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## **BEYOND THE STATE**

NON-STATE ACTORS IN THE MIDDLE EAST



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### ***Beyond the State: Non-State Actors in the Middle East***

There is a consensus that there is a return of great power politics globally centered around the US-China rivalry. Yet, in the Middle East, since October 2023, non-state actors remain key for the regional developments alongside states. However, it is not only armed non-state actors like Hamas in Palestine, Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen that are crucial in the regional political dynamics. There are other non-state actors that receive little to no attention and yet they are important for understanding where the region is heading. International organizations and institutions have seen their influence undercut, adding to the vacuum across the region. Many have attempted to fill this void: from the diaspora communities abroad to local charities and NGOs. Conversely, smugglers, private military companies (PMCs) and the Salafi-Jihadist groups, such as HTS, ISIS and al-Qaeda, have found various ways to exploit the turmoil and enhance their role. At the same time, ethnic and religious communities such as the Druzes, Christians and Yazidis have been caught in the crossfire. This Middle East Bulletin aims at mapping developments concerning these overshadowed actors in the thick of the regional tumult.



# THE RETURN OF THE 'NEAR ENEMY'

Contemporary shifts in Salafi Jihadist activity in the Middle East

Ilias Mitrousis

Both ISIS and al-Qaeda (AQ), the principal actors of the global Salafi-Jihadist movement, are significantly weakened in the Middle East and beyond. Nevertheless, both groups demonstrate resilience and maintain footholds in the region. By examining current Salafi-Jihadist activities in the Middle East, this article identifies a key shift. There is a transition from global terrorist attacks to local insurgencies, reflecting a shift from transnational to territorially oriented Jihadism.

**D**ESPITE THE COLLAPSE of its territorial Caliphate, ISIS has sustained its relevance through the 'internationalization' of its brand via a global network of affiliates. The organization occasionally claims responsibility, directly or through its affiliates, for large-scale terrorist attacks against international targets including the recent attacks in Moscow and Iran's Shiraz and Kerman. Nevertheless, its primary focus remains on local insurgencies. Experts argue that while its global terrorist strikes have also been reactive to pressure from the international anti-ISIS coalition, they are primarily aimed at challenging AQ's hegemonic posture within the global Salafi-Jihadist movement.<sup>1</sup> This strategic competition occurs as AQ struggles to revive its doctrine of global Jihad against the 'far enemy' (the United States and Western allies), while ISIS emphasizes building a territorialized Islamic utopia at the local level. While ISIS has demonstrated the capacity and willingness to strike internationally, especially between 2014 and 2016, most of the subsequent attacks featuring its name have been perpetrated by sympathizers or lone actors inspired by the group, rather than being directed by it. As the Sahel and West Africa evolve into the new Salafi-Jihadist hotbeds, ISIS's emphasis on the 'near enemy' (local corrupt regimes or deviant religious or ethnic minorities) is also signaled by its relatively 'laissez-faire' approach toward its affiliates. By not attempting to exercise direct control, it allows them significant autonomy in conducting locally focused insurgent activities.<sup>2</sup> This localized strategy is most evident in the organization's birthplace, Iraq and Syria.

Contrary to the period between 2014 and 2018, when its organizational structure and war tactics resembled those of a semi-conventional army, ISIS has nowadays transformed into a decentralized network of cells engaged in prolonged insurgency. The group employs ambushes, mobile attacks on security checkpoints, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and suicide bombers. The number of active ISIS operatives in these areas is estimated at around 2,500. In Iraq, ISIS operates on the outskirts of Baghdad and its surrounding governorates, albeit constrained by relatively effective counter-terrorism operations.<sup>3</sup> In Syria, ISIS's main theater of operations is the central desert region (Badia). It also maintains activity in the northeast, where it gathers funds and supplies, and in the west, where it sustains sleeper cells and hideouts. The Assad regime's prioritization of combating opposition forces and the clashes between Turkey, its affiliated rebels, and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) have created security gaps and tensions between the local tribes and the SDF that ISIS has been able to exploit. Indicatively, its high-profile attack on an SDF-run prison facility in Hasakah in January 2022 succeeded in freeing several Jihadist prisoners. Most importantly, though, it served as a reminder that the approximately 9,000 ISIS fighters, along with their 43,000 relatives still held in SDF prisons and makeshift camps, constitute a potent force multiplier.<sup>4</sup>

In keeping with its shift toward insurgency, ISIS appears to underreport its operational activity, possibly to obscure the actual extent of its resurgence and avoid provoking decisive confrontations.<sup>5</sup> Besides, smaller cells are tougher to eradicate but can still be 'effectively suppressed', as evidenced by the significant containment of the IS in Libya, Tunisia, and Egypt's Sinai. Furthermore, while the group seems to leverage its decentralized structure and the latent operational potential of its fighters in detention in the pursuit of resurgence, it also maintains a robust online presence. In its propaganda, it portrays itself as a powerful force—despite its setbacks—and attempts to incite attacks against the 'far enemy', likely in a bid to recruit followers and undermine AQ's influence.<sup>6</sup>



Recent assessments from the United States Central Command (CENTCOM) highlight the evolving threat posed by ISIS, noting that its attacks in Syria and Iraq could more than double from 2023 to 2024. CENTCOM also warns that ISIS could regain territory within two years in case of a 'premature Coalition departure' from the region.<sup>7</sup>

On its side, AQ continues to experience severe setbacks. In 2016 it lost Jabhat al-Nusra, its main affiliate in Syria, which in 2017 reinvented itself as HTS. In 2022 its leader Ayman al-Zawahiri was killed by the United States. Overall, its organizational structure has weakened. Despite these challenges, AQ maintains its outreach in the MENA region through affiliates in Yemen (AQ in the Arabian Peninsula - AQAP), Algeria (AQ in the Islamic Maghreb - AQIM), and Syria (Hurras al-Din - HAD). Whereas AQ's strategic focus remains global, the core organization has not delivered any large-scale attack on the West since 2005. In contrast, its affiliates' activities suggest a more localized focus. AQIM's presence in Algeria has steadily declined over the past five years, leading the group to shift its operations southward. After producing several offshoots, it is now engaging primarily the Malian and Burkina Faso militaries along with their foreign (Russian) backers. In Syria, HAD's activity has evolved mainly around attacks on Assad's forces, as well as countering HTS's attacks, which has eventually led to its significant weakening.<sup>8</sup>

AQAP stands out as AQ's most resilient affiliate in the region. It has demonstrated diminished capacity to strike outside Yemen. It is entangled in the civil war, it has clashed with the local ISIS offshoot (which AQAP has largely subdued), and it has been targeted by international counter-terrorism airstrikes. Yet, while AQAP's fighter numbers have declined from an estimated 7,000 in 2020 to 3,000 in 2024, the reported use of weaponized drones could potentially offset this local decline by enhancing its transnational operational capabilities in support of AQ's global doctrine. Fueled by the ongoing conflict in Gaza, AQAP has intensified its online propaganda, calling for 'lone Jihad' attacks against the 'far enemy'. However, similar to IS propaganda since October 7, AQ calls for attacks against Israel and its international backers have not instigated tangible action.<sup>9</sup> That may also underscore the general shift from global to local attacks, either due to objective prioritization or lack of operational capacity. Finally, experts note that AQAP's protracted involvement in Yemen's war has impacted internal cohesion and deepened its involvement with local actors, which may, in the long term, impede the reconstitution of its ability to strike globally.<sup>10</sup>

Nowhere is the shift in Salafi-Jihadist groups' focus on local insurgency more evident than in Syria, where HTS has successfully spearheaded the toppling of its 'near enemy', the Assad regime. While HTS maintains its Salafi-Jihadist ideology, it has sought to rebrand itself as a localized revolutionary actor that focuses on Syria alone and has renounced its Islamic State in Iraq and AQ origins. Practically, by rebranding itself, HTS has enjoyed relative tolerance by key international actors such as Turkey and the United States, despite being officially designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organiza-



tion. Consequently, contrary to ISIS's precedent, HTS was able to concentrate more resources on its state-building efforts in Idlib in preparation for its path to Damascus. Furthermore, the group's recent attempt, through verbal declarations, to assuage fears among minorities, pro-Assad civilians, and a skeptical international community underscores an ostensible shift toward political pragmatism.<sup>11</sup> While most Salafi-Jihadist groups place emphasis on victory over the 'near enemy', such a shift indicates an extra layer to HTS end-game by pushing for the acceptance of its 'revolutionary Syria' within the international community. This stands in stark contrast to both the IS rejection of the Westphalian state system, which pitted it against the world from day one, and AQ's commitment to a borderless global jihad.

To conclude, this article highlights a pivotal shift within the global Salafi-Jihadist movement from transnational terrorist attacks to localized insurgencies that seek territorialization. In the Middle East, ISIS has adapted a decentralized insurgency model in Iraq and Syria. Concomitantly, AQ's affiliates appear increasingly enmeshed in local conflicts, thus impacting their global strike capacities. Meanwhile, the HTS adaptation of local Jihad seems to indicate a significant departure from the existing prevalent paradigms. Together, these developments underscore the adaptive nature of Salafi-Jihadist groups as they balance local priorities with global ambitions. To be sure, it is highly premature to draw any conclusions about the potential impact of the events in Syria on the evolution of the broader Salafi-Jihadist movement. However, as observed by the former mufti of AQ, Abu Hafis al-Mauritani, in 2016, "much will depend on the success or failure of HTS's Syrian 'experiment'".<sup>12</sup>

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Panagiota Bouka

Spanning across Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Israel, the Druze have historically survived and maintained their coherence as a community by adapting to the political complexities of their respective countries. Amidst the ongoing war in Gaza and Lebanon, and the drastic changes in Syria, the diverse position and challenges of the Druze community across the region have revealed the precariousness of the Druze unity as a community across the region.

**D**URING THE GAZA WAR, the Druze community in Israel-occupied Golan Heights remained largely out of the spotlight until July 2024, when a rocket struck a soccer field in Majdal Shams, a Druze village.<sup>1</sup> The attack killed twelve children and injured many others, bringing attention to the community. While Hezbollah denied responsibility, Israeli authorities blamed the group for the attack and launched airstrikes on Hezbollah targets in response. In the attack's aftermath, the community's representative in the Golan Heights called for restraint, emphasizing the need to honor the victims with a quiet, religious funeral in line with Druze customs, avoiding political exploitation of their grief.<sup>2</sup> Now, there are four remaining Druze villages in the Israel-occupied Golan Heights —Majdal Shams, Mas'ade, Buq'ata, and Ein Qiniyye—in which 23,000 Druze live. Most of the Druze residents consider themselves Syrians and refuse Israeli citizenship. They hold Israeli permanent residency status, and an Israeli-issued laissez-passer for travelling abroad, with the citizenship field left blank. In the Golan Heights, most Druze consider themselves to be under Israeli occupation since 1967 and do not serve in the IDF, facing discrimination by Israeli Jews and the state. They have an ambiguous relationship with Israel and an unfamiliar —yet loyal—connection to Syria, a country that some have never visited but still consider 'home'.<sup>3</sup>

In contrast, the Druze community within Israel holds Israeli citizenship, and as such Israeli Druze are recognized as loyal citizens. They also serve in the military and, as a result, have played an active role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This is not surprising, as over the past 50 years the community has forged a 'covenant of blood' with Israel, suffering hundreds of casualties while loyally defending the country, which they consider their home. Many Israeli Druze have fought against Arab neighbors and the Palestinians, reflecting their long tradition of adapting to the dominant power in their region to ensure their survival. It should be mentioned, however, that a minority within the Israeli Druze community has consistently objected to compulsory service. As of the latest available data, there are approximately 120,000 Druze living in Israel, excluding those residing in the Golan Heights. The Druze population in Israel mainly resides in the Galilee region and in a few villages in the Carmel region, such as Daliyat al-Karmel and Isfiya.<sup>4</sup> Since the establishment of the state of Israel, the Druze have distanced themselves from Arab and Islamic radicalism. While compared to Israeli Christians and Muslims, Druze place less emphasis on their Arab identity and self-identify more as Israeli. However, despite their contributions to Israel's security, the Druze feel discriminated against, facing unequal allocation of resources and land. The Nation-State Law deepened their belief that true equality with Jews is unattainable, rendering the Declaration of Independence an ideal rather than a guiding principle.<sup>5</sup>

In Lebanon, the Druze community has carved out their own space given the country's confessional system. Currently, around 250,000 Druze live in Lebanon, primarily concentrated in the Shuf Mountains and Wadi al-Taym, located at the base of Mount Hermon, representing just 3-4% of Lebanon's population.<sup>6</sup> Like all the other Druze, they identify with the country they belong to. The Lebanese Druze have allied with parties like Hezbollah, primarily due to their opposition to ex-



ternal occupation. Contrary to the Israeli Druze, the Lebanese Druze have always been in solidarity with the Palestinian cause. Notably, the Lebanese Druze leader Walid Jumblatt dismissed Israel's claim that Hezbollah fired the rocket in July 2024 in Majdal Shams, as a fabrication.<sup>7</sup> He expressed his deep concerns about what he perceives as ongoing Israeli efforts to sow discord and fragment the region. Jumblatt underscored his belief that Israel's actions are part of a deliberate strategy to incite division and destabilize the broader regional fabric, a pattern he associates with past and present Israeli aggression.<sup>8</sup> Recently, the Lebanese House Speaker Nabih Berri hosted a meeting with Prime Minister Najib Mikati and Walid Jumblatt to address the escalating Israeli attacks on Lebanon. In a joint statement, they condemned the ongoing aggression and expressed condolences to the families of victims, praising the solidarity shown by Lebanese citizens in hosting displaced individuals from affected regions, including South Lebanon, Bekaa, and Beirut's suburbs.<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, this position is also echoed by Sheikh Al-Aql Sami Abi al-Muna, the spiritual leader of Lebanon's Druze community. He underscored that any attack on groups resisting Israel would be viewed as an attack on the Druze community itself, emphasizing their commitment to defending Lebanon and other countries in the region against potential threats.

Similarly, the Syrian Druze have also been wary of the war in Gaza and Lebanon. The Syrian Druze, numbering approximately 690,000 people, account for around 3-4% of Syria's population, making them the third-largest religious minority in the country. They are primarily based in Jabal Druze, in the As-Suwayda governorate, near the southwestern border with Jordan, in the Golan (Jawlan), in 17 villages in Jabal al-A'la—situated roughly midway between Aleppo and Antioch in the northwest—and four villages just south of Damascus.<sup>10</sup> The Syrian Druze community has been in a precarious position since the onset of the Syrian crisis in 2011. In keeping with Druze community practices elsewhere, they approached the crisis with caution. As a minority community, they tend to establish strategic alliances with the state in order to survive. The Syrian Druze refrained from participating in the protests against the Assad regime during the outset of the Syrian crisis and abstained in various instances to join the army, perhaps in a tacit agreement with Assad's regime.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, amid Syria's deepening financial crisis, they launched their own protests against Assad. By mid-2024, the Druze community's protests had escalated following the death of a demonstrator at the hands of the regime's forces. The protests in As-Suwayda soon expanded to Dara'a. Thus, it is no surprise that when Assad fled the country, the Druze celebrated his departure and appear to have no immediate conflicts with the emerging new leadership in Syria.<sup>12</sup>

The Druze community's position in the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East reflects their complex and diverse role within each country. Across Lebanon, Syria, Israel, and the Golan Heights, the Druze have navigated a delicate balance between maintaining a convenient relationship with the state and addressing the needs of their community. What stands out about the Druze community throughout history is their ability to navigate the specific political landscapes of each country. Despite being impacted by the regional dynamics and not always avoiding conflict, they have managed to survive amid the geopolitical upheavals surrounding them, preserving their lands and distinct identity while living alongside Sunni and Shiite Muslims, Christians, and Jews. While integration may have been more demanding for the Druze in Israel than in other parts of the Middle East, their role in each country is shaped by the need to balance integration with the preservation of their religious principles. This awareness of how their identity and survival



depend on both their faith and the political environment unites all Druze across the region, as they are acutely aware of it, regardless of where they live.

## NOTES

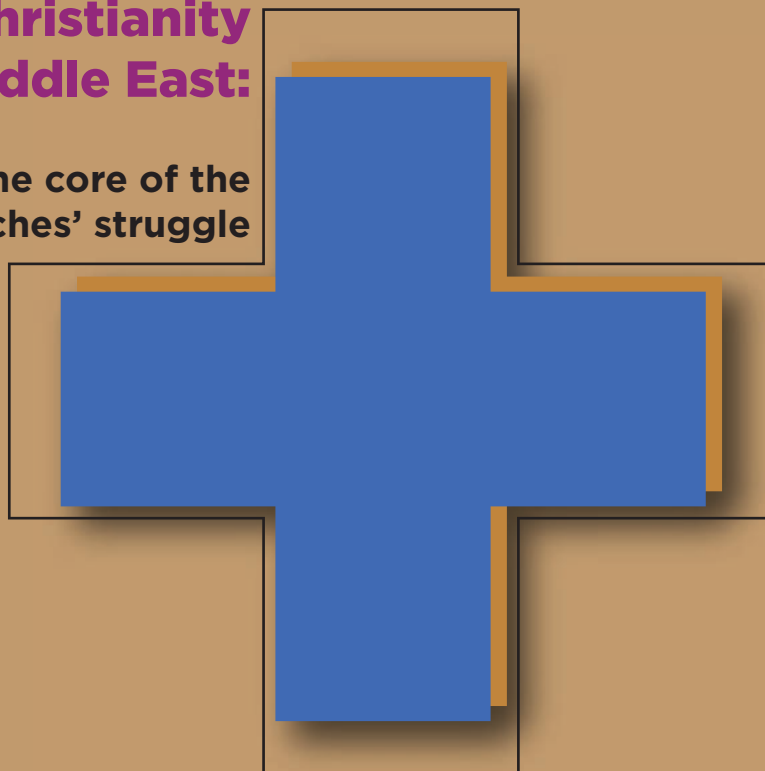
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# The preservation of Christianity in the Middle East:

**At the core of the  
Churches' struggle**



**Charitini Petrodaskalaki**

The current turbulent situation in the Middle East is deeply concerning for all Churches in the region. War, the targeting of Christian population and religious sites, the increasing hostilities against Christians in non-conflict zones, and the encroachment on Christian properties, have raised alarm among Church leaders. While the end of the war is in the best interest of every Church, it seems that their influence internationally and domestically remains limited, due to political and societal restraints, fueling, at the same time, the mass exodus of Christians.

**C**HURCHES IN THE MIDDLE EAST are among the oldest institutions in the region, acting as protectors and advocates of the Christian population. Some of these Churches are among the first established and are, in fact, not only religious but ethnoreligious, such as Copts, Maronites and Assyrians/Chaldeans, utilizing in their liturgies their own language instead of Arabic, while others are a byproduct of extensive Christian missions in the area. However, despite their difference in size, all Christian religious institutions are facing the same existential issue. Enduring Christian presence is vital for all the Churches in the Middle East. As the Christian numbers are continuously declining, the Churches' first priority remains to preserve their population and try to alleviate the reasons leading to their emigration or demise.

The events following October 7 and the subsequent escalation of violence disrupted the whole region. The modest Christian community in Gaza, numbering about 1,000 people before the war, is now left with little more than half. At least three churches have been destroyed in Israeli attacks, including the Greek Orthodox Saint Porphyrius Church, one of the oldest churches in the region, where 18 displaced Palestinians who had taken refuge were killed. The Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem condemned the airstrike, stressing that "targeting churches and their institutions, along with the shelters they provide to protect innocent citizens ... constitutes a war crime that cannot be ignored".<sup>1</sup> With the expansion of warfare to Lebanon, many Christians in southern Lebanon have witnessed the destruction of their towns and have been forced to flee their homes. Christian-majority areas have also been attacked by the Israeli army, in addition to documented instances of attacks on religious sites and the video dissemination of Israeli troops desecrating an Orthodox Church in a southern Lebanese village.<sup>2</sup>

From the beginning of the Gaza war, Church leaders have been concerned for the local population and the war's effect on Christians in the Middle East. The region's most representative Christian body, the Middle East Council of Churches, has been directly criticizing Israel for the escalation of violence, stating that "what the Palestinian people are exposed to in Gaza is not a military reaction to a military action, but rather a genocide and ethnic cleansing."<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Churches in Palestine have been critical of the disproportionate violence and targeting of civilians, as well as their restrictions on religious freedom, claiming that both Christian and Palestinian identities were under attack by the Israeli state. The Patriarchs and Heads of Churches in Jerusalem issued a joint statement in August, stressing concerns over the ongoing conflict and calling "towards the promotion of life and peace".<sup>4</sup> From the beginning of the war in Gaza, Maronite Patriarch Boutros Al-Rai urged for a peace agreement, warning that the conflict in Gaza would spread to Lebanon, as it indeed happened a few months later.

While all religious leaders have been emphasizing the need for peace, some have been outspoken in their calls, while others have adopted more cautious language, depending on their relationship with the state as well as the security concerns faced domestically. The Coptic Church, for example, adopts cautious language closely aligned with the state's position, while Egypt maintains a mediator role between Israel and Hamas. Pope Tawadros II brought attention to the fact that war and other pressures increase the exodus of the Christian population from the Middle East.<sup>5</sup> It is a significant turn from the hardline rhetoric that his predecessor, Pope Shenouda III, used over the Palestinian issue in the past. The main reason is that the Church does not want to lose the grace of the state, as



the latter is taking steps to improve the Christians' position and further legitimize their presence and freedom of religion. Accordingly, a new personal status law for Christians was approved in December, and the legalization of 293 Christian churches and service buildings that operate without permit were legalized in November 2024. Other factors contributing to the delicate position of Egyptian Christians include the rising support for Hamas in Egypt, making the Christian community fearful, worrying that the Islamist factions in Egypt could turn against them, especially since statements from Al-Azhar have framed the conflict in religious terms.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, the recent attacks on Copts, including the burning of Coptic homes in April, show a worrying trend on interreligious relations.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, Chaldean Patriarch Raphael Louis Sako, has been very outspoken about Christianity in the Middle East, firmly insisting on a two-state solution as the way to peace and prosperity. He has also been quite critical of the Iraqi state, as he claims that Iraqi Christians are treated as 'second-class citizens' and accusing the government of not doing enough to bring justice for Christians and repatriate internally displaced Christian and other religious groups, all the while allowing the Babylon Brigades and their leader, Rayan al-Kildani, to be perceived as a political party representing Christians. The Patriarch has openly criticized the Babylon Brigades for facilitating encroachment on the Church, the rights of Christians, and the acquisition of their property.<sup>8</sup> The Chaldean Church's firm stance on domestic issues does not bode well with the Iraqi government. In July 2023, Iraqi President Abdul Latif Rashid revoked Order 147 which recognized the Chaldean Patriarch as head of the Chaldean Church and being in charge of the administration of Chaldean religious endowments. The latter led to Sako's self-imposed exile to Erbil to protest. Although the Patriarch was reinstated in June, this incident demonstrates the fragility of Christian leadership against political authorities.

The continuing presence of armed groups in Iraq has raised questions on security, as some militias are accused of harassment and the promotion of demographic shifts at the expense of the Christian population. Most properties of Christians, either internally displaced or having left Iraq entirely, have been seized by non-Christians, and attempts have also been made to seize Church property as well. Nevertheless, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani denounced the unlawful seizure of Christian land in 2023, in an effort to promote religious coexistence.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, the KRG seems to be capitalizing on minorities by promoting a tolerant and diverse governing style to domestic and foreign audiences. In reality, the KRG offers protection and benefits to the Christians that adhere to the project

of Greater Kurdistan. This is evident in the opening of a new Patriarchate of the Assyrian Church of the East in Erbil, effectively attempting to undermine Assyrian autonomy aspirations, while using Christians to gain a foothold on the disputed territories with Iraq.<sup>10</sup>

At the end of the day, the power of the Churches in the Middle East derives from the presence of a vibrant Christian community, one allowed to freely practice its religion without fear for their lives. It seems that the situation is not going to improve for the Christians in the near future, leading to greater migration in search of a better future. Despite the various Churches' attempts to advocate for them, their influence remains limited in the face of societal dynamics and political establishments.



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# YAZIDIS

## IN IRAQ AND SYRIA

A decade of displacement and insecurity

Chryssa Toufeksi

Ten years after the genocide perpetrated by ISIS against minorities in Iraq, Yazidis are still seeking justice for the recorded atrocities inflicted upon their community. Amidst the ongoing crisis in the region, Yazidis continue to face a multitude of challenges, including ongoing violence, displacement, and insecurity both in Iraq and Syria.

**THE YAZIDI MINORITY** has historically lived in dispersed communities across Kurdish areas in Iraq, Syria and Turkey. Resisting conversion to Islam, Ottoman suppression and subsequent Arabization, they have been systematically persecuted due to their distinct religion and ethnic identity. Yazidis faced waves of ethnic cleansing in the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries.

Iraq was home to almost half a million Yazidis, primarily concentrated in Sinjar and the Nineveh Plains. In August 2014, ISIS committed genocide against the Yazidi people in Sinjar, perpetrating mass killings, enslavement, and sexual violence against women.<sup>1</sup> Over 6,000 women and children were taken captive and nearly 2,800 Yazidis are still missing.<sup>2</sup> Despite these atrocities, and although several countries have acknowledged the genocide, the response by the international community has been lacklustre and little progress has been made in prosecuting the perpetrators.<sup>3</sup>

Notwithstanding the difficulties in prosecuting for the crimes of genocide against Yazidis, their plight is further obscured by a series of conflicts in the Middle East starting with the October 7, 2023, Hamas-led attack against Israel. The subsequent Israeli invasion and bombing of Gaza and Lebanon, the retaliation attacks by Iran-backed militia against US targets in Iraq and Syria, the Red Sea crisis and the American-led missile strikes against Houthi militants in Yemen, and a series of missile exchanges between Israel and Iran that threatened to escalate to a full-blown war, plagued the region in crisis and turned the focus away from minority issues. Justice and accountability, therefore, for the Yazidi communities remain elusive.

So is their safe return to their homeland in Sinjar. Despite the defeat and expulsion of ISIS from the region since November 2015, the dispute between Arabs and Kurds for the district of Sinjar has hindered their return. This dispute, in fact, left Yazidis vulnerable to ISIS. When ISIS attacked, Sinjar was under the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG)'s control and its Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) Peshmerga fighters since 2003. The KDP Peshmerga, unprepared for such an attack, since their primary objective was to prevent the Iraqi army from gaining control of the area, withdrew, leaving Yazidis to be massacred.<sup>4</sup> The Syrian affiliate of the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK), the People's Protection Unit (YPG) stepped in to protect and help Yazidi survivors escape to Syria and IDP camps in Iraqi Kurdistan. Displaced Yazidis joined the fight against ISIS in Syria and then formed the Sinjar Resistance Units (YBŞ), the PKK affiliate in Iraq. In late 2015, in a joint effort, YBŞ, PKK-YPG and KDP Peshmerga forces defeated ISIS. For the following year clashes in the area continued between the PKK and KDP until the KDP withdrew to Dohuk governorate, following the failed Independence referendum in 2017 and fearing retaliation from Iraq's federal forces. Being the only authority recognised by Baghdad, KDP continues to administer Sinjar from afar.<sup>5</sup>

The district, located near the Syrian and Turkish borders, has since become a strategic site for transnational actors involved in regional conflicts. Pro-Iranian Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF), Shiite militia that joined the campaign against ISIS from other parts of Iraq and eventually were incorporated into the Iraqi army, aim to use Sinjar for attacks against Israel and to strengthen control over Iraq and the Levant. PKK utilizes Sinjar as a logistical corridor for weapons and fighters facilitating operations in Syria and Turkey.<sup>6</sup> In response, Turkey has launched repeated airstrikes against PKK and affiliated Yazidi militia targets in Sinjar, further exacerbating insecurity.<sup>7</sup>



Yazidi militias formed to defend Sinjar against ISIS are now active in the region, including the YBŞ, the Sinjar Women's Units (YJŞ) and the Sinjar Defense Units (HPŞ). YBŞ, supported by PKK and PMF have established a local administration in Sinjar that is not recognised neither by Baghdad nor Erbil. This lack of a recognized local administration hinders the allocation of funds, almost 50 million USD, for rebuilding essential infrastructure and services destroyed by ISIS and subsequent airstrikes.<sup>8</sup>

In October 2020, the Iraqi Federal Government and the KRG signed the Sinjar Agreement to jointly manage local governance, security and reconstruction to facilitate the return of displaced Sinjaris. The agreement allocates internal security to the police and stipulates the recruitment of returning displaced Yazidis along with current residents, Yazidi, Sunni Arabs and Kurds to the security force. The prerequisite is that recruits cannot be affiliated with the PKK. It also calls for the withdrawal of all non-state armed formations from the district, restoring KDP as a key political actor, while expelling PKK and its affiliates. However, Yazidis deeply mistrust the KDP for abandoning them in 2014. They believe that the genocide was a result of KDP withdrawal, and they demand accountability for it. They do not trust either the KDP or the Iraqi army to defend Sinjar from future threats. On the contrary they fear Kurdification or Arabisation under Erbil or Baghdad respectively.<sup>9</sup> In contrast to PKK and YPG, who never imposed restrictions, KDP treated Yazidis as Kurds, denying them their distinct identity. Sinjari Yazidis and Arabs, especially those affiliated with the YBŞ, rejected the Sinjar Agreement. Clashes between the Iraqi Army and YBŞ in May 2022 displaced thousands of Yazidis to the KRG and to this date, the agreement remains unenforced.<sup>10</sup>

In Syria, Yazidis lived in Afrin and Jazira, regions that were under YPG control since 2012 and enjoyed relative protection from ISIS persecution. However, the Turkish military incursions in 2018 and 2019 and the subsequent control by the Syrian National Army (SNA) displaced most of the Yazidi population from their homes in Afrin and Ras al-Ayn and led to kidnappings, murder and destruction of Yazidi shrines.<sup>11</sup>

ISIS presence in the region is complicating the security environment for the Yazidi community. In January 2022, ISIS attacked al-Sina prison in Al-Hasakah, Syria, freeing hundreds of combatants. Subsequent ISIS breakouts from Syrian prisons have occurred in June and August 2023. ISIS has conducted over 150 attacks so far this year in Iraq and Syria in the first half of 2024 pointing to the group's resurgence. One of the main parameters of ISIS defeat is the repatriation and reintegration of more than 40,000 individuals and families with perceived ISIS affiliation from the Al-Hol and Al-Roj camps, which are a pool of radicalisation.<sup>12</sup> Internments include

women who married ISIS fighters, whereas half of the individuals in al-Hol are children. But repatriation efforts are so far slow. Fearing a potential resurgence of the group in addition to the lack of trust in the ability of central and other local forces to protect their community, Yazidi militia in Sinjar refuse to demobilise.

Ten years after genocide and despite strong international condemnation, efforts to bring perpetrators to justice have been lim-



ited. The Yazidi plight has been side-lined amidst ongoing crises in the Middle East. Most Yazidis in Iraq remain displaced from their homes and live in IDP camps in the KRG administered Duhok Governorate. In Syria, Yazidis have faced their own unique challenges following the Turkish-led incursions in Afrin and the subsequent SNA atrocities. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) that has recently taken control of Syria, has so far announced the protection of minorities, but the future of Yazidis in Syria remains uncertain. While trying to cope with unimaginable trauma, Yazidi efforts to rebuild their lives and communities are still hindered. Armed groups that vie for control in the areas once inhabited by Yazidi communities, have created a complex geopolitical landscape, contributing to a decade long violence and displacement of the population. Amidst these challenges, prosecuting the perpetrators of the Yazidi genocide it is not just about serving justice in terms of punishment. Justice and accountability will help instil the community with a sense of a secure future.

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# Diasporas as Agents of Influence in the Middle East



**Christina Aikaterini Fytili**

Diasporas play a critical role in shaping Middle Eastern policy by leveraging transnational influence, resources and networks to advocate for their communities and impact global political agendas. This article explores the impact of key diaspora groups—Jewish, Palestinian, Kurdish, Lebanese, and Assyrian—in the Middle East’s complex political landscape and underscores shared diverse strategies and challenges.



**A** **S TRANSNATIONAL COMMUNITIES**, diasporas leverage their unique position, resources, and networks to advocate in favor of their homeland. Hence, they can influence foreign governments, shape narratives, and mobilize global opinion.<sup>1</sup> Despite fundamental challenges, such as geopolitical complexities and varying state strategies, diasporas continue their efforts, especially since Hamas' attack against Israel on October 7, 2023.

Diasporas rely on influencing global opinion as a primary strategy for advancing their goals and addressing challenges in their homeland. By protesting, leveraging social media, participating in boycotts, and building coalitions with international organizations, diasporic communities amplify their voices across borders and shape the narratives around Middle Eastern conflicts.

One prominent example is the BDS movement, championed by the Palestinian diaspora. BDS calls for boycotts of Israeli goods, divestment, and sanctions against Israel to protest against the occupation of Palestinian territories, granting equal rights to Palestinians, and allowing the right of return. Since October 7, BDS has noted important wins. Western universities, like Trinity College and San Francisco University, and banks such as Scotiabank have divested from Israel. Additionally, American cities like Portland and Missouri have passed legislation that limits companies that cooperate with Israel. Similarly, the Kurdish diaspora employs various means, from public demonstrations to hunger strikes, in order to highlight human rights abuses and secure Western support for autonomy in Iraq and Syria.<sup>2</sup> The past year, the diaspora tried to bring international attention to Turkey taking advantage of the Gaza war, in order to attack Syrian Kurds. However, Turkey's status as a NATO member and a strategic western ally, does not allow for meaningful impact or leeway.

The Lebanese diaspora often rallies around humanitarian crises, such as the 2020 Beirut port explosion and the ongoing war with Israel. Remittances play a vital role in Lebanon's economy, constituting almost 30% of the country's GDP.<sup>3</sup> Mostly active in Europe, through fundraising and advocacy campaigns, the diaspora spotlights corruption and sectarianism within Lebanon while calling for international aid and political reform. For the past months, the diaspora has been more focused on sending humanitarian and economic aid to their country, as well as protesting against Israel's attacks on Gaza and Lebanon while lobbying Western governments in favor of a ceasefire.

The Assyrians have faced significant persecution during conflicts such as the Iraq War and the Syrian Civil War.<sup>4</sup> The diaspora, mainly based in North America, underscores the plight of religious minorities in the Middle East, using cultural advocacy to preserve their heritage and highlight persecution through events, documentaries, and partnerships with human rights organizations, like the Assyrian Human Rights Network.<sup>5</sup> Organizations such as the Assyrian Aid Society of Canada also cooperate with their Iraqi counterparts, as well as with Kurdish organizations, providing humanitarian aid and focusing on rebuilding efforts, such as the building of schools and medical facilities.<sup>6</sup>

By framing their causes within global narratives of justice, equality and human rights, and leveraging transnational networks to disseminate their messages, diasporas not only shape public opinion but also encourage policymakers to reconsider their engagement with Middle Eastern conflicts.



Diasporas also have a profound impact on shaping state strategies and navigating geopolitical complexities. They act as intermediaries between their host countries and homelands, lobbying for policies that align with their communities' interests and advocating for foreign intervention or support. However, despite their influence, diasporas face internal and external challenges hindering their effectiveness: ideological polarization and competing priorities from within, as well as varying Western geopolitical strategies and alliances.

The Jewish diaspora, particularly through AIPAC, exemplifies how diasporas can align their goals with state strategies. AIPAC's lobbying efforts have secured substantial U.S. aid to Israel, presenting it as a strategic ally against Middle Eastern instability. AIPAC's framing of U.S.-Israel relations as mutually beneficial ensures that Israel's security is aligned with U.S. interests.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, organizations like the Jewish Voice for Peace currently challenge this notion by advocating for a shift in U.S. strategy to prioritize human rights and international law. This reflects a deep ideological divide in the Jewish diaspora, augmenting polarization. In the aftermath of the 2023 Hamas attacks, AIPAC mobilized quickly to lobby Congress for the Israeli Security Supplemental Appropriations Act, advocating for \$14.3 billion in emergency military aid. AIPAC framed the aid as essential to combating regional instability, which resonated strongly with lawmakers. At the same time, JVP organized mass protests in major U.S. cities, even inside the Congress, condemning the Biden administration's continued military aid to Israel. JVP argued that this aid contributed to the destruction in Gaza and violated human rights principles.

The Palestinian diaspora navigates these geopolitical complexities by pushing European governments to reconsider their relationships with Israel. Through BDS, they emphasize compliance with international law and human rights, framing Palestinian struggles as part of broader global justice movements.<sup>8</sup> As a result, the E.U. restricted funding for Israeli institutions involved in occupied territories, influenced in part by advocacy from BDS and its supporters. European cities like Barcelona and Oslo have also passed resolutions supporting BDS or instituting their own boycotts, lending some international legitimacy to the movement's goals.<sup>9</sup> In the U.S., its influence is not as strong, as anti-BDS legislation has been put in place, prohibiting state contracts or investments with companies boycotting Israel.<sup>10</sup>

By aligning their messaging with broader anti-ISIS narratives, the Kurdish diaspora has effectively garnered sympathy from Western governments, aligning with their priorities to secure support for Kurdish autonomy. However, balancing these aspirations

against Turkey's strategic value to NATO mostly complicates responses. The Lebanese diaspora, too, navigates geopolitical intricacies, lobbying for aid while addressing sectarian divisions. Their engagement reflects the host nations' broader interests, often tied to Lebanon's political factions, including Hezbollah.<sup>11</sup>

Smaller diasporas like the Assyrians face challenges in influencing state strategies. Despite highlighting the persecution



of Christians in Iraq and Syria, their efforts often garner limited traction due to their minimal geopolitical significance for the West. Diaspora advocacy, therefore, is a complex interplay of aspirations and host nation interests. While it is certain that groups like AIPAC wield significant power, others often struggle to align their goals with broader geopolitical priorities.

Some critics argue that diaspora advocacy can exacerbate conflicts or promote external interventions that have unintended consequences. Additionally, diaspora influence often reflects unequal power dynamics, with wealthier or more politically connected groups having disproportionate sway.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, it is questionable whether these groups can actually influence foreign governments with a specific geopolitical agenda, or even significantly impact policymaking in the Middle East.

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# INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS AS NON-STATE ACTORS IN THE MIDDLE EAST CRISIS



Ihab Shabana

Power struggles have always generated fluctuations in IOs policies in the Middle East. As such, the current Gaza war finds IOs oscillating between justice and interests, albeit with diminishing results. The role of IOs as non-state actors is clearly being weakened both by Israel's policy and the international community's tolerance against the war crimes committed in Gaza and Lebanon. This marks a 'non-role' for the IOs in the Middle East, as their position is being degraded by international actors. This article explores the challenges and the relegation of IOs in the new Middle East.

**A**MONG THE KEY PLAYERS IN THE MIDDLE EAST, international organizations (IOs) have increasingly assumed critical roles. Managing conflict side-effects, providing humanitarian aid, advocating peace resolutions and acting as interlocutors with international and regional states, IOs have been promoted as non-state actors in the region. This article will explore the role of IOs in the region amidst an exacerbated and volatile political environment, with the latter being in a limbo state due to Israel's prolonged and unprecedented war on Gaza and Lebanon, alongside escalating tensions between Israel and Iran. What the article will specifically question is the IOs' strategic position and dissipating international status, and, very crucially, the nature of the challenges and constraints faced in the field.

The broader crisis landscape that has taken shape over the last period across the Middle East creates both an opportunity for humanitarian and strategic involvement by the mostly entrenched IOs, and, concomitantly, a sense of predicament due to the wide-scale assault and disdain against their efforts in the field. Historically, IOs, despite not wielding the power of states and militaries, have managed to acquire a prominent position thanks to their international recognition, resources, and ability to act as intermediaries. In essence, a number of IOs are active on the ground, such as the two UN organizations related to Palestine and Lebanon, the UNWRA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees), the UNIFIL (UN interim forces in Lebanon), the ICC (International Criminal Court), the WHO (World Health Organization), etc.

In the Middle East's historical context (Palestine, Lebanon, Syria and others), IOs have often worked as a state substitute, addressing direct and emergency needs while offering midterm solutions for war-torn communities and brokering peace projects. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) have repeatedly attempted to propose de-escalation schemes and offer civilian protection.<sup>1</sup> In tandem, as Israel's strategy in the besieged enclave has been to weaponize food supply against Palestinians already since 2007,<sup>2</sup> its policy after October 7 seems to be violently cutting nutritional lifeline. By mid-September 2024, field reports revealed an 83% blockade on food supply to Gaza, resulting in grave famine consequences. Furthermore, attacks on Palestinian civilian infrastructure, hospitals and UN facilities reflect Israel's straightforward attempt to undermine the international organizations' capacities, breaching international law. According to Human Rights Watch, Israel's attacks are aimed at deliberately undermining the UN's peacekeeping mandate and constitute war crimes under international law.<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, based on the scale of Israel's war and its debated objectives, and coupled with the international community's stance, IOs are under an unprecedented attack which raises security challenges and concerns. Restrictions, derogatory accusations and sometimes direct attacks (such as those repeatedly occurring at the Rafah crossing during 2023 and 2024),<sup>4</sup> have generated a distressing situation on the ground, adding to the



general political paralysis of international actors such as the UN Security Council. The UNRWA's denial of access to affected sites and conflict zones delivering aid is grounded by Israel on its antisemitism tenets and is viewed as an act of aggression, while it is often justified for security reasons and on the grounds of 'supporting terrorism' and October 7. The UNRWA's ban in early November 2024 is the culmination of Israel's aggressive stance against IOs, adding to the constantly diminishing budget received by the USA.<sup>5</sup> On top of that, Israel's assault on UNIFIL positions in Naqoura in early November,<sup>6</sup> demonstrated the profane unpunishment of such abominable attacks against international organizations.

Diplomatic and geopolitical rivalries and challenges hamper the IO's effectiveness. Local and international actors are often caught between regional rivalries and internal political conflicts, as illustrated in the Lebanon and Gaza cases. Geopolitical and ideological rivalries involving the US, Iran, Saudi Arabia or Russia are often reflected in ceasefire related agreements, underlining the limitations in the UN Security Council's role in conflicts. Even internal rivalries inside the Arab League have extended the organization's impotence in intervening for conflict resolution.<sup>8</sup> Since some IOs' records reveal a highly politicized profile in the past serving power centers, the IOs' position in the Middle East crisis is critical, given the devastation and the prospects of war. Netanyahu's future plans for Gaza largely exclude the role of IOs and even further de-evaluate a potential role for the critical Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism.<sup>9</sup>

Violations of international law are not unprecedented. However, the aspects of legal and humanitarian challenges witnessed in the ongoing crisis are remarkable. The notable arrest warrants issued by the ICC against Netanyahu and Gallant for war crimes generated a sense of imminent justice and accountability before international law.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, the implementation of legal consequences mostly falls on established international interests. As suggested by many experts, the lack of enforcement mechanisms and the belief of power politics superseding international law is widespread.<sup>11</sup> The inaction environment has prompted the international community to a twofold strategy. First, some leaders, such as Erdogan, have urged non-western IOs, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, to overcome their relative inertia and take a more active role to promote peace and justice.<sup>12</sup> This 'non-western' pathway is related to the West's inactiveness against Israel's war crimes. Secondly, local and regional NGOs and civil society actors (i.e. in Greece, Britain, and the Netherlands) are escalating their lobbying and forming global committees to pressure their governments into enforcing the arrest warrants and ceasing compliance with Israel's internationally recognized war crimes.

The mounting complex nature of the conflicts and pressures from regional and international actors generate a suffocating and dangerous environment for IOs to operate in. This is added to the political, diplomatic, security, and legal constraints that they are currently facing in the field. However, greater political will is needed to implement humanitarian and legal measures, opening a narrow path for establishing a peace settlement.



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# CLAIMING HUMANITARIAN SPACE

## THE BATTLE BETWEEN NON-STATE ISLAMIC CHARITIES

## AND STATE-CONTROLLED AID

Alexandra Nikopoulou

Charity or the provision of zakat is a cornerstone of Islam and an obligation of all righteous Muslims, who have the ability to offer a part of their wealth to those in need in order to purify it.<sup>1</sup> While zakat is a standard practice of the Islamic faith, Islamic charitable organizations have, in recent years, emerged as pivotal non-state actors institutionalizing the act of charity and, at times, serving as agents channeling the interests of the people and – and even the states – behind them. Despite being part of the non-state sphere, some of these organizations are still controlled by states. This raises vital questions on the nature and the level of independence of these institutions, as well as about the efforts of states to exert control over non-state sectors, influencing aid, narratives and power dynamics.

**W**HILE CONSIDERING THE CENTRAL ROLE OF CHARITY in Islamic faith, it is crucial to understand the wide array of actors operating in the field, as well as their diverse goals and agendas. In periods of conflict, crisis relief – albeit vital for those who need it – can often come with ulterior motives and carry hidden agendas that can be overlooked in the face of urgency. Hence, it is important to examine the nature of these actors, their roles in conflicts and the ways they may be utilized by local and regional players to promote their own agendas.

Broadly speaking, Islamic charities can be classified into two distinct categories. The first encompasses global charities that engage in humanitarian work across the Middle East and are often headquartered in countries outside the region, particularly in Europe. These organizations primarily focus on public engagement, providing relief to those in dire need or in crisis-affected areas, and serving as a means for Muslims to fulfill their obligation of zakat. This category includes organizations such as Islamic Relief, Muslim Global Relief, Ummah Welfare Trust, and Muslim Aid. These institutions do not bear an apparent affiliation with a certain state, nor do they appear to promote a specific agenda. While active in the region, they also support Muslims residing in non-Muslim countries, focusing primarily on unconditional humanitarian aid. These Islamic organizations are the main non-state actors in the field of charity; however, they do not act alone.

The second category concerns state-centered and state-controlled Islamic charities that are predominantly found across wealthy Gulf states and often serve as agents of influence in the countries they support. Even though not all of these institutions share an explicit affiliation with their government, they often have connections with state officials or government authorities. A typical example is the Saudi King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center (KSrelief), an international organization established by the Saudi King himself in 2015, with the goal of supporting people in need, which is currently active in more than 50 countries.<sup>2</sup> While it identifies as an international organization, its strong affiliation with the state – manifested through the fact that since 2019 international aid from the Kingdom must go through KSrelief – is an indication of its lack of independence and its substantial role as a foreign policy tool to advance Saudi interests.<sup>3</sup> In 2024 alone, KSrelief provided WHO with \$19.4 million to combat health challenges in Sudan, Syria and Yemen, with the latter ensuring the lion's share of this donation.<sup>4</sup> In Yemen, the organization is also promoting educational projects and a demining program, titled MASAM, to achieve a 'mine-free' Yemen.<sup>5</sup> Given Saudi strategic interests in these countries and particularly in Yemen, ensuring the state's role and influence through aid could be perceived as a way to promote Saudi goals and increase Riyadh's influence. A similar pattern is observed with other Saudi-based initiatives like the King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Program for Charity Works (KAAP), which operates in cooperation with the Islamic Development Bank and the King Abdullah Humanitarian Foundation (KAHF) across fifteen countries in the Middle East, Asia and Latin America.<sup>6</sup>

Saudi Arabia is not the only country following this paradigm. The UAE's government portal lists several organizations responsible for charity work and providing humanitarian aid.<sup>7</sup> While there is a clear distinction between government entities and other charitable organizations operating in the country, in reality, the lines between the state and these organizations are rather blurry. Several charities are founded and supported by powerful sheikhs and emirs, while they are also established through ministerial decrees –



clear indications of these organizations' lack of independence. In Qatar, the situation differs slightly, as there are charities not directly affiliated with the state, that coexist with others that maintain links with state figures and the central government.<sup>8</sup> However, the state has taken significant steps to limit the non-profit sector after the 2017 crisis, also revoking the license of two Qatari non-profits operating abroad.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, in Kuwait, Islamic charities are highly centralized and affiliated with the state, though to a lesser extent than in other Gulf states. Nevertheless, the state is actively exploring ways to further institutionalize humanitarian aid, signaling a shift toward greater state control over charitable activities.<sup>10</sup>

Another important aspect to consider is the involvement of some Islamic charities in supporting jihadist activities. One of the most prominent examples is Al Haramain, a private charitable foundation, which maintained links to the Saudi royal family and was accused of supporting Al-Qaeda since 2002.<sup>11</sup> While several organizations have engaged in such activities, a more extensive account of these instances is beyond the scope of this commentary.

A significant issue arises with the growing efforts of Middle Eastern states — wealthy ones, in particular — to entrench the space of humanitarian aid and claim a share of the domain from non-state Islamic charities. These efforts erode the objectives of aid, raise public suspicion, and jeopardize the mission of independent organizations. States enter this space with ulterior motives, instrumentalizing aid to influence conflicts and strengthen their influence. They also seek to monitor and control the goals and recipients of aid, thereby limiting the scope for independent charities to operate. This competition between state-controlled charities and non-state Islamic charities creates significant obstacles for the latter. Non-state charities face strict monitoring, must 'compete' with state-affiliated institutions, and are often met with public suspicion. In some cases, Islamic charity has been unfairly associated with support for extremist ideas and organizations. This misconception hinders the ability of independent actors to reclaim humanitarian space. Consequently, in states with high levels of government monitoring, independent charities are rare. This is also why most independent Islamic charities are global networks headquartered outside the Middle East.

As long as the humanitarian field is perceived as a tool of power projection, states in the region will continue to limit the work of non-state Islamic charities and exploit this space to advance their foreign policy objectives. Given the ongoing crises in the region, opportunities for states to provide aid and expand influence are abundant. The interplay between non-state and state-controlled

charities highlights the growing complexity of the humanitarian field. Monitoring these trends is essential to understand how aid is being used and to draw attention to the fundamental purpose of charity: helping people in need without ulterior motives or hidden agendas.




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# PRIVATE MILITARY COMPANIES IN CONTEMPORARY CONFLICT WAGNER'S KEY ROLE IN RUSSIA'S MENA STRATEGY

Eirini Giannopoulou

The growing presence of PMCs in contemporary conflict has challenged state monopoly of violence, has further connected cross-border war economies and has provided a different leeway through which one can read power projection in the global arena. This article will attempt to enhance the understanding of the above through the examination of Wagner's role in Syria, Libya and Sudan.

**T**O COMPREHEND THE COMPLEXITIES of non-state actors' involvement in modern conflict, it is crucial to examine the role of Private Military Companies (PMC). PMCs base their activities and expertise on existing or constructed security gaps and the lack of state capacity to overcome them, disrupting the state's function as the only legitimate bearer of coercive power. During PMCs' peak activity in the early 2000s, the industry's total annual profit was around 100 billion dollars. As the privatization of conflict management became standard practice, South African and British PMCs were involved in West African civil wars, providing military training, pushing back rebel forces and engaging in the diamond trade. During the First Gulf War, the ratio of private to national military personnel was 1 to 1,000, when during the wars in Yugoslavia, it rose to 1 out of 10. The involvement of US and British PMCs in Iraq and Afghanistan was significant in shifting the oversight of modern conflict, ranging from counterterrorism operations and the protection of officials to accusations of grave human rights violations, such as indiscriminate mass shootings.<sup>1</sup> The aforementioned ratio is now estimated to have grown to 300 billion and expected to reach 400 billion USD by 2030.<sup>2</sup> While PMCs for many years seemed to be a Western "prerogative", emerging powers such as Russia, China, Turkey and the UAE have entered the field, challenging Western monopoly by outsourcing their military capabilities to boost national and economic objectives. China, who is promoting its Belt and Road Initiative, is one of Russia's largest peripheral competitors. Though more discrete, Chinese PMCs have been protecting officials and infrastructure critical to China's economic interests in East Africa and the Gulf of Aden. Similarly, the UAE's military advancement in regional conflicts, such as in Sudan, Yemen and Libya, has been closely linked to the collaboration with private contractors, raising issues of clientelism and lack of accountability.<sup>3</sup> This trend is best evident with Russia, which has used Wagner as a key tool for global power projection.

### **Russian power projection through the para-public military sector**

One of the most active PMCs currently is the Wagner Group, now renamed African Corps. It is only recently that the Russian President recognized funding Wagner's ventures.<sup>4</sup> Despite not being directly involved in these conflicts itself, the Russian government uses Wagner as a proxy to develop partnerships, support its economic and diplomatic endeavors and establish Russian legitimacy and power as an alternative to Western hegemony. Building on the USSR's ties with African anticolonial movements, as well as on the security vacuum created by the U.S. and France's withdrawal from the region, Wagner has managed to further enhance Russian potential.<sup>5</sup>

In Syria, Russia seized the opportunity to breach U.S. hegemony in the region. By enhancing its ties with the Assad regime since 2015, Russia managed to expand its economic and security interests through oil agreements and naval bases. Wagner has been involved in an array of activities in Syria, such as combat against ISIS, military training, as well as the protection of oil and gas sites and infrastructure.<sup>6</sup> The PMC has been accused of grave atrocities, including the committing and filming of beheadings.<sup>7</sup> Russian losses resulting from the recent developments in Syria, which are expected to weaken Russia's and Wagner's leverage in the Middle East, can be mitigated by its growing influence in the Sahel.



Similar to the Syrian case, a 2020 UN Report suggests that Wagner has been present in Libya since 2018, supporting Haftar's coalition against the Tripoli-based government through technical support, on-the-ground presence, and media influence in Haftar's favor, such as social media campaigns. Wagner has been accused of shadow-meddling with Libyan domestic political affairs, supporting the Haftar coalition, as well as controlling oil production.<sup>8</sup>

One of the main goals of Russia -when it comes to its involvement in the Sudanese civil war- is the establishment of a naval base in Port Sudan to facilitate the smooth coordination of its supply lines from the Middle East to Central and West Africa. This strategy connects the Sudanese civil war and Wagner with Libya. Specifically, Russia is seeking to establish another naval base in the port of Tobruk.

The issue of recruitment of personnel has also drawn attention. Although there is no concrete proof for the involvement of Wagner in this process, there is evidence that along with combatants from Nepal and India and armed troops from North Korea, Russia has allegedly been counting on recruiting mercenaries from Yemen, having the support of the Houthis in doing so. This recruitment strategy, which is largely based on deceit and involuntary displacement, can lead to two main observations.<sup>9</sup> First, Russia lacks the capacity to fully recruit domestically and has resorted to external outsourcing in order to enforce its interests in Ukraine. Secondly, this cooperation with the Houthis demonstrates a tightening of relations between Russia, Iran and affiliated armed groups, setting a block in the Middle East that could further challenge Western hegemony in the region. This further enhances Russia's power projection beyond its neighborhood, setting security trends and further disrupting global supply chains passing through the Red Sea.

### **Exploiting natural resources, porous borderlands and fragile politics**

To assess the role of PMCs in enhancing war economies, it is crucial to examine Wagner and Russia's economic leverage, in connection with their access to natural resources. By using Wagner as proxy in various conflicts, Russia can bypass sanctions, exploit minerals and, consequently, fund and enhance its strategic planning. Wagner has so far earned more than 1 billion USD in profit from being involved in gold and diamond mines in the Central African Republic (CAR) alone. Taking advantage of decreasing state sovereignty and the illicit economies that flourish in the Sub-Saharan borderlands, Wagner has been accused of smuggling gold through the

Sudan-CAR border.<sup>10</sup> The U.S. sanctioned an infrastructure company called M-Invest (and its subsidiary Meroe Gold), accusing them of being a cover for Wagner's activities in Sudan, including exploitation of gold mines.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, taking advantage of the hybrid security and governance reality in post-war Syria, Wagner has managed to attain significant profit from its natural resources, reportedly claiming 25% of oil production profit from the al-Shaer oil field. For Russia,



economic profit from the supply routes in question is of high importance, as it is through them that it can uphold its military involvement in Ukraine.

From Yemen to Mali and back to the Black Sea, Russia intends to escape the peripheral stakeholder trap. The Wagner Group has been actively contributing to Russia's global outreach strategy, taking advantage of opportunities created by war economies.<sup>12</sup> Limited tools to address severe violations of International Law from private contractors lead to a lack of accountability of individuals, as well as Russia which is using the para-public military sector as a shield against unlawful practices and uncertain strategic decisions. To conclude, Wagner's conflict management can lead to two macro level observations. There is an increasing trend for multipolarity in current global affairs that doubts Western predominance. Finally, the private military sector is an inextricable part of modern conflict resolution and must be given greater consideration in IL and global governance forums.

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# REGULATING THE IRREGULAR AT THE BORDERS

## A SYMBIOTIC ENTANGLEMENT BETWEEN STATES AND CRIMINAL NETWORKS

Eleni-Panagiota Stoupa

Escalating conflicts in the Middle East foster a conducive environment for the growth of criminal networks such as drugs, gold, arms, goods and human smuggling. The latter has been transformed into a lucrative industry with great risks and multiple violations of human rights. In parallel, it has become an entrenched aspect of the social structure of borders and an integral part of the region's collective memory, claiming its seat at the governance table. By examining this complex relationship this article aims to respond to a critical question: do criminal networks contribute to the maintaining of order over cross-border activities?

**A** **S MILITARY CONFLICTS AND CIVIL WARS** intensify across the Middle East, diplomatic efforts to resolve hostilities have repeatedly fallen short. The region now teeters on the brink, enduring immense human suffering and moral devastation, while its overall security and peace remain gravely threatened. Meanwhile, the risk of prolonging an attrition-based conflict between Israel and Iran -as well as with a network of proxy groups, such as Shia militias in Syria and Iraq, Islamic Jihad in the West Bank, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza, and the Houthis in Yemen- gives prominence to a thriving environment for criminal networks.

Drug, arms and human smuggling networks have increasingly taken root in the Arabian Peninsula and other MENA territories, particularly with ongoing conflicts such as the war in Gaza and Israel's conflict with Hezbollah. To smuggle drugs and weapons, criminal syndicates have taken advantage of the highly volatile security situation in Yemen and Syria as well as countries with weak law enforcement such as Iraq and the United Arab Emirates.<sup>1</sup> In Gaza, smuggling gangs are becoming more powerful due to limitations on the flow of products, managing the supply of tobacco and other goods – such as cigarettes – which are being sold for more than 1,000\$ a pack.<sup>2</sup> Gold smuggling along the Sudanese-Egyptian border has surged amid the ongoing conflict between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) paramilitaries.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, the gasoline smuggling crisis in Iran has escalated to previously unheard-of proportions, with up to 50 million liters of fuel being illegally exported from the nation each day.<sup>4</sup>

### Human smuggling as part of the local social systems

The Mediterranean basin encompasses ancient migration routes that have been utilized for centuries by individuals seeking to cross into Europe. Based on Europol's data, smugglers are responsible for 90% of irregular migrants who enter the EU through any route, providing a variety of services such as lodging, transportation, and forged documents.<sup>5</sup> Reaching Europe by these irregular routes is not only highly risky, but also quite costly. Fees are shaped according to the route, the circumstances, the weather, and the level of danger, as well as the migration path. The facilitation of irregular migration has evolved into a rapidly expanding and lucrative industry. According to Europol, criminal networks operating in this sector generate between EUR 3 and EUR 6 billion in revenue, a figure that "is set to double or triple if the scale of the current migration crisis persists in the upcoming year".<sup>6</sup> For instance, the price of freedom in Palestine has currently been estimated at 5,000\$ per adult and 2,500\$ per kid, while for Syrians to cross from

Ras al-Ain to Turkey ranges between 2,000\$ and 5,000\$.<sup>7</sup> To that end, smugglers are portrayed in the popular discourse as avaricious villains operating within organized criminal networks to exploit despair and human suffering for profit. At the same time, a wide ethnographic work that analyses smuggling activities in the context of their localities and narratives, highlights their necessity to survival along with their morality schemes.<sup>8</sup>

Passing from uncontrolled areas with no authorities or without



strong legal frameworks – such as northern Iraq and Syria – inherits unseen risks for forced migrants. Many may brush up against, be persuaded or driven into participating in illegal activities –such as drug or arms trafficking – linking human smuggling with a variety of other illegitimate practices. At the same time, there are cases that human smuggling turns into a window of opportunity in economic hardships. Such is the case of Sfax, a historically vibrant economic city in southern Tunisia, which has recently emerged as a key transit point for irregular migration. This shift coincides with structural social, economic, and climatic challenges in the Sahel region that drive an increasing number of sub-Saharan migrants to the area. Prolonged droughts, rising food prices, and inequitable agricultural pricing policies have undermined the traditional agricultural and fishing sectors, turning people to human smuggling.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, the lack of authorized migration routes to Europe has increased the significance of trusted middlemen. These people work under the ‘hawala’ system – a traditional informal value money system based on trust and balanced debts – acting as a “bank for smugglers and an insurer for migrants”.<sup>10</sup> By combining different relationships of trust, hawala brokers use this trust to extend their coverage across multiple places and guarantee their mutual responsibilities among smugglers and migrants. This migration brokerage complicates the dichotomies between legal and illegal, state and criminal networks, formalities and informalities, as well as regulating the irregularities at the borders.<sup>11</sup>

Criminal networks across the MENA region – despite their varied scale, scope, and origins - exploit longstanding trade practices along with the region’s instability in order to evolve over the centuries. These networks, whether spanning multiple countries or confined to a single border, have adapted to or persisted alongside the establishment of modern national borders. This historical continuity in trade routes and practices along with the state weaknesses facilitates their operations, regardless of the geopolitical changes in the region. From a state-centred perspective, smuggling has been extensively explored in both academic and policy-oriented research as an economic, social, or political issue necessitating identification and resolution. Though, the complex relationship between smugglers and migrants needs a deeper understanding focusing on their positioning in the process of the migration regime and the developed patterns and experiences before, during and after borders crossing. In borderlands – the beacon of regional networks of trade and cultural exchange – smuggling is portrayed as a well-established feature of local social systems and is part of the collective political memory. Currently, with the most severe threat of all being the possibility for the entire region to be drawn into a conflict “the art of ensuring trans-local sovereignty” as has been described by Thomas Hüsken, mirrors a symbiotic relation between state and criminal networks, in which the latter provide dangerous opportunities for a chance to life.<sup>12</sup>



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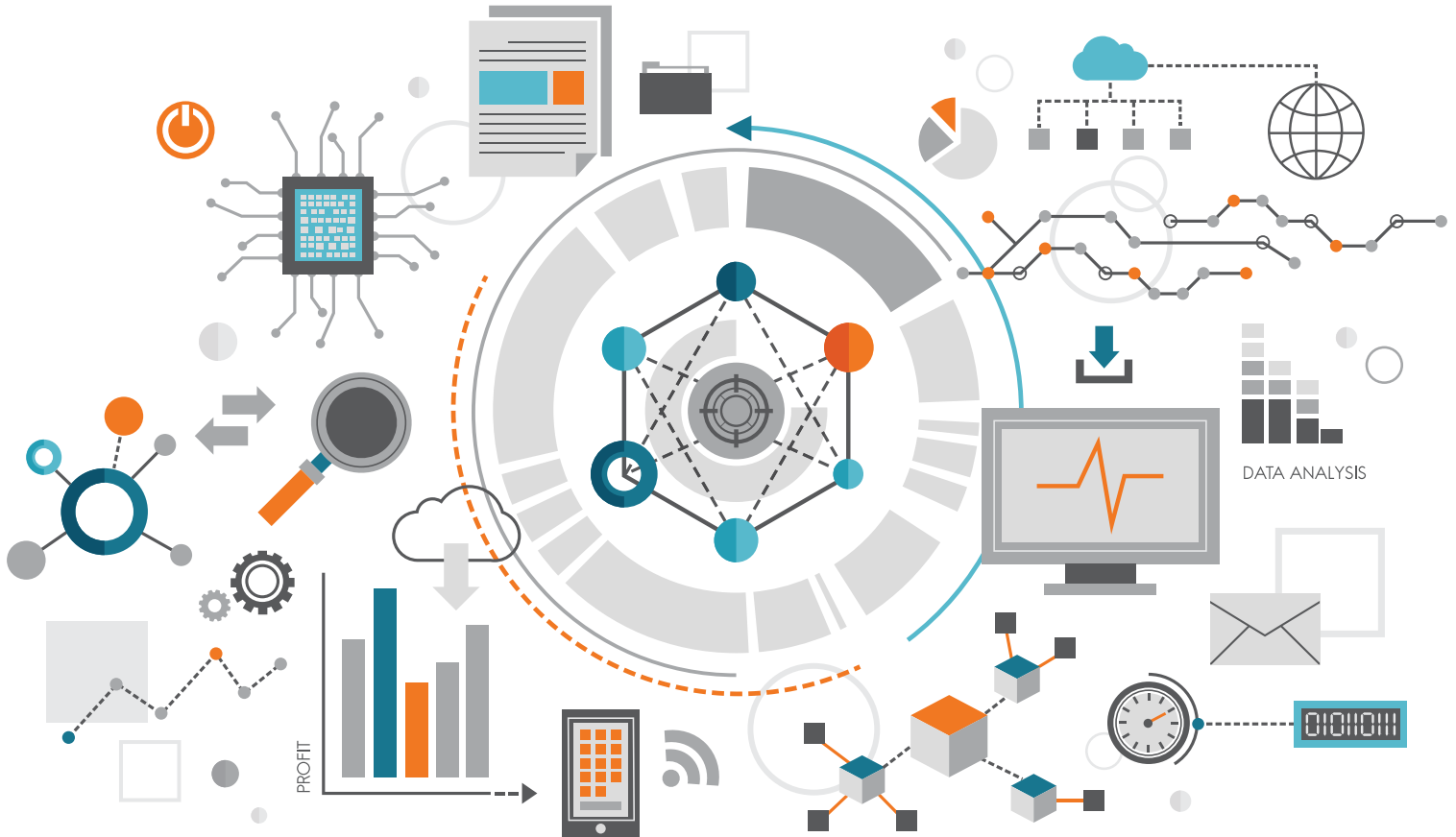
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# DATA COLONIALISM

A new age of dependency in the Middle East



Alexandros Papamichalopoulos

During the twentieth century, the Middle East bore witness to foreign powers seeking to exploit the region's energy resources through colonial and neo-colonial politics, for the benefit of the Western economy. Nowadays, a new vicious cycle of control and exploitation seems to be emerging. This new era of neo-colonialism is taking place in cyberspace, where Big Tech companies are taking over the colonizers' role.

**THE RECENT STATEMENTS** by Turkish President Erdogan concerning collaborating with Elon Musk's SpaceX on technological development more than highlight the growing demand for advanced technology in the Middle East, signaling the region's emergence as a key market for Big Tech. The Middle East offers the following advantages for private international companies: abundant energy resources for AI, high internet penetration to attract investment, a central role in Eurasian data traffic, and increased demand for cyber security amid regional rivalries. The above situation is linked with the endeavor of the region's states to attract foreign investments, exploiting the geopolitical transition towards the Global South, redefine global trade dynamics and build a knowledge driven economy. However, this new market also fosters a form of neo-colonialism, where Big Tech actors and regional players engage in new forms of control centered on cyberspace.<sup>1</sup>

Nkrumah defines neo-colonialism as the result of colonialism, where the colonizer's exercise of power never stopped. Instead, the colonizer exercises influence over the former colony, now an independent state, through other means, such as the economy, infrastructure and technological development.<sup>2</sup> Within the cyberspace market, however, neo-colonial power is exerted in a different way. This new version of neo-colonialism is termed as data colonialism. Instead of appropriating the natural resources of the colonized states, Big Tech, acting as the new colonizers, extracts the data produced by the colonized people through their services. As a result, Big Tech gains control over the users' surplus value which constitutes a new form of capital.<sup>3</sup> In this sense, the users/subjects become objects that produce data, stripped of their rights. In this new scenario, actors such as Google and Facebook gain immeasurable power, which in many cases can even substitute that of the state, such as people surveillance, as exemplified in Iran and Saudi Arabia.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, this situation is also directly linked to the reproduction of dependency and underdevelopment. On the one hand, the colonized state in need stands powerless against its loss of sovereignty, since reacting to the latter risks rendering it vulnerable in an insecure region ripe with local antagonisms. On the other, the colonized state cannot gain direct access to cutting-edge technology by itself, effectively maintaining and reproducing a vicious cycle of dependency and underdevelopment.<sup>5</sup> For instance, the Gulf states have based the realization of their ambitious goals in the private sector. More precisely, private companies, such as Cisco in Saudi Arabia, play a key role in the realization of Vision 2030, while simultaneously offering training and cyber security courses to Saudi

citizens.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, Cisco is responsible for the creation of secure private and public cloud systems for the UAE and Saudi Arabia. The acquisition of cyber capabilities is considered crucial for their national security against countries such as Israel and Iran, as leading regional players in AI and cyberwarfare.<sup>7</sup>

Nonetheless, Iran and Israel are also dependent on the assistance of the private sector in order to ensure regime sta-



bility and maintain their domestic security. Chinese private companies such as Hangzhou Hikvision, Zhejiang Dahua and Tencent have provided Iran with public surveillance and camera systems with face recognition capabilities.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, Google and Amazon have signed a \$1.2 billion contract with Israel for the development of the Nimbus software concerning the provision of public cloud services, AI services and facial-and-emotion recognition systems.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, IBM operates the Eitan system which provides the Israeli government with information on Palestinians in the occupied territories, while Microsoft runs the Almunasseq software, through which Palestinians can request permission to enter the occupied territories.<sup>10</sup> These instances demonstrate that the private sector can and may have taken over crucial state powers such as border control, national security and domestic stability. In both cases, Big Tech companies contribute to the perpetuation of authoritarian regimes, such as the Iranian or Egyptian ones, or the inhumane treatment of Palestinians in the case of Israel.

Dependent states are becoming battlegrounds for cyber rivalry between the US and China, with their respective Big Tech companies vying for control over data colonies. A key example is Abu Dhabi's G42, which complied with US demands to sever ties with Chinese firms in exchange for American technology, fearing that China might replicate it. This shift from economic to power dynamics mirrors Lenin's concept of imperialism. As technology shapes national policy, this may signal a move from data colonialism to data imperialism, where the colonizer can exert control over key sectors such as the economy and trade, while the colonized state remains trapped in dependency since its colonizer remains one step ahead in cutting-edge technology development as showcased in the Nvidia chips case.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, attempts by the data colonized to disentangle themselves from the grasps of the private sector fall short, as evidenced in the Saudi digital regulations, shepherded by the PWC private company, enabling a new vicious cycle of dependency.<sup>12</sup>

While these conditions seem to replicate neo-colonial policies, the emergence of cyberspace and data colonialism seems on the verge of backfiring on colonizers, as the accumulation of data/power by Big Tech could primarily serve private interests which do not necessarily align with traditional foreign policy in the Middle East.



## NOTES

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