

Faisal WARIKAT:

The Survival of Proto-State Armed Groups in the Middle East



Thesis of the doctoral (PhD) dissertation

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Introduction

*The minimum goal of any organization is
survival*

Crenshaw (1987)

The subject of this research is the survival of proto-state armed groups in the Middle East; the importance of the subject stems from its influence upon international security, the heavyweight these groups play inside the Middle East.

The groups that can be qualified as proto-states are Fatah in Jordan (1968-1971), Fatah in Lebanon (1971-1982), AMAL in Lebanon (1975-1988), ISIS in Syria (2013-2017), Taliban in Afghanistan (2001-2021), Houthis in Yemen (2013-until today), Hamas (2006-until today), Hezbollah (1990-until today).

Hamas and Hezbollah were selected as case studies because of their success in surviving several wars more than other groups that fought Israel, also managed to survive conflicts with their internal rivals. They even managed to get into governing positions: Hamas has governed the Gaza strip to win the first Palestinian elections in 2006. Hezbollah MPs have been elected to the Lebanese parliament and served in several Lebanese governments. Another reason for the selection is their heavyweights in the Arab -Israeli conflict; they are deeply embedded in their respective communities from the socio-economic and political points of view, and they are considered uncontested proto-states armed groups.

Proto-State Armed Group

Proto-State Armed Groups are part of armed groups that started as non-state armed groups but elevated to the position above a non-state and lower than a state; they have apparent physical control of portions of territories in which they raise their flags, their presence is not limited to practice violent activities but also take part in political activities, evident examples are Hezbollah, Hamas, Fatah during its presence in Jordan (1968-1971) and Lebanon (1971-1982), Taliban in

Afghanistan during the period (2001-2021)¹Moreover, Yemen's Houthis (Ansar Allah) are usually described as ' state within a state.'

My definition of a proto-state armed group is *Armed groups that have a hybrid nature that pose a hybrid threat to the state-actors; challenge the sovereignty of the host-state by their hybrid nature, control an essential part of the host state to demonstrate their governance, and usually have enmity with selected enemy-state. Also, they seek internal and external legitimacy.*

So, the main conditions for a group to be named a proto-state armed group:

- It has a hybrid nature and threat
- Has an implicit legitimacy with state actors
- Has apparent existence in a defined part of the host state.
- Claims a cause, the appropriation of national responsibility.
- Has an enemy-state
- Pursues internal and external legitimacy

Dissertation's Problem

The dissertation's academic problem is the survival of proto-state armed groups in the Middle East despite the presumed effective counterinsurgency measures. The research aims to fill the gap in understanding the factors contributing to their survival and conceptualizing proto-state armed groups concept.

Research Objectives

The research objectives are the followings:

- Establish an analytical framework for the analysis of the survival of non-state armed groups, including proto-states armed groups.
- Develop the concept of proto-state armed group. The concept is still vague and has little meaning in academia and amongst researchers who conflate it with other labels like terrorist

¹ Although Taliban and Houthis do not exist in the Middle East, partially brought as examples of PSAGs, because of their recent victories, similarity in ideologies, even the US CENTCOM is still responsible for that part of the world as the other parts of the Middle East.

groups, insurgencies, or even the name that these groups like to apply to themselves: resistance groups;

- Analyze the effectiveness of the state countermeasures against proto-state armed groups. The proto-state armed groups phenomenon needs more than complex power solutions; hard power means proved ineffective in this field;
- Investigate the center of gravity (CoG) of proto-state armed groups during the conflict with the host-state.
- Highlight the factors responsible for the proliferation of terrorism in the Middle East region.

Hypotheses

Hypothesis (1)

A proto-state armed group survives partly due to internal factors particular to the group and partly to its interactions with the external circles. The external circles are the host-state, the region, and the international system. Besides these circles, the group interacts positively or negatively with the 'other groups' and the enemy-state that targets the group's survival.

Hypothesis (2)

Several CoGs need analysis during the conflict between the host state and the proto-state armed group. The strategic CoG of the host state during the conflict is its legitimacy. The primary source of conflict between them is the competition for legitimacy. The proto-state armed group's legitimacy can be reduced to internal and external support. The second CoG is the operational CoG which is the power of resistance that equals the product of military power multiplied by the group's morale. Operational is essential for winning the kinetic part of the war, and it is conducive to success on the strategic level.

Hypothesis (3)

Countermeasures against proto-state armed groups depend upon the victory theory of the host-state. The state's interaction with the group is based upon its ability to neutralize the latter's Center of Gravity. The central equation for victory applies to either belligerent. It is:

$$\text{Victory} = \text{Legitimacy} + \text{Resilience}$$

Where:

Legitimacy is the decrease or increase of support the belligerent receives from the population of the host state and external states, and other armed groups, therefore

$$\text{Legitimacy} = \text{Internal Support} + \text{External Support};$$

$$\text{Resilience} = \text{Power of Resistance} + \text{Recovery};$$

Resilience is the ability of the proto-state armed groups to withstand the belligerent power without deformation to its bonds; if the force is greater than its resistance, then it is the time that it takes to recover to its original status.

Power of Resistance equals the belligerent's military power, multiplied by its morale in the broadest sense: that of his fighting forces, as well as that of the society he relies on, therefore

$$\text{Power of Resistance} = \text{Military power} * \text{Morale}.$$

Substituting the component factors into the central equation, we get

$$\text{Victory} = (\text{Internal Support} + \text{External Support}) + (\text{Military Power} * \text{Morale}) + \text{Recovery}$$

The destruction of the military means or sapping the opposing belligerent's will to fight (or both) will result in the operational level. However, if his ability to recover is not affected, he will return to fight another day. Therefore, the state's ability to achieve victory hinges on its ability to prevent the recovery of the proto-state armed group to its initial status. The victory equation must be modified:

$$\text{Victory} = \text{Legitimacy} + \text{Power of Resistance} + \text{Prevention of Recovery}.$$

Hypothesis (4)

The prevalence of terrorism in the Middle East region is affected by the socio-economic and political factors.

The main socio-economic factor is the high population growth rate with a low unemployment rate, especially in the young generations, economic growth that does not match population growth. Also, political freedoms are low in the Middle East, and the lack of freedom of expression turns the youth to covert means of demanding political and economic rights. The rate of corruption also contributes to the frustration of the youth.

Research Methodology

The methodology used to find the answers is mixed; it relies on multi-methods to approve the authenticity of the proposed hypotheses. The first step was to use a survey appropriate to the exploration; the overall sample was 400 respondents (200 from Jordan, 100 from the West Bank, and 100 from Gaza Strip). The survey was evaluated using an index of an 8-item scale developed by the researcher. The survey used a questionnaire that adopted a 5-point Likert scale (very high, high, medium, low, and very low) to measure the responses. After the survey, subject matter experts were interviewed, followed by a focus group to validate the analysis results. Also, the results were consulted with the social constructivism theoretical framework. Table 1 is a synopsis of the used methods. The second step was the use of case studies of Hamas and Hezbollah to validate the findings of the research.

Table 1

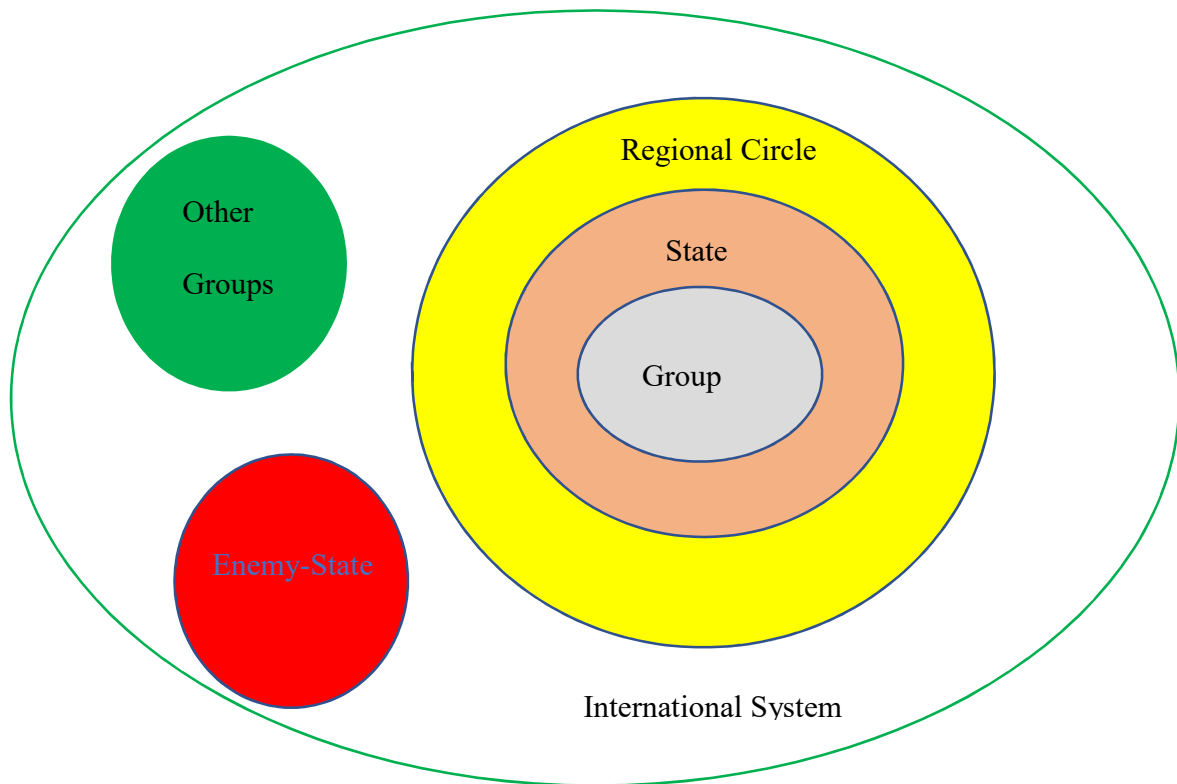
Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Method	Validation Method
Hypothesis (1)	Survey, Interviews, focus group.	Case studies
Hypothesis (2)	Analysis of CoG	Case studies
Hypothesis (3)	Analysis of case studies	Interviews
Hypothesis (4)	Analysis of Global Terrorism Database (GTD)	focus group

The following figure 1 is the suggested analytical framework for the survival of armed groups

Figure 1

Analytical Framework



Dissertation Structure

The dissertation is built up of six chapters run as follows:

The Introduction

The Introduction consists of the research elements: the statement of the problem, the declared objectives of the research, the research questions followed by the hypotheses, significance, and an outline of the dissertation's structure.

Chapter One

This chapter surveys the literature on the subject; it goes from general broader borders to narrow down on the research issue. Also, it conceptualizes proto-state armed groups and determines the conditions needed for their survival.

It also presents the research methodology used in the dissertation; the research design is a mixed research methodology, it explains the philosophical stances, methods, also explain the framework which is used to analyze armed groups' survival, which is named by 'circles of survival,' and that was derived from the literature review covered in the first chapter.

Chapter Two

This chapter evaluate the presented hypotheses starting from the first hypothesis which is about the survival of proto-state armed groups, then the center of gravity of the groups and the host -state during their conflict, their victory theory by demonstrating how they could win or lose against state actors. Case studies are presented from the 1982 Israeli invasion to Lebanon, PLO in Jordan in 1970, and the Taliban victory in Afghanistan. Lastly, the fourth hypothesis concerning the proliferation of terrorism inside the Middle East.

Chapter Three and Four

These two chapters represent the case studies of Hamas and Hezbollah to validate the already established hypotheses in chapter Two. The analytical framework is applied to analyze the survival of these groups.

Chapter Five

This chapter aligns the findings with the theoretical framework and conclude. Also, it presents the new scientific findings, the contribution to AcademiaAcademia, and future studies that can be pursued in line with this dissertation.

Conclusions

The Future of Proto-State Armed Groups in the Middle East

There is no meaning to finish this research without giving expectations to the future of Proto-state armed groups in the Middle East. It can be concluded from this research that there is a high connection between the Middle East and Proto-state armed groups; the Middle East is their first condition to live because of reasons related to the legitimacy weakness of the states, its inability to answer the high rates of population growth and the failure of its conventional armies to deal with other's states armies, the availability of appealing causes like the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The youth frustration in these states and their contempt pursued them to search for alternative structures than the state as these political systems do not seek to democratize their societies and

rely on the availability of Islamic groups to provide a cause for their legitimacy in front of the Western Powers. “Jihadi groups not only offered young people a salary and sense of belonging, but they spoke to the estrangement and alienation that many young people felt. Weak economies bred despair, as much more youth sought government employment than governments could provide” (Alterman, 2021).

Center of Gravity

The center of gravity of the host-state during the conflict with the Proto-state armed group is the state's legitimacy, while the CoG of the groups is also their legitimacy which is a combination of public and external support.

The cases of Hezbollah and Hams prove the validity of this hypothesis as the legitimacy of their host entities is the critical factor for their survival. Their military power combined with their will to fight constituted the operational CoG that proved itself within their internal disputes.

Victory theory of Proto-state armed groups

In order to win over Proto-state armed groups, the first requirement is to strengthen the CoG of the host state, which is its legitimacy; the following step is to deprive the group of its internal and external support.

Thirdly, is to use military power, intelligence efforts, information operations (IO) to destruct the resistance of power by destabilizing their will to fight and inflicting damage to their armed wings; lastly is to prevent their recurrence by holding the leadership to commit to a deal which prevents the reemergence of its violent character.

The distinctive features of war with Proto-state armed groups are that it is first and foremost war overpopulation, it needs intelligence preparations, secures the army and security agencies from defections and penetration, provides the population in general with protections, the state campaign has to be done in a comprehensive strategy that uses information operations.

The proliferation of terrorism in the Middle East

The Middle East is fertile soil for terrorism because of the socio-economic and political deficiencies and unsettled Arab-Israeli conflict.

The case studies also demonstrate that conflict is essential to the persistence of political turmoil that generates violent expressions. The unsettled Arab-Israeli conflict is another factor for the terrorism proliferation in the Middle East.

Survival of Proto-states

As soon as the armed group becomes proto-state, it becomes survivable more than any other armed group; its survival is ingrained with the host-state weakness, the public support it has, the services it provides, and the external support and roles it plays. Later, even the host- state will differ from naming it by negative connotations. For example, the proto-state armed group is hard to be destroyed if it gets the 'significant threshold' of the population in support of that group; Galula believes the number for insurgencies is 15-25 % of the population, both the cases of Hamas and Hezbollah have more than the threshold of support and that is attributed to the maturity of the groups and their practice of social service provision.

Evolution of the Proto-State Armed Group

From the comparative study between Hamas and Hezbollah, the emergence of proto-state armed groups stems from social protest movements environment; they usually start by splintering from a mother more peaceful group with hawkish leaderships inspired by ideology as a reaction or protest to the reconciliatory behavior of the mother group. The next step is justifying their splintering by perpetrating clandestine terrorist actions that provide them with confidence doses; as soon as they get more recruitments, they become visible by declaring their political charters, announcing their resistance intending to attract more population by the claim of appealing causes. After the chart declaration, they embrace external state sponsorship from powers that like to contain them within its grand strategy. This step provides them with the finance to swallow more of 'population support' and go beyond the 'significant population threshold.

In this step, they also adopt hybrid threat and hybrid nature to pursue external sources of legitimacy and accept politicization efforts; both of the groups declare a substitute chart in which focus is more on political ends and relinquishing terrorism as a means and as the price they end up with implicit international acceptance.

New Scientific Results

The scientific findings that this dissertation came up with are the followings:

1. I have developed the analytical framework for the analysis of the survival of armed groups. The framework can be used to assess the proto-state armed groups, and it can contribute to the analysis of new terrorist groups and assess the possibility of their survivability.
2. I have proved the existence of the 'enemy state calculations' in the analysis of the survival of the armed groups; it mainly depends on the concept of the 'Bone-Breaking Point.'
3. By analyzing the existing proto-state groups and their conflicts with their host states, I have proved that the strategic center of gravity (CoG) of the host state and the proto-state armed groups during the conflict is their legitimacy. Their operational CoG is the product of the military power multiplied by the morale of the group's leadership and fighters.
4. I have established the theory of victory in the war between the state and the proto-state armed groups.

Academic Contribution of the Research

- This work established a conceptual framework for the Proto-state armed groups; past researches do not delineate borders between terrorism, insurgency, proto-states, and other kinds of non-state armed groups; which generated mixed and complex interpretations that do not resonate on the ground as mostly these groups have a physical appearance and are publicly supported in their host states and have their communication lines with regional and international state actors.
- The use of a new analytical framework for the analysis of non-state armed groups which takes into consideration the combined effects of the region, international system, reaction with the host-state and enemy state, and with 'other groups' as an alternative to the current focus on the strengths of the group. Also, this research demonstrated the use of different theories in this field, most notably the use of social constructivism to delve into the future of these groups and explain their reactions. Likewise, this research used the center of gravity theory for proto-state actors, which was constrained to state actors in the classical Clausewitzian way of thinking.

Recommendations

The following is a list of recommendations on the policy level:

- The international community and the US, in particular, have to study the advantages of negotiation with proto-state armed groups and encourage them to disarm and contribute to the peace process; it is a better requirement to develop a relationship with democratically elected, yet ideologically may hostile regimes to reconcile them, by such action, the international community should encourage group's norms modifications by promotion of direct negotiation which might lessen the impact of group's norms.
- Encourage the affected states to build their legitimacy, enhance their nation-building process, as their weakness is the factor that invites proto-state armed groups and other kinds of groups to flourish; they exploit the vulnerability of the state, and in some ways, they do the jobs that state ought to do, like building schools, preventing crimes, controlling illegal bands, it is a waste of resources to fight the proto-state armed group before doing the first task, the Afghani government with the US wasted 20 years of resources in war with Taliban, as they went to the second step which is the destruction of the operational CoG and missed the essential first step and that made their failure inevitable.

The weakness of the host-state is an essential cornerstone of the endurance of the proto-state armed groups, which means that its efforts from the international community are to help the host-state recover from its weakness is of utmost importance; the lesson learned from Afghanistan 2021 is to fight corruption and build a system that is accepted by the local people, not because of its agency to the sponsor powers.

- States are sometimes forced to create similar proto-state armed groups units to combat the hybrid threat, but they have to be careful with this creation and control it from the first minute that it will not be easy for it to dismantle these units after their triumph as in the case of PMU in Iraq demonstrates.
- In contrast to older generations in the Middle East, the youth is iconoclastic in their definition of the legitimacy of their states. They are unwilling to base it on rigid religious or even ethnic structural elements responsible for conflicts dating back millennia.

They demand to base legitimacy upon good governance; existing political systems should take note; if they do not, they ignore it at their own peril.

Practical Application

This dissertation offers a practical guide, and will certainly enhance the knowledge of military planners and the officers of security agencies, and assist them in dealing with armed non-state actors.

Its use is recommended to military personnel in peace operations missions like UNFIL, in order to obtain an understanding and a concise appreciation of the area and its nuances that cast a shadow over the success of the mission.

Hungarian diplomacy is active in the Middle East and that demand a greater understanding for the causes and remedies for intractable conflicts that are common in that area. This research makes a significant contribution in this aspect.

The scientific findings and the conclusions are applicable to similar conflicts that might take place in any part of the world, Europe is no exception in this case.

Nowadays the conditions are not conducive to the growth of proto-state armed groups in Europe because European states are generally stable, and state fragility is not a problem, but this condition can change at any time.

The use of hybrid warfare is entrenched within state actors, e.g. Russia relies on pro-Russian militias and separatist armed groups in Ukraine.

I used a set of historical case studies to maintain the authenticity of victory theory. I strongly believe that the theory is applicable in any part in the world, and it can prove its value in the current Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

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