

A Necessary Void in International Relations: Non-State Actors in the Middle East

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Out of Nowhere: The Kurds of Syria in Peace and War

By Michael Gunter

United Kingdom: C. Hurst & Co. (Publishers) Ltd., 2014, 176 pages, \$29.97, ISBN: 9781849044356

Hezbollah and Hamas: A Comparative Study

By Joshua L. Gleis and Benedetta Berti

Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012, 264 pages, \$53.00, ISBN: 9781421406145

Inside the Brotherhood

By Hazem Kandil

United Kingdom: Polity Press, 2015, 240 pages, \$20.45, ISBN: 9780745682914

There has been a dramatic expansion in the size, scope and capacity of non-state actors around the globe in the last three decades. Providing social services, implementing development programs, participating in international conflicts, non-state actors have played important roles, especially in regions where the government presence is weak. The Middle East is rife with both important humanitarian non-state actors delivering social services as a complement to government action and violent non-state actors operating outside domestic law and international norms. The commonality

in both examples is the way in which the non-state actors establish private authorities in the spaces where state sovereignty is weak or absent, and legitimate it in terms of identity, religion, services provided or nothing but violence. This leaves numerous questions to be answered.

The global proliferation of non-state actors has increased the need for a broader theoretical analysis and empirical validation, while the increasing influence of non-state actors in the domestic and international politics of the Middle East also needs specific attention. This article reviews

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three books which shed light on different non-state actors of considerable importance in the Middle East. In this article, Firstly Gunter's book on the PYD; secondly Gleis and Bert's comparative analysis of Hezbollah and Hamas; thirdly Kandil's book on the Muslim Brotherhood will be reviewed. Operating under different organizational frameworks for distinctive causes and using different methods, all of the non-state actors analyzed in the books play significant roles in regional politics. The striking point that is reached when the books are read together is the shared denominator of the quite different organizations, which enables us to carry out a comparative analysis on the non-state actors in the Middle East. In the last part, two general observations related with the shared denominator of them will be briefly discussed.

The important role of the PYD in the Syrian civil war has reached to the point that it might change the artificial borders in the Middle East that were drawn according to a revised version of the Sykes-Picot agreement. The main purpose of Gunter's book *Out of Nowhere: The Kurds of Syria in Peace and War* is to explain the processes paving the way for the sudden rise of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) from "out of nowhere." The research of Gunter's book was completed before the sudden prominence of ISIS in Syria; therefore it does not cover the most important phenomenon in relation to PYD which is their being the most effective actor in the fight against ISIS. It also misses out the

battle over Kobane which turned into a symbol for and a source of Syrian Kurdish activism. Suffering from the unavoidable consequences of writing about unfolding events Gunter's book on the other hand constitutes one of the most detailed analyses of Syrian Kurds in recent years, and an essential reading on the matter. In the first chapter Gunter highlights the fact that talking about Syrian Kurds as a separate entity would only be meaningful after the separation of Kurds into the four newly established states following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, and the influx of many Kurds leaving Turkey to live in Syria following the Kurdish uprisings in the 1920s.

The Turkish origin of the Kurds in Syria is regarded by the Syrian government as a means to justify the disenfranchisement of many Kurds in Syria. In 1962, 120,000 Kurds were given the status of *ajanib*, forfeiting the rights of citizenship. Another 75,000 Kurds are also known as *makhtoumeen* which deprives them from all their civil rights, which is in fact worse than *ajanib*. The repressive policies of the Baathist regime also included the repopulation of the lands that are expropriated from the Kurds and prohibition of Kurdish language. Gunter points out that with the abovementioned policies making Syrian Kurds invisible, it is also the fractured, transient, and even obscure nature of the Syrian political parties that allowed the Kurds to be forgotten until PKK affiliated PYD suddenly emerged as the strongest among them. The Asad regime al-

lowed Salih Muslim's return from Qandil in April 2011. On July 2012 the regime suddenly pulled its forces out from north-eastern Syria. Beginning to occupy Kurdish cities and getting an enormous edge over other political parties, PYD established its *de facto* autonomy in Northern Syria, just below the Turkish border. In July 2012 the PYD began to fight against the other opposition groups. Gunter argues that there is an alliance between Salih Muslim's PYD and the Assad regime, but it is only implicit and partial.

The book is organized thematically. While the third chapter explores the role of Kurdish women in Kurdish society and organizations, the following chapter aims to uncover the importance of the transnational relations of the PYD with transnational state, and non-state actors. The chapter entitled "Transnational Actors" reveals how the borders between the nation states dividing Kurdish families are considered as illegitimate and artificial by the Kurds. The author presents quite successfully how their transnational interactions with Turkey, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), the PKK, and the U.S. have been playing a key role in the history of Syrian Kurds. Uncovering the pivotal impact of the transnational ties of the Syrian Kurds the book's fourth chapter can also be read as the reflection of the failure of the borders in separating the Kurds within the region. Given the prominence of the transnational process for PYD the author chooses to tell the story of PYD not chronologically but by providing

the histories of the KRG and the PKK first. In an effort to provide a brief account of the U.S. policy on the Kurdish issue, Gunter defines six chronological stages of America's Kurdish policy since the First World War till now: Wilson's promises of autonomy, Mulla Mustafa Barzani stage, the 1991 U.S. War, the U.S. policies over KRG since 2003, the U.S. support for Turkey on the PKK issue, and finally the Syrian stage. In this section the justifications of a possible attack of the U.S. against Syria and the risks and repercussions of such a bombing campaign are discussed in detail.

In the last chapter Gunter comes up with different scenarios regarding the future of the Syrian Kurds based on the assumptions that a united Syria is not a viable option anymore, and the PYD will not "return to the abyss of the forgotten" (p. 119). Gunter argues that Barzani's successful KRG model presents a better example to emulate or join for the PYD than Öcalan's "more radical less successful" PKK model (p. 61). Having strong organizational ties with the PKK, PYD's leader Salih Muslim declared that they would apply Öcalan's philosophy and ideology to Syria. Gunter analyzes the ideological underpinnings of PYD's claims, and more importantly also analyses the practical outcomes of their rhetoric of democratic autonomy. He argues that although the PYD advocates a bottom up way of civic organization and a democratic autonomy paving the way for more direct governance, in practice the local councils are excluded from decision making with those who disagree

with PYDs orders being pressured, tortured and even executed.

Gunter focuses on a non-state actor with the Kurdish identity in Syria, while Gleis and Berti compares two non-state actors who are in opposition with Israel. Gleis and Berti's *Hezbollah and Hamas: A Comparative Study* provides a descriptive and structured comparative analysis of the two organizations. Evaluating the Israeli counter-measures towards these organizations the book aims to contribute to the formulation of more effective military and policy responses towards them. In the introduction the authors point out that despite all their differences Hezbollah and Hamas share some common denominators: they have a burgeoning impact on the regional and international politics, constitute adversaries to Israel, and are difficult to define. The book is repetitive in drawing attention to the problem of defining the groups, and how they are labeled with different names by different people, such as a terrorist group, a guerilla organization, a resistance or liberation movement, a mainstream political party, or a social movement. Carrying out a focused analysis of the background they came from, the historical origins, ideology, structure, strategy and tactics, and military and political evolution of the two groups the authors reach the conclusion that in truth they are "all of these things and more" (p. 7). The book is quite successful in uncovering the organizational complexity of the two organizations. According to the authors these groups simultaneously operate

as "military organizations, organized political parties with institutional power and representation, broad media apparatuses, welfare and charity organizations, and grass-roots movements" (p. 186). They use the term "politico-military groups" to define the complex nature of the organizations (p. 186). Given the social aspect of the groups that is presented by the authors it would be more comprehensive to define them as "socio-politico-military groups."

In the first part, Gleis and Berti analyze Hezbollah (the Party of God) which is a powerful Shia Islamist social, political, and military organization in Lebanon. They describe the political, social, and military situation in Lebanon out of which Hezbollah was born. When France took control of Syria and Lebanon, it aimed to create a safe haven for the Maronite community who are considered to be the most pro-Western sect in the country. Constituting the majority of the country's political elite, the Maronites gained the support of Shiites. The French had managed to play off the traditional divisions already present among the populace in order to achieve a form of divide and rule policy that weakened the more powerful Sunnis. When Lebanon gained independence in 1943 a parliamentary system that ensures that power would remain firstly in the hands of the Christians and then in the hands of the Sunnis was established. Allocation of the seats in the parliament was based on the demographics of 1932, which was also questionable. The authors argue that "from the outset,

the confessional system implemented by the French proved itself to be an ineffective solution to balance Lebanon's delicate ethnic composition, as it encouraged fractious behavior among the various confessions. Specifically, it heightened the existing divisions already present among the different sects, encouraging them to create their own political parties and militias" (p. 15). Besides the unjust allocation of government representation, and the second class treatment of the Shiites by the Christian and Sunni population, there emerged various conditions paving the way for the emergence of Hezbollah in the late 1970s, such as the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979, expansion of the arms industry in the early stages of globalization, and the rise of political Islam in the face of the failure of pan-Arabism. In the third chapter, the authors point out that Hezbollah's religious ideology consists of three pillars: belief in Shiite Islam, the *wilayet al faqih*, and *jihad* in the way of God. Having Lebanon's largest and most powerful militia, whose strong political party is publicly backed by Syria and Iran, Hezbollah adopts both conventional and nonconventional tactics. The authors argue that "it is the first time that a non-state armed group has implemented such advanced tactics" (p. 84). It can be considered as both a military organization, with advanced capacity, and at the same time a civilian organization as it constitutes a national mainstream party, which prevents the authors from defining its identity. However, the argument that they state with full confidence is

that Hezbollah has turned out to be a significant regional player.

In the second part, Gleis and Berti analyze Hamas, the Islamic Resistance Movement. At the beginning it aimed to pursue an armed struggle against Israel and provide social welfare programs. Engaging in the Palestinian political process Hamas became the first Islamist group in the Arab world that gained power democratically. The authors first describe the circumstances paving the way for the emergence of Hamas, which was established in 1988 after two Arab Israeli wars failed to benefit the Palestinians and the first intifada began. The defeat of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1982 in Lebanon urged Palestinians to come up with an alternative organization. In 1989 the PLO recognized UN Resolution 242 and 338 and agreed to initiate negotiations with Israel based on the two state solution. The PLO's acceptance of the two state solution, after four decades of Palestinian struggle against Israeli occupation, heightened the divergences between the PLO and Hamas. The author argues that a combination of a number of factors resulted in the emergence of the Islamist Organization as an increasingly attractive option. Decoding the founding ideology of Hamas the authors conclude that it is a distinctively Palestinian Islamist revivalist movement with a militant dimension. Its initial goal is to take control of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and main target is to regain the entire territories occupied by Israel. Ideologically rejecting Israel's right to exist,

Hamas won the 2006 elections with a majority, however not approving the Hamas cabinet Fatah remained in control of the Palestinian Authority government. The situation culminated in a severe schism continuing today. While Fatah controls the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank with the support of Israel, Hamas rules over the Gaza strip, where Israel imposes a strict blockade. The authors point out that Hamas' social welfare network provides it legitimacy, enables its recruitment of supporters and suicide bombers, and also makes it difficult to define.

The third part of the book is about the counterinsurgency and counter-terrorism tactics Israel uses against Hezbollah and Hamas. The authors refer to the policies violating basic human rights of Palestinians, such as the construction of the separation wall, bulldozing homes and targeted assassinations, as "inventive tactics" (p. 175). When it comes to civilian deaths resulting from operations of Hezbollah and Hamas, they represent it as a strategic choice of terrorist organizations, whereas they choose to represent civilian deaths caused by Israel as unintended consequences because of the complex nature of Hamas or the fact that the operations took place in highly populated areas.

While the first two books reviewed deal more with the historical processes that the non-state actors went through, Hazem Kandil's book titled *Inside the Brotherhood* is more concerned with the political sociology of the Muslim Brotherhood. Draw-

ing on interviews conducted with members and secondary sources of considerable variety and importance, Kandil provides an intimate in-depth analysis of the Muslim Brotherhood. The main themes he focuses on are the recruitment and socialization processes of members, construction and sustainment of social networks and most importantly the formulation of the governing ideas.

Having been considered as the mother of all Islamist organizations, the Muslim Brotherhood is now going through the biggest crisis in its history. After the protests organized for the reinstatement of President Morsi were suppressed with many casualties, thousands of its members were detained and the government declared the group a terrorist organization. In this book Kandil argues that the Brotherhoods unorthodox understanding of the relation between religion and worldly success paved the way for the recent crisis. He successfully reveals how "religious determinism" occupies a major role in the Islamist ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood, and the ways in which the very idea built the road to the downfall of the Brotherhood (p. 85). The mainstream Muslim jurists, he argues, believed that the reward of religious conduct was heaven. Sharia law was regarded as a means to regulate religious behavior, often making a Muslim's life more difficult. In other words, for the traditional Muslim scholars, worldly and otherworldly success did not coincide. According to Kandil, what the Muslim Brotherhood did was to turn this tradition-

al understanding on its head. Under this new framework implementing the Sharia law is no longer considered only a reflection of religiosity and a means to get into the heaven, but also a way to ask for God's help to advance in the material world. Providing numerous examples from the accounts of members and historical experience of the organization, Kandil perfectly illustrates the "religious determinism" in the Muslim Brotherhood's thought and presents its implications both in the daily lives of the members and in the course of the history of the Muslim Brotherhood. They aimed to cultivate Muslim individuals whose unification would constitute the Muslim society and government. They did not have tangible political, social, or economic plans to turn the country around, Kandil argues, because according to their understanding the existence of this devout Muslim community would guarantee success in every field. For Kandil, it is this kind of "religious determinism" that ended up with the great tragedy in Rab'a al-Adawiya on August 14, 2014.

What is significant for the purpose of this article is the way in which Kandil explained the origins of this ideological shift. This unconventional ideological shift in the minds of Muslims, he argues, was the product of the unconventional measures of the age. Kandil argues that this unorthodoxy of Islamism came out of the intellectual crisis of the 19th century. The irreversible collapse of the Caliphate and the division of the Muslim lands by frightening super powers left the people to "seek hope

in divine deliverance and to do whatever it takes to survive" (p. 118). The Muslim Brotherhood emerged as a unique response to the sudden collapse of the caliphate, which was the symbol of the unity between religious and worldly power. Believing in the obligation to be bound to the Caliph by an oath of allegiance, in the face of the sudden loss of the Caliphate Muslims felt obliged to pledge loyalty to the ones they believed represented the *umma*. Not surprisingly, Muslim Brotherhood did not confine itself with-in the borders of Egypt, where it was born. Transnational relations of the organization and the prominence of its regional impact have been explored in the last chapter.

When the three studies on quite different non-state actors of the Middle East are read together two general observations draw the attention of the reader. Firstly, all authors face the problem of defining the non-state actor they analyze. Referring to PYD as a Syrian Kurdish Party Gunter portrays a picture in which PYD has a *de facto* autonomy with an army, local assembly with executive and legislative branches and social welfare mechanism. Even Gleis and Berti abstain from calling Hamas and Hezbollah merely terrorist organizations; repeatedly highlighting the fact that they are political parties, charity organizations, and social movements at the same time. Kandil defines the Muslim Brotherhood as an organization whose cause is its own being. He considers the organization as an ideological movement while at the same time mentioning that they do

not consider themselves as an ideological movement, or any type of movement. The lack of means for the scholars, who seek to analyze the non-state actors of significant importance in the Middle East, in conceptualizing their subject matter reveals the scope of the theoretical void on the phenomenon.

The importance of transnational relations is a theme of major importance in all three cases. None of the non-state actors discussed regard themselves as bounded by borders. For the Kurds, borders are not considered as legitimate lines of separation, rather a common space, in terms of language or tribal affiliation. Hamas does not recognize the Israeli right to exist; Hezbollah struggles to overcome the unjust government allocation inherited from the French mandate while

taking part in armed conflicts beyond the borders of Lebanon; whereas the Muslim Brotherhood regards itself as an island of awakened Muslims without borders. Regardless of the differences in the goals and means of the organizations there is a striking commonness: the organizations are established on the basis of the refutation of the political and ideological borders drawn for the Middle East after the First World War.

Given the teleological essence of the non-state actors receiving the support of the masses, the theoretical void in terms of analyzing the non-state actors in the Middle East in the international relations discipline seems quite essential if the *raison d'être* of international relations as a discipline is to ensure the continuation of the hegemonic political projects. ■