş' current researches are on critical geopolitics, ethnic/religious radicalization, geopolitics of non-state conflicts, terrorism, and the Kurdish affairs. He is currently working on the following research projects: Kurdish Geopolitical Space: Remaking of the Kurdish Political Subjectivity and the New Kurdish Geopolitical Imagination; the New Regional Security Project (NRSP). His most recent books are *Türkiye Dünyanın Neresinde?Hayali Coğrafyalar Çarpışan Anlatılar* (Where is Turkey Located? Imagined Geographies, Competing Narratives) (2015, Koc University Press) and *Geopolitical Mentality and the Military in Turkey* (2016, Kadim).

Dr. Tuncay Kardaş is Associate Professor of International Relations at the Middle East Institute of Sakarya University. He received his BA and MA degrees from Bilkent University in Ankara; MsEcon (Security Studies) and Ph.D. from the Department of International Politics at Aberystwyth University in Wales in 2006. He is currently serving as the Deputy Director of the Middle East Institute of Sakarya University. His research focuses broadly on sociology of security, foreign fighters, the ISIS, critical security studies, security governmentality, visual semiotics, and Turkish Foreign Policy. Dr. Kardas is the co-editor of "The Borders of Islam: Exploring Samuel Huntington's Faultlines, from Al-Andalus to Virtual Ummah," (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

His most recent articles appeared in Turkish Studies, such as Middle East Critique, Insight Turkey, Birikim, Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations, and Economics and Management: Current Issues and Perspectives. Dr. Kardaş's current researches are on foreign fighters, Islamic radicalization, and the Kurdish conflict. He is currently working on the following research projects: Turkish Foreign Fighters, ISSDIT: Inter-Societal Security Dilemmas in Turkey, and ISSDIME: Inter-Societal Security Dilemmas in the Middle East. He is the organizer of Crisis and Critique Conferences and an editorial board member of Ortadoğu Yıllığı. His most recent research is titled "The Inter-Societal Security Dilemma in Turkey: Kurdish Opening" Turkish Studies with Ali Balci published in Turkey Studies.

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