

THE ARAB SPRING AND THE RISE OF NON-STATE ACTORS

Fadi Elhousseini



In the past four years, Arabs have been living in an endless Sisyphean ordeal, an unexpected nightmare after rising for what they called “the Arab Spring”. The scenario was cloned in most Arab Spring countries. Alas, hopeful revolution turned into belligerence, then into strife followed by a war, as if a new regional order was endorsed to guarantee instability and chaos in the region. This new regional order has markedly new features and novel actors. The feature most starkly apparent is the rise of non-state actors, which have bolstered their presence and influence across the region, disregarding borders and ignoring the strategic equations that ruled the region for decades.

Non-state actors, mainly Islamic movements like Hamas, Hezbollah and Al-Qaeda, played a limited role in the pre-Arab Spring era. However, before looking at the new non-state actors and their role in the region, it is worth highlighting a number of facts concerning Islamic movements.

Firstly, any designations that labelled those movements, like political Islam or moderate Islam, are merely descriptive terms and have nothing to do with the core of Islam as a religion. Islam is a comprehensive and inclusive religion and attaching one characteristic, without a reference to others, may give the false impression that there are different forms of Islam, such as “non-moderate” Islam. One may argue, though, that such labels are simply “creative” terms to differentiate between the various Islamic groups.

For instance, several Western powers found in “moderate Islam” an acceptable term that may justify “dealing” with specific groups and not others; the limits of the word “dealing” can range from basic and regular contacts to alliances and common interests and agendas. On the other hand, several Islamic groups did not shy away from being labelled as moderate Islam or political Islam as long as this distinguished them from other groups that took a violent path to achieve their goals. Being distinguished as “moderates” gives these groups some kind of legitimacy, and hence more freedom to work in their societies to achieve their goals.

Perhaps designating these groups as “movements with Islamic orientation” would be a more accurate approach, as they tend to share one goal: the return of Islamic rule, either state or through Islamic law, the

shari’ah; the only difference is the time factor which implies their behaviour and reveals their strategy. If a group seeks to achieve its goals gradually, its behaviour and activities are characterised principally by peaceful means. Conversely, if the group seeks instant change, its policies and actions tend to be characterised by radical and violent means.

Returning to the role of non-state actors in general, one should concede that with the advent of the Arab revolts, their role has become more evident to a degree that it has surpassed the role of many regimes and governments in the region. These actors began to impose certain policies and agendas on regional and global regimes and are at the helm of every regional summit and international conference.

The emergence of these actors has turned the whole region on its head, broken many taboos and penetrated one country after another. Puritanism is now widespread across the Middle East and new vocabulary - such as apostates, infidels and heretics - has become common in daily conversations. In no time, these actors could abolish traditional political borders drawn in the early years of the last century (by the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement) when other ideas, concepts or phenomenon, like globalisation, took decades to find their way into the region.

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They and their offshoots spread throughout the region, taking various names: Al-Qaeda, Al-Nusra Front, Daesh or ISIS or IS, the Houthis and so on. Their expansion does not appear to have any limits or borders. That being said, they have been seen to possess sophisticated organisation that does not reflect the limited number of their members and recruits. In other words, the number of their members can’t, by any means, reflect the unprecedented “achievements” they have attained in such a short time. The most important element in this novel equation is their network of known and unknown allies who provide them with finance, logistics and arms, mainly away from the spotlight.

The situations in Iraq and Syria represent the starkest



Islamic State militants with a captured Iraqi army Humvee at a checkpoint outside Beiji refinery (Photo Credit: Reuters)

example of entangled interests and relations from one side, and regional and international hesitation from the other. Some regional powers opted to keep the card of “supporting or turning a blind eye to the activities and movements of those non-state actors” as a last gamble, lest things veer out of control on other fronts and so as to weaken groups like Hezbollah or the PKK, or even to harm the Assad regime. Similarly, many Western powers, who classify Hezbollah as a terrorist organisation, ignored its outright intervention in Syria in order to weaken all those groups (the “bad guys”) in a destructive conflict that took on a sectarian hue.

The US was able to pounce on this opportunity and use it to re-promote to its Arab allies the importance of its role as a supplier of weapons, as an adviser who provides them with information and expertise in fighting terrorism, and as a protector through US-led coalition strikes. The reports which showed the evolution in American weapons sales, mainly to Arab countries, are just a case in point.

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Russia, which is fully aware that a nuclear deal with Iran would definitely harm its economy (any agreement with Tehran would lead to the return of Iran as a major oil supplier which will eventually lead to a drop in oil prices), had no choice but to bless

this deal knowing the importance of Iran’s regional network of relations, mainly with non-state actors.

Intriguingly, and despite regional dismay at the existence of non-state actors and their rejection of any talks about a new Sykes-Picot deal, one may realise that facts on the ground are going nowhere but to that end. Since America launched its campaign against ISIS, the latter has taken control of a large swathe of Iraq and Syria, whereas before the strikes it controlled relatively small areas. ISIS’s fighters began to appear more equipped and trained and their media performance has improved a great deal. The consecutive successes of ISIS have encouraged others either to follow suit or to attach themselves to this “successful” model; as a result, not one single Arab capital has become immune, especially in the aftermath of the so-called Arab Spring.

Although many analyses questioned the conditions that brought forth most of those actors and their real goals, and despite the fact that many investigations have shown suspicious features in the activities of those groups, the region appears to be slipping inadvertently towards malignant ends.

In an attempt to evaluate the aftermaths of the existence and acts of the rising non-state actors, one may say that distorting the image of Islam was unambiguous. Secondly, some of these actors, who used to enjoy popularity among the Arab masses for resisting Israel, appear to have lost ground in the Arab streets as they were tainted by either violence or sectarian agendas.

Thirdly, Israel, which was isolated in the region for decades, was uniquely endowed and could enter the regional dynamics through the door of such actors. To elaborate, Israel remained unscathed on the fringes of the Arab Spring and its repercussions, and won triple-level strategic gains from the emergence of the non-state actors.

For a start, the government in Tel Aviv started to sow a network of relations with many Arab regimes that share, in theory at least, common fears, especially a potential Shia menace as represented by Iran and Hezbollah. Israel has also gained by the weakening of traditional Arab states, such as Iraq and Syria, which were a threat to Israeli decision makers. Furthermore, it benefits Israel when world attention is distracted from what is still the core issue in the Middle East, its ongoing colonial occupation of Palestine.

In sum, it appears that the region is in desperate need of a real leader, a new Saladin, who can put an end to the misery, the divisions and the schisms that afflict the Middle East; someone who is able to find a solution for the absence of a religious reference which has resulted in a chaotic and austere interpretation of Islam.

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Sunni fighters arm themselves with RPG missiles launcher and machine guns as they take up position in Fallujah city, western Iraq (Photo Credit: EPA)