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Syria will become the test case of whether states hollowed out by militias and warlords can ever be resuscitated.[1] The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) currently features seven states that may be described as 'militianised', in that they have been captured and instrumentalised by non-state armed groups, the warlords who preside over them, and their external sponsors. Three of those states - Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen - remain affiliated to varying degrees with what is left of the Iranian-led 'Axis of Resistance'," which also included another largely militianised state, Syria, until the Assad regime fell on 8 December 2024. Competing fragments of two other failed states, Libya and Sudan, have fallen under the sway of warlords beholden to external actors other than Iran. In the 'two Palestines', Hamas in Gaza operated fleetingly, though never entirely, as an Iranian proxy from the 2010s through October 2023, while in the West Bank, under the cover of a fictitious 'Palestinian Authority', Fatah-affiliated security forces have long since become a militia proxy of Israel, regularly targeting militants on the latter's behalf - or at the request of the United States government, as happened most recently in Jenin in mid-December. This assorted collection accounts for a substantial portion of the Arab land mass and is represented in all the subregions of the Middle East, from North Africa (Libya and Sudan) to the Arabian Peninsula (Yemen) through the Fertile Crescent (Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, and Iraq). With a combined population of approximately 175 million citizens, militianised states account for some thirty-seven per cent of the total Arab population of 473 million.

Militianisation vs. Militianised States

Militianised states abuse and impoverish their populations, threaten their neighbours, and endanger regional and global security. If the risks they pose ever are to be addressed effectively, one first must understand the dynamics that give rise to militianisation and then help entrench it. These dynamics present striking similarities across cases, as all militianised countries share three basic

ingredients: a hollowed-out state; a potent yet initially marginalised sociopolitical force; and external interference. The evidence suggests that all three ingredients are required to enable militianisation, which also stems from the distinctive ways in which they are inter-connected.

The logical starting point for this analysis is the existence of a disaffected social force, drawing strength from ethnic, religious, regional, or tribal solidarities, and resentful at decades of political marginalisation and socioeconomic discrimination. The accumulated grievances of that social force provide fertile ground for the emergence of one or more militia(s) in its midst, particularly under two conditions: when the state, incapacitated by decades of corruption, personal rule, and broader misgovernance, becomes too weak to stand up to armed groups; and when the latter are assisted and instrumentalised by a much stronger state in the regional arena (e.g., Iran, Turkey, or the United Arab Emirates). The interplay between such domestic and regional dynamics is typically complex and case-specific. For one, while militias frequently use their power to advance the interests of regional patrons, they cannot be reduced to mere 'proxies' of the latter.

If and when one or more militia manage(s) to capture the state, mere 'militianisation' morphs into the creation of a 'militianised state'. The shift from 'militianisation' to a 'militianised state' represents a critical, qualitative change in a country's political economy. It usually brings about significant transformations in that country's domestic policies, foreign alliances, regional and geopolitical positioning, and even the extent to which it enjoys true sovereignty. For those reasons, it deserves some elaboration.

Militianisation simply refers to the emergence of militias at the grassroots level, their accumulation of resources and power, and their possible proliferation in a conflict-rich environment. As noted above, in the Arab region the rise of militias has been closely associated with pre-existing social and political movements claiming to speak on behalf of historically neglected and repressed social forces and giving expression to those constituencies' longstanding grievances and narratives of victimisation. Concurrently, militianisation entails the state's loss of monopoly over violence, a broader fragmentation of authority, and at least partial governance by militias of territories under their control. Under conditions of militianisation, the central government and broader state apparatus come to coexist, often uneasily, with non-state armed groups (militias) that take on governance functions in localities or regions where they have managed to displace formal state institutions or fill the security and other public-service delivery gaps left by the state. In yet other cases, a state that has become partially debilitated or incapacitated has deliberately devolved power to locally based armed groups (the militias).

The concept of militianisation thus relates to the existing literature on fragmented authority, hybrid political orders, and mixed governance (including 'rebel governance'). Under conditions of mere militianisation, however, while non-state armed groups may be developing strength at the local or even provincial level (as *Ha'at Tahrir al-Sham* did in Idlid in Syria from 2016 for instance, or as Hizballah did in southern Lebanon, the Biq'a, and Beirut's southern suburbs from the 1980s onward), they have not yet seized or penetrated the state to such an extent that would warrant describing that state as having become 'militianised'. In short, while militianisation involves the consolidation of power by militias at the grassroots level, and while it may result in the emergence

of new local orders within which militias share governance functions with the state, or even displace the latter, it does not on its own amount to a radical reconfiguration of power at the central level. If and when such a reconfiguration takes place, mere ‘militianisation’ has given way to a ‘militianised state’, as discussed further below.

Critical as well to the manner in which militianisation has unfolded in the Arab region is the existence of a strong connection between militias and their respective external backers. Those ties exacerbate the weakening, in both capacity and legitimacy, of an already enfeebled state apparatus. They also ensure that if and when one or more of the militias involved asserts direct control over the state, the latter is likely to fall under the influence of that militia's external backer. Yet, as was noted above, militias rarely are mere surrogates of those foreign states that provide them with financial assistance, weapons, training, and other forms of support; they retain agency and varying degrees of autonomy, allowing them to pursue their own agendas, which do not always coincide, and even at times may conflict sharply, with those of their nominal external patrons.

A ‘militianised state’ requires far more than mere evidence of ‘militianisation’ on the ground, as reflected for instance in the performance of key governance functions by non-state armed groups (NSAGs) at the local level. By ‘militianised state’, we refer to a state within which strategic institutions, decision-making arenas, and the vast resources they command have fallen under the grip of one or more militia(s), with the latter having become so embedded in the state apparatus that they can dictate critical government decisions on matters ranging from domestic issues to national security and foreign policy ones. In a militianised state, militias operate as a state (or states) within the state. A state experiencing militianisation consequently is re-engineered to serve the interests and priorities of militia commanders, cadres, and members, and to a lesser extent those of at least segments of the once marginalised and now dominant social force. Meanwhile, the majority of the population is reduced to the role of political and economic outsiders.

In such a reconfigured state, the bureaucracy may be cleaved between its militianised and non-militianised components, but the latter become subordinate to the former. Even a single ministry or public agency may experience the tension between the ‘nominal’ or ‘residual’ state on the one hand, and the ‘deep’ state represented by militia interests on the other. Sometimes, as in Libya and Sudan, the victorious militias may divide among them the spoils of state and territory. Last but not least, militias' dependency on their respective external sponsors also results in militianised states often serving those sponsors' interests, which means that militianised states no longer operate as truly sovereign entities.

As the above discussion suggests, a truly militianised state entails transformations that are far more significant than mere evidence of shared governance at the local level between state and non-state actors, or even the ability of militias to develop footholds in certain state institutions. Instead, state militianisation is best understood not just as the penetration or capture of parts of the state by one or more militias, but as a fundamental reconstruction of that state and, by extension, of the regime presiding over it. Once a state experiences militianisation, former regime insiders may be challenged by new elites tied to militias, and power struggles may ensue. Old elites may be displaced or compelled to coexist with the new ones. That situation usually translates into new

institutional and political realities, as well as new economies that reflect the clout of militia elites and their control over resources. Such transformations are far-reaching: they do not amount to just the emergence or consolidation of a 'hybrid political order', but rather result in a state erected on new foundations. Militias become normalised not just in the territories where they previously had engaged in governance, but at the very heart of both polity and state - and within both their prerogatives are typically formalised and legalised. From that considerably stronger position, militias become much harder to uproot (no MENA state that has experienced state militianisation has yet been de-militianised), and they can proceed to loot the nominal state, build vast economic empires, and substitute their authority for that of ostensible state agents. Furthermore, since in a militianised state militias often enjoy legal standing, they no longer are accurately described as 'non-state actors'. At the very least, the distinction between them and formal state institutions has become far more blurred, both on legal grounds and in reality, since the two often have partially merged, producing new institutional entities.

One may conceptualise both the degree of militianisation in society and the extent to which the state itself has become militianised as unfolding along a continuum. One may also hypothesise that once militianisation of society crosses a certain threshold, the militianisation of the state, though not inevitable, becomes more likely. Similarly, the transition from mere militianisation (including possibly evidence of militia influence within the state) to outright militianised state is more likely to be a process, unfolding over many months or years, than a moment. A marked escalation in violent internal conflict, especially if the state is unable to impose itself by relying on its own regular army and security forces, may precipitate full-fledged state militianisation. One thinks here, for instance, of the decisive role that pro-Iranian Shia militias played in the defeat of the Islamic State in Iraq between 2014 and 2017, which paved the way for their formal incorporation into the state's security institutions, and their subsequent hijacking of those institutions from within.

Peacemakers or Militianisation Enablers?

Unfortunately, the militianisation of states has all too frequently been fostered and legitimated by alleged 'peacemakers'. United Nations envoys, Western diplomats, and other would-be mediators repeatedly have sought to terminate violent conflicts by prioritising engagement with the dominant domestic actors, who in a conflict-resolution or post-conflict phase are often little more than warlords linked to powerful external sponsors. That strategy consistently has had nefarious consequences for the countries and populations that have been on the receiving end of it: it has increased the standing and clout of militia leaders; strengthened their grip over the state and enabled them to pilfer public resources; conferred international legitimacy on them; sidelined populations and democratic or proto-democratic actors; and sanctioned the country's de facto loss of sovereignty to the militias' external patrons. What that approach has not done is bring peace - instead, it has given peace-making a bad name, and for good reasons, as the examples below illustrate.

In Lebanon, which was the first MENA country to fall prey to that approach, the Saudi-brokered Ta'if Accords of October 1989 ensured that the post-war polity would be hijacked by three main forces: the pre-civil war elites, which had militarised during the hostilities; leaders of the militias and politico-military organisations (the most significant of which was Hizballah) that had risen to prominence during the war; and individual Syrian clients, who were instrumental in facilitating Syrian control of the country until April 2005. In the years that followed Syria's withdrawal, Hizballah steadily rose to increased prominence, infiltrating the state and rendering it hostage to Iranian interests.

In Iraq, several ill-fated decisions by the Bush administration paved the way for the militianisation of the state following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime and the American invasion in March 2003. Particularly critical were 'de-Baathification', the disbanding of the Iraqi army, and the adoption of a new power-sharing formula along ethno-sectarian lines. The radical and sudden purge of Iraq's bureaucracy brought about by de-Baathification created at the heart of the state a vacuum that was never filled by a new generation of competent bureaucrats but instead provided an opportunity for the recruitment of militia loyalists. Meanwhile, the dissolution of the Iraqi army prompted Sunni officers and rank-and-file soldiers to swell the ranks of an insurgency that further destabilised the state and partially drove the ascendancy of Iran-backed Shia militias within the security apparatus, the interior ministry, and the broader bureaucracy. As for the power-sharing arrangement among elites, which was largely borrowed from Lebanon and imposed on the country through a joint endeavour between former Iraqi exiles and the Americans, it, too, allowed for a steady increase in the clout of politico-military organisations with close ties to the Iranian regime (especially the Badr Organisation, established in Tehran during the 1980s). Subsequently, as discussed earlier, the fight against the Islamic State (IS), which from its launch in June 2014 until the recapture of Mosul in February 2017 was led by pro-Iranian Shia militias, enabled the latter to solidify and subsequently formalise their grip over the state. That situation then was accepted as a fait accompli by the international community, including the United States. In the name of restoring a precarious domestic peace that required the military defeat of IS, Western powers thus resigned themselves to the militianisation of the Iraqi state.

In Syria, the initial failure of the rebellion to bring down the Assad regime produced yet another militianised state. There, militianisation resulted in territorial fragmentation and 'statelets' dominated by competing militias connected to rival external sponsors. The regime became little more than one such entity, extending from the capital to the Alawite heartland in Latakia province through the Damascus-Homs-Hama corridor. Until the regime collapsed in early December 2024, its domestic core consisted mostly of pro-Assad Alawite militias and remnants of the coercive apparatus connected to them. Meanwhile, other components of the state, especially the military-security establishment and the president's immediate entourage, were shared by Russia and Iran (directly or through local proxies). Elsewhere, foreign-backed militias held sway, including the U.S.-supported Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in the northeast, the Turkish-controlled Syrian National Army (SNA), and *Ha'at Tahrir al-Sham* (HTS), which had strong ties to Turkey, in Idlib province. That precarious arrangement was rooted in yet another externally brokered settlement in

Astana in 2016 that, although reached in the name of stabilisation, mostly functioned as a means of guaranteeing the respective interests in Syria of Russia, Turkey, and Iran. Years later, when Syria was readmitted to the Arab League in May 2023 and all major external actors (including, though to varying extents, the UN, the EU, and even the US) tentatively moved to make their peace with the brutal Assad regime, the political rehabilitation of that regime was justified, implicitly or explicitly, by the alleged imperatives of 'stabilisation' and 'peace-making'.

Libya and Sudan, too, demonstrate the extent to which ostensible 'peace-making' and 'stabilisation' efforts - in those cases, conducted primarily through UN 'Missions' and UN 'Special Representatives of the Secretary-General' - often end up tightening and legitimating the grip of militias over countries already carved into fiefdoms run by warlords supported by competing regional powers. In the Libyan case, the government in Tripoli owes its existence to a UN-mediated process, Turkish backing, international recognition, and - most decisively - the readiness of a cartel of powerful militias to defend it. The Libyan people is not a party to this arrangement. Meanwhile, in the eastern region, the rival government operates mostly as an administrative structure, while real power lies in strongman Khalifa Haftar, his clan, his so-called Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LASF), which is nothing more than a militia, and support from Russia, France, the UAE, and Egypt. Over a decade of UN involvement has merely sanctified Libya's cleaving into bimodal satrapies and the tightening of militias' grip over its eastern and western regions. It also has created among Libyan citizens vast and justified anger at the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), criticised as impotent, inept, and adrift, and at successive 'Special Advisers to the Secretary-General' (SASGs) viewed as complicit in the exactions of self-interested politicians and warlords.

As for Sudan's descent into civil war from April 2023, it can be traced back to a large extent to ill-advised and ultimately botched UN and US efforts to engage with the country's two dominant violent powerbrokers, Generals Burhan and Hemedti, in a futile attempt to get them to reach a power-sharing compromise, while sidelining non-violent, civilian actors, beginning with Sudanese civil society, despite the latter having previously demonstrated real capacities and potential. There again, international actors' single-minded pursuit of an elite-based deal among violent entrepreneurs, justified in the name of peace-making and stabilisation, brought only misery and utter devastation - as well as loss of sovereignty, given that external actors, especially the UAE, both took advantage of the raging violence and actively fuelled it as they sought to advance their own interests. Revealingly, three of the four dominant domestic actors in Libya and Sudan are straight out warlords (Haftar in Libya, and Hemedti and Burhan in Sudan), while the fourth, the Islamists who control Tripoli, preside over a coalition of militias.

Yemen has yet to be affected by similarly dysfunctional external efforts at 'peace-making' and 'stabilisation'. But its turn may be coming, given the Emiratis' support for southern separatists since 2019, the Saudis' tentative outreach to the Houthis since 2021, and the hobbling of the Houthis' Iranian backers this past year. Those conditions might prompt a grand bargain among the key regional actors involved (Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE). Presumably, that deal then would be endorsed, tacitly or explicitly, by the international community. As in the cases examined above,

it might produce a de facto carving of Yemen into satrapies dominated by militias and their external sponsors. And if those other cases also serve as a guide, the outcome for Yemen might be anything but peaceful.

Why Do Peacemakers Cut Bad Deals?

The historical record thus is clear: in the MENA at least, ostensible peace-making efforts by outside parties usually end poorly for the nations they nominally are intended to benefit. But why? Sometimes, the answer has to do with original intent: political settlements reached through external intervention are meant primarily to advance the agendas of the professed peacemakers and reconcile their competing interests in the target country; the wellbeing of the populations concerned is at best a secondary consideration. The so-called Astana process - aimed as it was at protecting the 'market shares' of Russia, Turkey, and Iran in Syria - perhaps best illustrates this phenomenon. But reconciliation of external actors' interests can also be detected in most of the above examples, from the Ta'if Accord, which was designed to accommodate Saudi and Syrian interests in Lebanon, to more recent manoeuvring in the name of peace-making and/or 'stabilisation' by key external players in theatres ranging from Libya to Palestine.

Bureaucratic dysfunctions and the profound incompetence of officials involved in peace-making efforts (their lack of influence over key powerbrokers on the ground and their poor use of whatever leverage they might have) also frequently come into play, particularly when the UN is involved. Since the Middle East has been the site of more UN mediation and peace-making attempts than any other global region, it has more than its fair share of collateral damage, including in the form of militianised states. One thinks, again, of the failed UN involvement in Libya in the past several years. Under the tenures of SASGs Ján Kubis and Stephanie Williams in particular, the utter discrediting of the UN-backed political process in that country did not just paralyse the UN but had a debilitating impact on the diplomacy of both the Biden administration and European governments, which had thrown their weight behind it.

But it is not just the UN: the US and EU member states, too, have made their own contributions to militianisation. Exhibit A may be the disastrous US diplomatic engagement with Sudan in 2021-23, which ended up both empowering and emboldening the two warlords responsible for the current humanitarian and political catastrophe in that country, while contributing to the sidelining of pro-democracy civil society and political activists. French President Emmanuel Macron's early public outreach to Khalifa Haftar in Libya, when he invited the Libyan warlord to peace talks in Paris in July 2017, constitutes another glaring example. To be sure, in that case, the overarching motive was a mixture of national self-interest and personal grandstanding, as opposed to the blend of naivete, empty threats, and complacency that characterised senior Biden administration diplomats' approach to the crisis in Sudan. But the result was similar, in that Macron's diplomatic embrace of someone who at the time was still viewed as little more than a rogue warlord conferred both international and domestic legitimacy on the latter, helping him remake his image into that of a respectable politician and even statesman, while also emboldening him militarily. Haftar's

military offensive on Tripoli in 2020 and his subsequent consolidation of power in the east and indeed across Libya since then should be understood in that context.

Still other factors explain the propensity of would-be peacemakers to prop up warlords, in effect if not always by intent. For one, the psychology and incentive structure of peace-making by neutral parties being that of diplomacy, the ostensible task is to get to an agreement, ideally as rapidly as possible. From that perspective, any deal is better than none - not just because an agreement, however flawed, might conceivably prevent yet more fighting, but also because failure to secure an end to violence would not reflect well on the alleged peacemakers, organisationally and personally. In a conflict- or post-conflict setting, however, the most direct path to an agreement involves accommodating the priorities and interests of those who preside over local political orders, and that typically means leaders of subnational armed groups. Additionally, peace-making organisations often look beyond just bringing an end to hostilities - they also aim to create the conditions that will enable the delivery of emergency and humanitarian aid, reconstruction projects, and the return of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) to their homes. For these objectives to be reached, and in order to guarantee the security of the international staff that will be deployed to implement relevant programmes, they first must secure the cooperation of those who control territory and populations, i.e., militia leaders.

The Broader Stakes Behind the Syrian Opportunity

Now that the militia structure previously controlled by Assad and his foreign backers has been forced out of power, and that the once-favoured social force, the Alawis, has been rendered equivalent rather than superior to all the others, Syria is presented with a golden opportunity to build a real state -one that enjoys genuine sovereignty, that can perform the basic functions associated with statehood, and that can provide for political order without devolving into a repressive apparatus. But can a long hollowed out, institutionally debilitated state really be brought back to life? Because it has not happened previously in the modern Middle East, and given Syria's historical vulnerability to factionalism and instability, it would be risky to assume it is likely to occur.[2]

This is not an idle question or pursuit. Militianised Arab states plague not only their citizens, but also the region and even the world. The video footage of the human detritus in liberated Saydnaya Prison made plain the evil that lurks just below the surface of such states. The stashes of Captagon, and abandoned factories for making it, pointed to the havoc wreaked by what had become the world's largest narco-state producing and trafficking the drug throughout the region and beyond. Similarly, the rows of ‘used’ cars that the authors observed for sale in southern Lebanon were widely believed to consist of automobiles stolen in Europe by Hizbullah-associated thieves, proving that the continent is not immune to criminal activity by entities tied to militianised states (as if human smuggling out of Libya had not already demonstrated that sufficiently). And it is what one does not see that is yet more important. That includes smuggling of sanctioned Iranian oil through Iraq and other routes.[3] But above all, it is soft and hard power projection by militianised

states' fellow travellers or powerful 'sponsors', foremost among which are Russia and Iran, that poses the gravest threat to global security. So militianised states are surely worth trying to resuscitate as real ones, responsive to their citizens, and playing responsible regional and global roles. How then is that to be done?

Ten Negative Commandments

Unfortunately, the question above cannot be answered precisely, given the absence of any successful case to emulate. Instead, what we do have is considerable evidence from failed attempts at rebuilding collapsed states and at addressing the known perils of militianised ones. The question therefore should be rephrased accordingly: what should not be done? Ten negative commandments may at least help to avoid yet another peace-making or failed state rebuilding calamity.

1. Don't surrender the country to warlords and militias on the ground that since they have the guns, they are the only ones who can make peace. While they might be able to, none so far has appeared to want to. Bestowing legitimacy on them only seems to diminish their readiness to make concessions.
2. Don't avoid seeking truth and reconciliation and the associated step of holding wrongdoers accountable. Unpunished offences will be repeated. Unrequited desires for justice will corrode whatever arrangements follow.
3. Don't ignore stolen assets. Do all possible to restore public ones to the state and private ones to their rightful owners. Investigate whether foreign assets linked to warlords are tied to criminal activity, and act accordingly. Justice needs to be seen to be done if respect for it is to be encouraged and regularised.
4. Don't entrust reconstruction to outside powers whose own interests are involved. Instead, empower citizens to participate as fully as possible in rebuilding. The negative example is Solidere's rebuilding on behalf of Saudi Arabia of the historic centre of downtown Beirut, which destroyed it and estranged Lebanese from it.[4]
5. Don't preference private goods and services over public ones on the ground that since the state is weak, only private actors can deliver. This logic, for example, increasingly justifies private electricity generation and distribution in conflict zones. Delivery of public goods is vital to rebuilding state capacities, respect for the state, and of course to the wellbeing of citizens.
6. Don't overpromise what realistically can be provided to those who have suffered, lest they become disappointed and alienated from the rebuilding process. If all Syrian emigres since 2011 were to return in a short period, the management problems would be overwhelming. Establish priorities, procedures, and reasonable timelines so citizens can plan and adjust rather than be swept along by enthusiasm then to be let down.
7. Don't rush high-stakes elections in countries that clearly are not ready for them, where their results likely would be contested, and where they would add to the existing

polarisation. Many steps are necessary before the benefits of holding elections outweigh the dangers associated with them. In Libya, the UN's and US's fixation on the alleged need for general elections (which were never held) was profoundly counterproductive.

8. Don't allow militias to retain residual autonomy from the state or within the state's appropriate coercive institutions, even on a transitional basis. No militia that has been permitted to maintain such independence has ever been dissolved.
9. Don't rely on UN peace-making. Nowhere in the region has it succeeded. The organisation is too weak and divided to be effective in militianised (and other) settings. In Libya, the US and EU might have been far more successful if their diplomacy had been conducted more autonomously from the 'UN process'. For one, they would not have been discredited by their perceived closed association with, and reliance on, UNSMIL, especially after the latter lost control over a process it was supposed to lead.
10. Don't fail to capitalise on the opportunity provided by the people of Syria who accomplished what no other citizens have in overthrowing a militianised Middle Eastern state. Generous support will not only assist rejuvenation of the Syrian state, but it will also render more likely emulation of the Syrian case.

Is the Fever Breaking, or Will the Cancer Spread?

Given the geostrategic defeat suffered by Iran in the past few months and given that the 'axis of resistance' has been dealt blows from which it is unlikely to fully recover, the plague of militianised states finally may be facing an antidote. But the threat of militianisation continues to loom large over the region. In part, that is because Syria has just begun a transition, which may or may not be successful, and because whatever success it has may not be emulated by others. But it is also because it is all too easy to imagine other Arab states succumbing to some form of state decay or even breakdown. The key suspects are the remaining North African states spreading westward from Egypt through Tunisia and Algeria to Morocco. Together their population is 213 million, which if added to the populations of the already militianised states brings the total to some 400 million out of about 475 million Arab citizens. These are all fragile authoritarian states. To be sure, none has a dispossessed social force upon which a powerful militia might be built - as represented by the Shi'a in Lebanon prior to the 1980s, the Shi'a in Iraq under Saddam, the Zaydis in Saleh's Yemen, or Palestinians in the Occupied Territories. But equally none now enjoys substantial political support. These regimes, supported primarily by their coercive institutions rather than any identifiable, strong constituency, are under huge pressure due to economic hardship, stultifying political control, and profound misgovernance, not to mention population growth and environmental degradation. While militianised states are the most challenging immediate problem facing state builders in the MENA, the latter would be well advised to keep looking over their shoulders at those other states, which presently appear quite a lot like the militianised ones did before they collapsed.

About the Authors

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[1] This article is informed by our forthcoming book with Hicham Alaoui, *Making Aid Work: Dealing with Dictators and Warlords in the Middle East* (Lynne Rienner, 2025).

[2] It is useful to remember that between independence in 1946 and the November 1970 coup carried out by Hafez al-Assad, Syria experienced ten military coups (three in 1949 alone) and nearly twenty extra-legal changes in government.

[3] Maha El Dahan and Yousef Saba, "Fuel Oil Smuggling Network Rakes in $1 Billion for Iran and its Proxies," *Reuters*, 3 December 2024, https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/fuel-oil-smuggling-network-rakes-1-billion-iran-its-proxies-2024-12-03/.

[4] Solidere stands for Société Libanaise pour le Développement et la Reconstruction du Centre-ville de Beyrouth.