

# Conference Report

The State, Non-State Actor Nexus

EGIC Enters the Debate

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The 1979 seizure of Mecca's Grand Mosque, perpetrated by a dangerous non-state actor composed by a group of religious fanatics, had severe and long-lasting implications inside Saudi Arabia (KSA)—the most powerful state in the Arab Gulf—and for the region as a whole. The Euro-Gulf Information Centre (EGIC) examined the unfolding dilemma of the state to non-state actor nexus in the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA) in the context of its Great Rivalry series. The Great Rivalry examines the evolution of geopolitics in the wider Middle East. High-level scholars and policy-makers gather in Rome, annually, to provide multi-layered analyses for the dynamics at play so sense can be made and policies adjusted to suit unfolding realities.

On 14 September 2019, Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen claimed responsibility for targeting Saudi Arabia's (KSA) Abqaiq oil complex—the largest crude oil stabilisation plant in the world—and took out 5% of global crude output. This event proved again that non-state actors are increasingly capable foreign policy actors able to influence dynamics in the MENA

and beyond. The latest attacks are part of a longer calculated escalation in which Iran has been relying on its proxies to 'test its waters with increasingly destructive and sophisticated attacks' explained EGIC's President, Mitchell Belfer. Tehran has a long history of creating and coordinating an array of proxy militias using the common affiliation to the Shiite sect to establish the Islamic Republic of Iran as the patron of various groups across the Middle East. Iran has often used its network of proxy militias to advance its foreign policy interest and to carry out attacks while cloaking its direct involvement.

Meanwhile, other powerful non-state actors—mainly Sunni jihadi groups—continue to pose a formidable security threat throughout the region. Daniele Raineri, a veteran correspondent and expert on terrorism related issues argues groups such as Daesh and Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) are increasingly obsessed by the need of obtaining popular legitimacy in the areas they control or in which they operate. Daesh's failed efforts to control parts of Libya demonstrate the importance of legitimacy. Raineri explai-

ned that ‘Daesh’s was initially successful in exploiting the government to population disconnect—partially caused by the presence of two rival governments within Libya—to seize power in the cities of Derna and Sirte.’ However, in both cities the terrorist organisation was ousted by local forces with the help of the Libyan population—very hostile to the prospect of being ruled by Daesh’s foreign fighters. Daesh was more successful in Iraq and Syria where the bulk of the organisation’s members was recruited among locals. It is certainly worth reflecting on the fact that non-state actors attempt, once in control, to establish their own state system—the case of Daesh—or to control the state they operate in—the case of Hezbollah in Lebanon. In both cases the aim is to obtain the monopoly of violence.

The situation on the ground in Libya deserves an ad-hoc examination around the state to non-state actor nexus in the country. As explained by the President of the NATO Defense College Foundation (NDCF) Alessandro Minuto Rizzo, ‘Libya’s various tribes have little or no interest in joining the state formation process.’ Even more

problematically, the country’s two rival governments—based in Tripoli and Benghazi respectively—are increasingly assuming the characteristics of proxy forces supported by powerful foreign actors and not the ones of functioning states. More broadly, the support to non-state actors in foreign countries has been a long-time dilemma in the West. Western states have often acted selectively and inconsistently from 2011 onwards vis à vis various situations such as the unrest in Syria, Bahrain, Yemen. The most staggering example of such Western inconsistency is perhaps the current US position towards Kurdish fighters, key Washington’s allies in the fight against Daesh but abandoned when targeted by Turkey’s military.

Non-state actors are likely to be increasingly relevant on the global stage for two main reasons. First, the outcomes of the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq have decreased the appetite, especially in the West, for a direct involvement in the region. Second, non-state actors such as proxy militias are proving to be increasingly effective to promote their patrons’ agendas with violent means. Crucially, according

to Michael Stephens, Senior Research Fellow for Middle East Studies at the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) this is related to the fact that the Western-inspired international legal system 'is very effective in blocking direct military confrontation between states but lacks the tools to address violence by non-state actors.' As things stand a country such as Iran, which can rely on a consolidated network of proxy militias, is able to commit acts of war largely with impunity provided it maintains the level of armed confrontation to a non-state actor level.

EGIC will continue to monitor the impact of the state to non-state actor nexus on geopolitical developments throughout the MENA. Issues such as the activities of Iran proxies against Gulf states, Iraq's attempt to institutionalise its Shiite militias, Syria's government increased reliance on Hezbollah and the re-emergence of the threat posed by Daesh across the Arab levant make this topic ever-more relevant.