Violent Non-State Actors in the Middle East: Origins and Goals

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The history of the Middle East is littered with violent conflict – interstate wars, civil wars, insurgencies, revolutions, coups, invasions by foreign powers, and ethnic and sectarian strife. Especially since the 1967 war between Israel and a group of Arab nations led by Egypt, peace in the Middle East has been elusive (Quandt 2005; Dennis 2004).[1] Independent of the agency of the groups we will discuss in this chapter, there are a variety of structural conditions in the Middle East that permit a range of political actors to violently resist or even defeat the authority of the state and its allies.

Competition for regional hegemony is a fact of life in the international system and is particularly evident in this region of the world – whether longstanding rivalries such as Iran vs. Iraq (Williamson and Woods 2014) or more current rivalries such as Iran vs. the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Gause III 2014). As part of that hegemonic competition, states sponsor violent groups as part of a bid to revise or maintain the status quo (Byman 2005). As a result of civil wars and/or the use of military force by foreign powers, four countries in the region (Yemen, Iraq, Syria, and Libya) are failed or failing states that provide sanctuary for many of the most violent and resilient violent non-state actors (VNSAs) along with the wide assortment of criminal gangs and war profiteers. What has emerged in a more virulent form in the region since at least 2001 (Gerges 2005) [2], however, is the entrance of the disruptive force of transnational VNSAs whose radical Islamist political and social vision for the region demands the violent transformation of the Islamic world beginning with the home of Islam, the land and peoples of the Middle East.

In this chapter, I focus on the origins and primary goals of four key VNSAs that represent major organisations that are able to mount sustained campaigns of strategic anti-government violence to achieve their political goals in the Middle East – those that use terror, guerrilla warfare, punishment and, when possible, conventional warfare to challenge the incumbent governments for control of territory (Jones 2016; Salehyan 2009). VNSAs as varied ideologically as transnational Salafi-Jihadi groups such as ISIS[3] and its affiliates, and Al Qaeda and its affiliates, operate in the Middle East as well as Shia Lebanese nationalist groups such as Hezbollah and Sunni Palestinian nationalist groups such as Hamas. Either in opposition to the state or as a partner of the state (e.g., Hezbollah in Syria,), VNSAs are important political actors in the widening political and military conflicts that have killed hundreds of thousands and displaced tens of millions of citizens with global repercussions (Human Rights Watch 2018 and 1992) [4].

While we will explore in more detail in this chapter only a handful of the more infamous VNSAs, they are not operating alone in the conflicts in the Middle East. There are a variety of other actors in the region that need to be accounted for to fully grasp the 'industry' of violent non-state actors that shape the level of conflict in the region and the related political outcomes that result from these conflicts. But there are simply too many groups to properly cover in this brief chapter. To give you a sense for the scale and scope of the VNSA industry in the region I will provide a brief synopsis of the nature of the literally hundreds of other VNSAs that operate in the region currently. We will then take a closer look at those few groups that I believe have distinctively shaped the politics of the Middle East in the last 20 years and promise to do so for the foreseeable future.

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Overview of the VNSA 'Industry' in the Middle East

Multiple states in the region do not have a monopoly on the use of force within their borders, and that means, for the time being at least, VNSAs hold vital and decisive power over the course of political events in the region. The current level and nature of conflict in the region, in fact, seems to be degrading the power of the state even further. This allows not only the major VNSAs to influence the politics of the region but also the 'industry' of hundreds of other groups who also act as critical factors in the course and speed of political change. Paraphrasing Hobbes, life in the Middle East seems to be even shorter, even more brutish and seemingly more hopeless.

There are a variety of groups that operate in the shadows of the larger Islamic mass movements and serve as strategic paramilitary partners for more established VNSAs such as Hamas or Hezbollah. The nature of their affiliation is generally intentionally obscured to grant some level of political immunity to the political wing of its parent group. Groups such as the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) (Fletcher 2008) and Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade (AAMB) (Fletcher 2005) have persisted for decades but remain clandestine and maintain very limited and exclusive membership. In addition to violent actions taken by the group on its own, it often functions as a strategic partner to other larger groups who are designed as mass movements (PIJ and Hamas and AAMB with Fatah and Hamas. There are also several groups that act as local agents of foreign governments such as Iran or transnational actors such as Al Qaeda. Ansar al Islam (AI) (Stanford University n.d.) and Kata'ib Hizballah (KH) (Stanford University n.d.) have been listed by the US State Department as foreign terrorist organisations for at least 10 years. AI is a Sunni group based on Salafi Jihadi principles whose primary mission has been to resist the Kurdish regional government in Iraq and advance the potential for Sunni Islamic rule in that region of Iraq. Its founders were trained in the AQ camps during and following the Afghan war and currently affiliate with Al Qaeda groups in the region. It has at times cooperated with and fought with ISIS as well. KH is a relatively large Shia paramilitary group that is reportedly backed by Iran and seeks to strengthen the ability of Iran to influence Iraqi politics in favour of the majority Shia community in Iraq. It has played a prominent role in the Popular Mobilisation Units in Iraq (Toumaj 2016).[5] KH troop strength, noted to be as high as 30,000 civilian fighters, was called to action to defend Iraq against the invasion by ISIS in 2014 in Iraq. There are hundreds of other VNSAs that arose – or became prominent – in the wake of the wars in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Libya. A few of the prominent groups that rose up in the last 5 to 10 years include Jaysh Rijal al-Tariqa al-Naqshbandia in Iraq (Iraqi Sunni nationalist) (Stanford University n.d), Ahrar al Sham in Syria (Syrian Salafi Jihadi nationalists) (Stanford University n.d.), the Houthis in Yemen (Yemeni Shia nationalists) (International Crisis Group 2014), and the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group in Libya (Libyan Salafi Jihadi nationalist) (Witter 2011). These groups vary in size, ability, and political ideology, but all play/have played important roles in their respective political/military areas of operation. In addition, there are new VNSA groups emerging in Egypt in reaction to the authoritarian regime of the current President, Abdel Fattah al Sisi (BBC News 2014). Groups such as Hasm and Liwa al Thawra in Egypt (El-Gundy 2017) are still small, less than 18 months old, but increasingly active with attacks on government officials and military targets. Though rumoured, it is not clear what, if any, links they may have to more long-standing activist groups in Egypt such as the Muslim Brotherhood or potentially ISIS. They seek to overthrow the sitting President of Egypt, al Sisi, through violence and to establish an Egyptian society based on Islam.

Focus for the Discussion

Islam inspires the political visions of all of the four organisations I will focus on in the remainder of this chapter. But each organisation translates Islam differently into political and violent action. All four groups (or their affiliates) have at one time taken and held territory by violence. All are capable of competing with both rival VNSAs on the battlefield or Western-style military forces in conventional combat. The four groups are:

1. Hamas – a Sunni Islamic Palestinian group formed in 1987 that is devoted to the formation of an independent Palestinian homeland.
2. Hezbollah – A Shia Islamic Lebanese group formed in 1982 that is devoted to the political rights of the Shia community in Lebanon and the deterrence of Israel.
3. Al Qaeda and its affiliates (AQ) – a transnational Sunni Salafi Jihadi group whose core was formed in 1988 in the aftermath of the Soviet-Afghan war, focused on the re-establishment of the Caliphate but, more

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immediately, on defensive jihad to defeat the 'far enemy' who they argue were the root cause of oppression of the Islamic faithful – that is, the Western powers such as the US who support the leaders in the Middle East that they consider to be apostate.

4. Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and its affiliates – A Sunni Salafi-Jihadi group that was formed as a spin off from Al Qaeda in 2014. They focused on the establishment of the Caliphate in the very near term and the prosecution of the offensive global Jihad to expand the geographic scope of the Caliphate.

Hamas

Hamas has been in existence since 1987 and is now, with the pacification of its rival Fatah in 2007, the largest Palestinian militant movement.[6] Hamas is an offshoot of the Sunni Islamic movement known as the Muslim Brotherhood of Palestine that was established in the Palestinian territories in 1935.

Recognising that Hamas can be vague in its public statements and has evolved its thinking on core issues (e.g., conditions for settlement with Israel on the state of Palestine, the role of democratic elections domestically, the role of Islam in the governance of society), the organisation has consistently maintained its focus on two super-priorities since its origin and more recently on one other. First, Hamas is a nationalist movement inspired by Islam. It seeks an independent Palestinian state consisting of Gaza and the West Bank. It is zeroed in on the plight of the Palestinians versus the greater Muslim community. In regards to the notion of an Islamic state, Gunning notes that Hamas has more recently conceded that Islam must be 'willed by the people, and can only come about if a clear majority support its establishment' (Gunning 2010). The notion of an independent Palestinian state is not negotiable for Hamas but the boundaries (1948 vs. 1967) and the basis for the rules of society are negotiable (i.e., Islam vs. a secular model).

Second, Hamas is committed to sustaining steadfast resistance to the occupation (and later, to its non-violent variant, the siege/blockade) by Israel and will use violence as needed against both military as well as civilians in Israel to compel the Israelis to conduct what they see as fair and even-handed negotiations for the establishment of the Palestinian state. It seeks these goals on behalf of all Palestinians currently in the Territories and the refugees from the 1948 war who live outside the Territories. It has waged bloody terror campaigns against Israel almost since its inception including two major suicide bombing campaigns in the mid-1990s in opposition to the Oslo Accords (Ariav and Linsay 2012) and as part of the second Intifada from late 2000 to mid-2005. Hamas has also engaged in four conventional wars with Israel since 2006, the year that they won the national elections in the Palestinian Territories and assumed formal leadership of the Palestinian Authority. While summarily defeated in each of these wars, Hamas and its allies have maintained their resistance to Israeli occupation of Palestinian Territories to the present.

Third, Hamas seeks intra-Palestinian unity; Hamas wants to avoid civil war or the factionalism that would weaken the Palestinian cause in the presence of a superior enemy such as Israel (Rabbani 2008, 59–81). After its stunning victory in the 2006 Palestinian national elections, Hamas turned its attention to the business of governing. One of its earliest initiatives was to push forward with a national unity government with Fatah – a goal it has yet to achieve. Hamas could ill afford, nor was it inclined to be, ideological purists since the support of a broad constituency is vital to the accomplishment of its political goals (Brown 2009, Brown 2012, Lybarger 2007).

Hamas '… is neither Al Qaeda nor the Taliban. It owes something to Hezbollah (Ghaddar 2013) and much to the Muslim Brotherhood. It is Islamist but nationalist; Sunni, yet supported by a Shia regional power (Iran); democratic, yet opaque; populist, yet cruel' (Milton-Edwards 2010). Its founders established Hamas to 'get in the game' politically and militarily and use force against Israel in addition to the preaching and other 'quietist' methods to prepare the faithful Muslims of Palestine to accede to the state of Palestine.

Hezbollah

Hezbollah emerged during the summer of 1982 in the wake of the second Israeli invasion of Lebanon within the prior four years. Lebanon was at war with itself since 1975 and had split into several armed factions vying for control of the country. Hezbollah was formed from a splinter of Amal, the Lebanese Dawa party, the Association of Muslim Ulema

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and the Association of Muslim Students (Ranstorp 1997; Palmer-Harik 2004; Norton 1999). Following Israel's swift defeat of Syrian and Palestinian forces in southern Lebanon in the summer of 1982, Iran inserted an estimated 1500 Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps troops (IRGC) into Lebanon's Bekaa Valley with the cooperation of Syria. They trained the Hezbollah fighters (estimated at no more than 500 full time forces at the time) in the political ideology of Islam and the fighting methods of the elite forces of the IRGC. They were groomed to conduct terror and guerrilla operations against Western forces in the region and the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) and SLA (South Lebanon Army) forces in the south.

In 1985 Hezbollah articulated its political agenda in its Open Letter (Norton 1987). They proclaimed that they were dedicated to evicting all foreign occupiers, annihilating Israel and forming an Islamic state in Lebanon based on the Shia model that was established in Iran in 1979. But Hezbollah quickly yielded on its goal of forming an Islamic state in Lebanon. They acknowledged that the peoples of Lebanon have the freedom to choose their own system of government – openly admitting that they preferred an Islamic system but yielding to the Qu'ranic stipulation that Islam cannot be imposed on anyone (Norton 1987).

A core belief of Hezbollah is that oppression is what is wrong with the world – regardless of religion. 'The only religious obligation upon the Party is that it actively pursues justice, regardless of whether or not this culminates in the creation of an Islamic state' (Saad-Ghorayah 2002). As part of its mission to bring social justice to Lebanon – and relieve the suffering of the 'dispossessed' – Hezbollah built a robust social welfare network in large part to close the large gaps in public services that the weak national government could not deliver. Hezbollah's social services organisations rivalled or exceeded the abilities of the Lebanese government as it relates to important social services (e.g., education, medical care, financial aid, and trash collection). Hezbollah uses its NGOs to serve mostly the needy Shia but, in times of great crisis, they are open to all in need. They see it as part of the greater jihad to transform each member of Lebanese society regardless of whether they are Muslim or convert to Islam.

While Hezbollah is generally viewed as patriotic to Lebanon,[7] virtually incorruptible and willing to suffer enormous personal loss to fight for their political goals, its dependence on Iran and Syria for military, political and economic support raised doubts about their ultimate purpose. Iran and Syria combined have contributed handsomely to the movement in order to build its political and military power for use against mutual foes. Iran bankrolled Hezbollah with an estimated $50 to $100 million in annual support for the development of Hezbollah's military, political, and social services operations in the early years of its existence – to this day it plays a major role in the financial viability of the group (Ranstorp 1997; Byman 2005; Rafizadeh 2016). Syria provided military and political support and collaborated with Iran to ensure safe transit of weapons into Lebanon for use by Hezbollah as it conducted its terror campaigns in the 1980s against the US and Western powers (e.g., France) in Lebanon[8], guerrilla wars against the IDF and SLA in the 1990s and the building of its deterrent military forces to oppose Israel in the 2000s (Reenders 2006, 38–56).[9] Today, over 35 years after its founding, Hezbollah is recognised as a highly effective military organisation (Biddle and Friedman 2008) and the single most powerful political organisation in Lebanon (International Crisis Group 2005)[10] While perplexing to its Lebanese followers (Kizilkaya 2017, 211–228) Hezbollah's willingness to fight and die in Syria in the service of President Assad since 2013 to the present, Hezbollah has solidified its role as a major political force in the regional politics of the Middle East (International Crisis Group 2017).

Al Qaeda and Affiliates

Al Qaeda was founded in 1988 in the wake of the war in Afghanistan between the USSR and the various Afghan militias who resisted Soviet occupation and their appointed leaders. Osama Bin Laden had claimed repeatedly that Muslims around the world were being oppressed by foreign powers (the USSR's incursion in Afghanistan was just one more example of that for him) and that jihad was an individual obligation of all faithful Muslims (Kepel and Milelli 2008, Gerges 2005). Along with his mentor Abdullah Azzam, Osama bin Laden called for the formation of Al Qaeda (the 'Base') in Afghanistan in order to attract thousands of foreign fighters to their camps there to build them into a kind of special jihadi forces that would be trained in both the principles of its Salafi-Jihadi (Maher 2016, Bunzel 2016) interpretation of Islam and modern special warfare. Once properly trained and equipped, the intent was to ultimately return them to their homelands to advance the cause of the Muslim faithful by terror and guerrilla warfare as well as by preaching and spiritual development. Al Qaeda wanted to transform the overall 'Jihadi industry' from one that was

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focused on toppling the 'near enemy' – the likes of Saddam Hussein in Iraq or Hosni Mubarak in Egypt – into one that relentlessly attacks the 'far enemy' (Gerges 2005) the powerful Western nations that backed leaders whom Al Qaeda viewed as apostates, dictators and tools of Western government oppression of the Muslim faithful. Once the far enemy was defeated, the powerful global Jihadi army that was to be raised would destroy local leaders via a series of bloody battles that would fulfil the apocalyptic prophecies in either the Koran or the Hadith (Gerges 2005; Fishman 2016; McCants 2015; Byman 2015). While the goal of the restoration of the Caliphate was a longer-term one for Al Qaeda, it was subordinate to acting as the vanguard to inspire faithful Muslims around the world to take up jihad (Byman 2015) to defend against the oppression of the West and apostate Muslim leaders. Ayman Zawahiri (Bajoria 2011), AQ's senior leader, explains in his book, *The Knights Under the Prophet's Banner,* that 'no solution is possible without jihad' (Kepel and Milelli 2008).

Rooted in Al Qaeda's conviction that Muslims were oppressed and under attack by the West, they articulated four primary goals in a public address to the world in 1998. They released a fatwa via their umbrella organisation, the World Islamic Front for Combat Against Jews and Crusaders, which included these four goals (Byman 2015, 47–48; Kepel and Milelli, 2008): 1) Ending the US presence in the Middle East; 2) Destroying Israel; 3) Reorienting the Jihadi Movement; and, 4) Opposing 'apostate' regimes in the Muslim World. These goals are fairly broad and allowed a lot of room for the group to pursue its political agenda as it saw fit and as opportunities presented themselves. Al Qaeda's primary mission through the mid-2000s was to bring the fight to the 'Far Enemy', but the US invasion of Iraq presented a unique opportunity to kill Americans in the Middle East. As it built out its affiliates (e.g., Iraq, Northern Africa, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and ultimately Syria in 2011), it began to spread its ideology and special forces throughout the modern Middle East to both bloody the US and coalition forces and establish control over territory in the Middle East.

Al Qaeda's presence in the Middle East increased dramatically in 2004 when the group then known as Monotheism and Jihad merged its organisation with Al Qaeda. The resultant organisation had a variety of names but was generally known as Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and was founded by an especially violent jihadi named Abu Musab al Zarqawi, the 'Sheik of the Slaughterers'. This organisation would become the present day Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) when it split with Al Qaeda in early 2014 (see below). In addition to AQI, Al Qaeda would form a variety of affiliates in the Middle East (Zimmerman 2013) including AQ in the Islamic Maghreb (2007), AQ in the Arabian Peninsula (2009) and Jabhat al Nusra (2011). Given space limitations, I will discuss just two AQ affiliates – AQI and Jabhat al Nusra – in this chapter.

Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) – As noted, AQI was founded in 2004 as a result of the merger of Abu Musab al Zarqawi' group, Monotheism and Jihad, into Al Qaeda. AQ central's instructions to Zarqawi in 2005 were to do four basic things: '... expel the Americans, establish an Islamic state, expand the jihad to Iraq's neighbours, and ultimately confront Israel. Zawahiri described the first two goals as "near-term". He (Zawahiri) hoped that eventually it would reach the status of the caliphate' (Bunzel 2016, 15). Clearly AQ central and AQI believed that the Caliphate was an important goal but they disagreed on important aspects of how and when to best pursue it. They disagreed on the conditions that were necessary for its founding, the role of violence against the Shia as preparation for its founding and the related timing of its founding. In contrast to AQ central, Zarqawi saw the Shia as a greater threat to the goals of Al Qaeda than the coalition forces (Bunzel 2016, 14). AQI would expend substantial resources on waging a sectarian war against the Shia between 2003 and 2010 – a war that AQ central saw as unnecessary since they believed the Shia could be redeemed through preaching. AQ Central did not want the public relations problems of being accountable for killing fellow Muslims. For AQI the extermination of the Shia was central to its pursuit of the solution to the ills of all faithful Muslims (Lister 2014; Fishman 2016; McCants 2015).

Jabhat al Nusra (JN) – The second AQ affiliate that has played a significant role in the Middle East, Jabhat al Nusra (Victory Front for the People of the Levant), was formed in early 2012 as a spinoff from AQI. Jabhat al Nusra (JN) was an outgrowth of AQI given Al Qaeda central's (AQC) continuing need to expand in the Middle East and to develop sanctuaries for AQC to ramp up its actions against 'far enemies' around the globe. Bin Laden had been assassinated by this time (May 2, 2011), and coalition forces had degraded AQI significantly by March 2010 by killing or jailing over 75% of its leadership. Iraq had become a vastly more difficult country in which to conduct operations. The US and its allies began winding down operations in Iraq and turned greater attention to kinetic

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operations in Afghanistan in an attempt defeat the Taliban and track down and kill/capture the remnants of AQC in that region. The Syrian civil war had not yet evolved to the scale and scope it would become in 2012 and beyond but it appears that AQC leadership saw the potential to exploit the deteriorating conditions for the development of a new branch (Lister 2016) and a new sanctuary at the same time. JN was built largely with a foundation of Syrian nationalists who were members of AQI that signalled a change from the foreign fighter dominated models that Zarqawi had used to great effect in the early days in Iraq. From 2012 to the present, JN evolved its operating style and philosophy to the point where it was no longer clear whether it was still committed to the broader Al Qaeda mission of global jihad to re-establish the Caliphate, or simply one more Syrian nationalist insurgency (Lister 2015; Lister 2016), trying to unseat a local dictator – a very big difference for the organisation and its followers (Abbas 2016, 45–64). They changed their name to Fatah al Sham in 2016 and claimed that they were no longer affiliated with AQ. Most analysts believe that they are, in fact, still an AQ affiliate but are simply creating strategic ambiguity to optimise both funding from sponsors and also to potentially compel coalition forces to reduce/redirect attacks away from JN to ISIS and its affiliates in the Syrian battle space (Lister 2015). With the fall of Aleppo in December 2016 to regime forces, the tide of the Syrian civil war had clearly turned against anti-government resistance organisations. Nonetheless, JN (now Fatah al Sham[11]) appears poised to continue to lead the fight in Syria for the foreseeable future along with its allies and affiliates (Stanford University n.d.). JN's transnational intentions are less clear at this time but many analysts believe they are playing 'the long game' and will return to the pursuit of the global Jihad regardless of the outcome of the Syrian war.

ISIS and its Affiliates

ISIS (The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria [Stanford University n.d.]) officially became an independent entity when it split with (or was disowned by) Al Qaeda in February 2014 as a result of the split of AQI from AQC (Joscelyn 2014). ISIS is known by a variety of names (e.g., Daesh, ISIL, the Islamic State) but I will use ISIS to refer to the group in this chapter.

While aspiring to fulfil the overall mission that bin Laden had expressed in his 1998 fatwa, ISIS holds an even more strict interpretation of Salafi-Jihadi doctrine than Al Qaeda and its affiliates such as JN (Coker 2014; Lister 2016; Bunzel 2015). This profound difference of vision and strategy triggered a running conflict between AQ Central and Zarqawi, the fiercely independent leader of AQI and his equally independent successor Abu Bakr al Baghdadi (McCants 2015), regarding who were legitimate targets of violence (i.e., the Shia, non-combatants?) and when the Caliphate should be established. While most leaders in Al Qaeda, if not the larger Jihadi community, agree that the Caliphate is a good and desirable goal, they believe that the Muslim faithful need to be prepared through preaching and spiritual development prior to that realisation – a process that generally takes generations to implement. In addition, the conditions on the ground need to be right. Bin Laden and the other senior leaders of Al Qaeda expected a long and bloody jihad (decades potentially, given the military might of the far enemies) before the conditions on the ground would be propitious to even think about establishing a Caliphate – bin Laden understood that declaring a Caliphate from a cave in Afghanistan or a safe-house in Iraq wouldn't be sufficiently credible nor effective (though AQI tried it in Iraq and failed in 2006). ISIS disagreed and built an army of local and foreign fighters that exceeded 30,000 by 2014 (Dodwell 2016) to take and hold territory in Syria and Iraq with the intent to build an even larger army to re-establish the global footprint of Islam and provide a lasting solution to the oppression of the Muslim faithful. In sharp contrast to its predecessors in Al Qaeda, ISIS was intent on taking and holding large amounts of territory in Iraq, Syria and beyond and did so by the summer of 2014. ISIS is a state-building project and employs an offensive form of jihad to take and hold territory in sharp contrast to its rival, Al Qaeda (McCants 2016, Bunzel 2015). With the impressive collection of captured territory and the spoils of victory yielding $1 million per day in income from conquered territories, the Caliphate was declared in June 2014 (Lister 2014). The current leader of ISIS, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, became the Caliph and promptly demanded pledges of loyalty from all Muslims, threatening death should they not comply (Al Arabiya English 2014). The declaration of the Caliphate immediately prompted negative reactions from the Zawahiri, now the leader of AQ and ISIS' strongest rival, as being illegitimate since it was not founded according to the prophetic method (Joscelyn 2014). Their intent was to claim the mantle of leadership from bin Laden's ghost – to fulfil the mission that bin Laden declared to the world in 1998.

ISIS promptly commenced an affiliate building effort and built a network of groups that extended throughout the

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Middle East (e.g., Egypt, Libya, Yemen) and other parts of South Asia and Africa (Gambhir 2015).[12] ISIS sought to establish itself as the number one 'global brand' for Salafi-Jihadi organisations with Raqqa, Syria as its global headquarters. Today, ISIS is under pressure in Iraq and Syria and has been routed from much of the territory it captured in 2014. ISIS remains a potent military force in the Levant but also vis-à-vis its global affiliate network (Leigh, French and Juan 2014, Stanford University n.d.). Its affiliates in Afghanistan (ISIS Khorasan), the Arabian peninsula, and Nigeria (Boko Haram) continue to operate as a terrorist organisation using guerrilla tactics.

Conclusion

VNSAs play a decisive role in the politics of the Middle East. This chapter focused on a select few established organisations that have been able to mount sustained campaigns of strategic anti-government violence to achieve their political goals – those that use terror, guerrilla warfare, punishment, and conventional warfare to challenge incumbent governments for control of territory. They represent varied political philosophies, difference-making military and political power, and the resilience to overcome massive counterforce to sustain violent challenges to undermine incumbent governments. Syrian nationalist groups attempting to overthrow the Assad regime and Islamic nationalist groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah are focused on state-building projects within the internationally recognised boundaries of their particular states. The transnational Salafi-Jihadi movements and their expanding networks of affiliates, however, are prosecuting a truly global jihad and discard most known state boundaries as irrelevant. They seek to break up the Middle East and the international order as we know it to reshape it according to their interpretation of the designs of the founders of Islam. Furthermore, Hezbollah has evolved from a minor partner of Iran and Syria to become a major partner of these states in their campaign to defeat the anti-Assad insurgency in Syria – they have evolved from simply a Lebanese movement to a force that can play a substantive role in changing or maintaining the balance of power in the Middle East. The Sunni insurgency in Iraq boasts tens of thousands of fighters that both resist the government and are also in conflict with ISIS and the Shia militias that were born to counter ISIS and US/coalition forces. The Yemen and Libyan civil wars have continued unabated since 2011 and these states are sliding into even deeper failure permitting a variety of VNSA's to flourish and rule fragments of these countries. Affiliates of the transnational salafi-jihadi movements comingle with criminal gangs, warlords, and various nationalist rebel groups in the four failing states in the region (Libya, Syria, Yemen, and Iraq). But these same volatile collections of actors are also operating in several states in the region that have viable governments in place (e.g., Egypt, Algeria, and Tunisia).

VNSAs are formidable challengers of the legitimacy and security of the existing state system in the Middle East and to those who govern those states. To understand the politics of the Middle East, analysts and policymakers need to account for their difference-making power.

Notes

[1] The two notable peace accords signed since 1967, of course, are the peace accord between Egypt and Israel in 1979 and Israel and Jordan in 1994. The global effort to bring peace to the Middle East is a widely-covered phenomenon, but two helpful sources from the US perspective are: Quandt, William. 2005. *Peace Process: American Diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict Since 1967*. Washington: Brookings; and Dennis, Ross. 2004. *The Missing Peace.* New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux.

[2] Al Qaeda was founded in 1988. Al Qaeda in its original form (Bin Laden-led and often referred to as Al Qaeda central) clearly targeted the far enemies (i.e., the United States) as its primary targets. While these goals never formally changed, the refocusing of kinetic activity on Middle Eastern opportunities was made during the US war with Iraq (2003–2011).

[3] ISIS refers to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (or al Sham) that is the successor organisation to Al Qaeda in Iraq. The group has numerous alternative names that are discussed later in the detailed discussions of key groups.

[4] It is important to note that the authoritarian regimes in the region are also complicit in the scale and scope of death and destruction in the region. The most current example is the role of the Assad regime in the Syrian civil war. The

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Iraqi regime under Saddam Hussein was also complicit in the deaths of tens of thousands of its citizens in the wake of the Gulf War in 1991.

[5] In the Shia arena, there are over 120,000 fighters operating in Iraq and Syria collectively known as the Popular Mobilisation Units (PMU) with approximately 80,000 of these forces "fighting under the banners of Iranian-backed militias" (Toumaj 2016). They were formally called into action by the Grand Ayatollah Sistani following the fall of Mosul in 2014 – ostensibly to protect the most important Shia shrines from desecration and destruction by the then marauding ISIS army. The four primary Shia groups are: the Badr Organisation, the Mahdi Army, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, and Kata'ib Hezbollah. One of the groups (the Badr Organisation) has been in existence since the early 1980s, closely aligned with Iran and had actively engaged the US and coalition forces in combat during the building stages of the insurgency of the Iraqi war (2004 to 2006).

[6] Scholars of Hamas generally recognise the birth of Hamas as December 1987 even though their covenant was not published until June 1988. The outbreak of the first intifada was in December 1987 and Hamas is generally recognised as having been active in that effort since its inception.

[7] Beyond the dependency on Iran for substantial financial support, the group's ideological submission – and at times, strategic policy decisions – to Grand Ayatollah Khomeini and his successor via the guardianship of the jurisconsultant (*velyat al faqih*) has caused concern in many Lebanese about the group's autonomy and fealty to Lebanon.

[8] Hezbollah also fought a series of battles with the armed forces of Amal between 1989 and 1990. Syria and Iran intervened to stop the intra-Shia warfare.

[9] 'Hezbollah's self-declared mission to sustain a 'balance of terror' had evolved since the Israeli withdrawal from south Lebanon in 2000 in an attempt to find new directions from the party that would preserve missionary zeal for its own militants'.

[10] See also a more current discussion of Hezbollah's political and military status: Noe, Nicholas. 2011. and also New York Times: Shadid, Anthony. 2011.

[11] The AQ affiliate in Syria continues to undergo a variety of name changes as part of federation and de-federation from various Islamic groups on the Syrian battlefield (Stanford University. n.d.)

[12] See also: Rahmani, Bardia, and Andrea Tanco. 2016. "ISIS Growing Caliphate: Profiles of Affiliates." Wilson Center. Last modified February 19, 2016. https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/isiss-growing-caliphate-profiles-affiliates.

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