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The Existential Crisis Of Statehood: Proliferation And Operational Impacts Of Proxy Warfare In Middle Eastern Conflicts – Analysis

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By Dr. Ramzi Bendebka



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Key Takeaways:

- **Erosion of the Weberian Monopoly on Physical Violence:** Modern proxy warfare is counterintuitive to historical processes of state-building, with arming, financing, and training sub-state actors beyond constitutional structures, creating a destabilizing 'oligopoly of violence'.
- **Institutional Infiltration and Hybrid Sovereignty:** Iranian-backed proxy networks use the weakness of the state within the region to create parallel political, military, and economic systems; they receive public funding and enjoy state immunity and constitutional impunity and are not subject to civilian oversight.
- **Shift from Pan-Arabism to Statist Preservation (*Wataniyya*):** There has been a significant paradigm shift in the political agendas of the region from the 20th-century concept of trans-state Arab unity (Qawmiyya) to the need to protect territorial sovereignty, state borders, and nation-state existence (Wataniyya).
- **Great Power Disruption and Transactional Failure:** Superpowers and global competitors—such as the United States, Russia, and China—use the Middle East as a zero-sum space of influence, prioritizing short-term counterterrorism, energy security, or geopolitical leverage over supporting the strengthening of Middle East state authority.

Introduction

The nation-state has been the most contested and least taken-for-granted political form in the modern Middle East. The territorial map of the region, largely laid out during the imperial reordering of the post-World War I era, has remained cartographically persistent. Still, the internal substance of state sovereignty in the region has been increasingly eroded. Following the Arab

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Uprisings of 2011, it was widely predicted that the borders drawn by Sykes-Picot were destined to disappear due to the free movement of people or sub-state fragmentation, but this never came to pass. Practical administrative powers of the States wielded within these borders, however, have greatly eroded, and the gap between *de facto* administrative control and domestic legitimacy, and *de jure* legal sovereignty (international recognition), has significantly widened.

Post-colonial independence produced many 'hard, weak states' that were structurally fragile and institutionally lacking strong civic legitimacy, yet coercively authoritarian in their behavior towards domestic dissent. The random delineation of imperial borders created a degree of incongruity between the borders and identities, sowing seeds of irredentism and structural vulnerabilities in the regional system. The struggle of sub-state or trans-state identity networks thus remained a continual threat to modern statehood in the Middle East, while the domestic state's concerns centered on the regime's survival.

The current status of the Middle Eastern nation-state can only be understood by studying the state's internal structural weaknesses and the external actors that exploit it. Certain of these external dynamics are the most acrimonious challenges to statehood in the region today, above all the constant proliferation of asymmetric proxy warfare. Proxy war is an active erosion of the state that undermines the monopoly on physical violence, institutionalizes hybrid forms of government, and involves non-state armed actors in the host state's constitutional and administrative power structure. Modern proxy war is not a war to overthrow the international boundary; it is a war that undermines the central state from within by exploiting structural differences at home. External sponsors arm sub-state proxies with high kinetic power and turn states into places of constant security rivalry, endangering the very survival of Westphalian governance in the Middle East.

From Pan-Arab Unification to Statist Preservation: The Reordering of Regional Priorities

Throughout the twentieth century, there was a strong push for supranational ideational movements to question the legitimacy of individual states in the Middle East. Arab nationalism was an anti-colonial movement that stood for nationhood, asserting that all Arabic-speaking peoples were a single, undivided nation (*al-Umma al-'Arabiyya*) united by language, history, culture, and a sense of collective identity. It began in the late nineteenth century,

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during the so-called Nahda (Arab Awakening) under Ottoman rule. After the First World War and the establishment of the Western mandate regimes, the Arab nationalist movement became a fervent anti-imperialist movement that demanded political unification of the Arab community under the slogan of pan-Arabism (*Qawmiyya*).

In Pan-Arabism, post-colonial territories were viewed as artificial, temporary, and divisive constructs of European colonial powers. Classical Pan-Arab ideologues asserted that the Arab world was divided into independent states, a historical aberration that could not stand and had to be rectified by achieving pan-Arab unity. In this ideology, it was considered that the security and interests of the whole Arab nation (raison de la nation Arabe) were of absolute moral value and priority over the narrow self-interest of any state (raison d'état). The notion of individual state sovereignty (*Wataniyya*) was often denounced by Pan-Arabists as "regionalism" or disloyalty to the anti-imperialist cause.

The zenith of Pan-Arabism was during the 1950s and 1960s when the charismatic Egyptian President, Gamal Abdel Nasser, led the way. In 1956, Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal, and in his victory over the British, French, and Israeli forces, Cairo came to wield great trans-state ideological influence. Nasser appealed directly to the populations of neighboring Arab states via Radio Cairo's Sawt al-Arab and played on popular pressure within the country against pro-Western conservative regimes. To a large degree, Nasser created an informal norm of regional behavior that established standards of conduct, thereby limiting the sovereignty of individual states and punishing states seeking security alliances outside regional "collective" security systems.

The most explicit effort to realize the Pan-Arab dream was in February 1958 when Nasser unified Egypt and Syria into the United Arab Republic (UAR). The UAR was a policy of political incorporation, in which the state sovereignty of each member state was supposed to disappear in favor of a single regional state. The UAR experiment, however, very quickly revealed the fundamental conflict between unionist ideals and structural realities. The union was highly centralized in Cairo, with the Egyptian military and technocrats controlling key offices; the Syrian political parties were disorganized, and Egyptian economic policies were imposed on Syria. The union was not an equal one for the political and military elites of Syria, who felt frustrated by their subservient position to Egypt, and saw it as a form of Egyptian administrative rule that looked to promote the Egyptian state rather than unity. In September 1961, the Damascus military coup dissolved the UAR and reestablished Syria's independent statehood. The UAR's demise dealt a major blow to the cause of Pan-Arabism, as it became clear that even ideologically similar peoples were unwilling to give up their local statehood and administrative autonomy.

While the UAR revealed the structural weaknesses of pan-Arab unification, the catastrophic Arab defeat in the Six-Day War of June 1967 brought an end to the pan-Arab ideology. The rapid military collapse of the Arabs undermined the revolutionary regimes' most important claims to regional leadership and anti-imperialist legitimacy. Following 1967, Arab foreign policy made a turning point: a fundamental change in emphasis from the ideational to the pragmatic dimension and from trans-state action to Westphalian statecraft. Self-help, territorial defense, and realpolitik power balancing were the sole means of survival adopted by Arab regimes in response to the serious security threats they faced. Internal state-building was further encouraged by the regularities of war and increased domestic revenue flows from the 1970s oil boom, leading to greater state strength and resistance to external ideological subversion by individual governments. The notion of patriotism and loyalty based on the individual territorial state, called Wataniyya, became the dominant factor in international relations in the Middle East, replacing Qawmiyya.

The contemporary political leaders play the role of Arab nationalists (neo-pan-Arabism) defensively, not with the intent of creating a unified entity that would diminish the importance of the state and increase the power of the pan-Arab movement. The politics of the region is less about seeking to "blur boundaries" than about a fierce, defensive effort to preserve and strengthen the state. The modern regional order in the Middle East is focused on the security of state structures, national boundaries, and the integrity against sub-state disintegration. Unlike in the mid-twentieth century, when states embraced the option of political merger, today's governments in the Middle East are driven to preserve the nation-state and its security against armed sub-state actors and other proxy forces that aim to weaken the state from within.

De-Structuring the Sovereign State: Iranian Proxy Networks and Great Power Dynamics

Non-state armed actors within asymmetric proxy networks pose the greatest current threat to state survival in the Middle East. This is the approach that the Islamic Republic of Iran has followed, building an advanced regional network dubbed the "Axis of Resistance" (Mihwar al-Muqawama). Iran's proxy model was launched in the wake of the Islamic Revolution in 1979 and is being managed by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps – Quds Force (IRGC-QF), giving Tehran the ability to deploy asymmetric force, create strategic depth, and intimidate regional and global opponents, without facing

the financial burden or the direct military threat of conventional interstate conflict.

Iran's proxy strategy does not aim to overthrow host states or take their place with formal colonies, but rather creates a situation of "hybrid sovereignty". Hybrid proxy actors are not revolutionaries but rather reside in, exploit, and control formal state structures from the inside. The result is parallel sovereignties that gradually erode the state both politically, militarily, economically, and administratively.

Hybrid proxies compete in national elections, serve in the parliament, and occupy key cabinet positions in the political and institutional arena. They use political tactics and threats to obtain legislation that allows them to block national defense decisions, control civil ministries, and control huge sums of public money to pay their own staff, build their own military bases, and establish their own political networks. In the military sector, the formal state armed forces, known as the military apparatus, are underfunded or constrained. At the same time, hybrid proxies maintain their own military wings equipped with advanced kinetic weapons, including precision-guided ballistic missiles, armed uncrewed aerial vehicles (UAVs), and anti-ship cruise missiles. These armed wings are totally independent of operational control, having their own councils and external patrons, and are neither under the national defense ministries nor under the constitutional commanders-in-chief.

In the economic domain, proxy networks create shadow economies that are not subject to the central bank's control. They are tasked with taking control of key international border crossings, overseeing illegal cross-border trade, levying illegal customs duties, and conducting commercial activities. These activities deprive central state treasuries of tax revenue and finance the militia. In the social sphere, Proxies run alternative social welfare systems, religious courts, and medical facilities. Their provision of basic services to the marginalized creates solid sub-state popular legitimacy which outstrips the under-resourced civil infrastructure of formal state structures. Hybrid proxy actors benefit from all the advantages of statehood, such as sovereign immunity, legal protection, state salaries, and state representation via official diplomatic agents, but do not assume the constitutional responsibilities, legal obligations, or civic duties imposed by contemporary Westphalian statehood.

The three regional case studies – Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen – illustrate this type of state capture very clearly. Hezbollah has transformed from a secret movement to the strongest political and military group in Lebanon. Hezbollah has a technologically advanced military wing, both in the number of precision-guided missiles it possesses and in the capabilities of those missiles. Hezbollah maintains an effective veto over the cabinet's decisions and controls the Lebanese military, with members in the country's cabinet

and parliament. Hezbollah's unilateral actions, such as deploying thousands of fighters in Syria to preserve the Assad regime or to start wars on the borders with Israel without considering the consequences, have deprived the Lebanese government of its authority over war and peace, thereby removing the formal state from the list of sovereign powers.

However, in Iraq, the vacuum of security since the 2003 U.S. invasion was the breeding ground for the flourishing of armed groups that are backed by Iran. The creation of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF / Hashd al-Shaabi) was triggered by the emergence of ISIS in 2014, which brought together dozens of armed groups. In 2016, the Iraqi parliament passed a law to incorporate the PMF into the state security apparatus and to allocate government salaries to its members. But this was a legal incorporation, not a legal subordination of militias to the government. Establishing and cultivating strong allegiance to outside patrons, extensive black-market economic networks, control of border crossings, infiltration of state ministries, and unapproved military incursions into foreign countries are all hallmarks of key PMF brigades that are systematically undermining official Iraqi sovereignty.

The Ansar Allah-Yemen conflict has turned into a proxy war, where a domestic political issue became a catastrophic war. In 2014, the Houthis decisively seized the capital city of Sana'a, ousting the recognized government, after receiving advanced missile technology, armed drones, and tactical training from Iran and Hezbollah. The Houthis took over to collect taxes and run millions of people without internationally recognized authority in the north of Yemen. The Houthis, who have a geographic location along the Red Sea, used their fleet of advanced missiles and drones to target international maritime traffic, even though they never have to face international legal liability for their actions, while also threatening Saudi Arabia continuously and trying to make one of the regional powers weaker.

Moreover, the principal-agent slippage is very severe in the case of proxy warfare. As time goes on, non-state proxies develop local bases, acquire local revenue, and advanced military technology. This leads to the emergence of local political aspirations and independence among the proxies, which sometimes result in confrontation with their sponsors or in their sponsors becoming entangled in unnecessary escalations. If autonomous proxies launch an uncoordinated military operation or violate red lines, host countries face devastating counterattacks. The formal host has no veto over the foreign patron or the local proxy and is completely disenfranchised in matters of national security.

These sub-state proxy threats have been consistently ignored by the global great powers (the United States, Russia and China) in trying to help Middle Eastern states eradicate them. Great power interventions have often worsened state fragility because of three systemic factors:

The Middle East is one field of zero-sum strategic competition for the world's powers. Great powers do not invest in transparent institutional state-building; instead, they foster their state or sub-state allies to outcompete their global rivals. In Syria, for example, the Russian military intervention has been based on the principle of preserving the regime and ensuring naval facilities in Tartus and Khmeimim, rather than on the goal of restoring a unified and responsible state apparatus. Second, external actors pursue short-term transactional policies and narrow security interests, rather than policies aimed at dismantling non-state militias, to address issues of energy transit, nuclear non-proliferation, and counterterrorism. The United States has, on many occasions, directly allied itself with sub-state actors to achieve tactical objectives against extremist groups which have, in turn, negatively impacted central state authority. Third, foreign involvement that focuses on regime change or rapid withdrawal has repeatedly undermined administrative governance. The 2003 invasion of Iraq by the US and the 2011 NATO invasion of Libya destroyed existing institutions and administrative systems, but did not create any viable alternatives. The resultant security vacuum enabled regional competitors and non-state networks of proxy forces to grow by leaps and bounds. But caught between aggressive sub-state proxy penetration and the transactional apathy of global powers, Middle Eastern states are structurally undermined and cannot assert exclusive Westphalian sovereignty over their national territories.

Conclusion

The Middle East is now a nation-state in crisis. The Middle Eastern state was often designed as a hard, weak state: tightly militarized, institutionally weak, structurally vulnerable, and lacking civic legitimacy. Proxy war aggressively takes advantage of this situation, and it is an engine of state de-structuring. External powers provide funding, arms, and training to sub-state actors, thereby breaking the Weberian monopoly of physical violence and replacing the state with a heterarchic oligopoly of force. The rise of hybrid proxy actors, like Hezbollah in Lebanon, the PMF in Iraq, and the Houthis in Yemen, who hold formal positions in the government and also operate as independent military forces, creates permanent political gridlock and structural weaknesses, as well as threatening neighboring countries. At the same time, one can see that Middle Eastern states are preoccupied these days with the fundamental problem of protecting their borders, institutions, and survival, shifting from 20th-century Pan-Arab unionism (Qawmiyya) to statist preservation (Wataniyya).

To restore stability in the Middle East, the era of proxy management must give way to rebuilding the political substance of the nation-state in a functional, empirical manner. Domestically, governments at various levels should establish clear civic institutions, promote national citizenship, and

ensure that all organized armed militias are strictly subordinate to the unified constitutional defense forces, or even eliminate them. At the international level, the world's great powers and regional powers need to shift from a competitive approach to indirect involvement in fragile states. Unless territorial sovereignty is respected and the central administrative system is rebuilt, the Middle Eastern state will continue to perpetuate a vicious cycle of institutional collapse, proxy rule, and conflict.



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Dr. Ramzi Bendebka is an Assistant Professor and Researcher at the International Islamic University Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. His research fields include International Studies, Middle Eastern and African Studies, Regional Studies, and the Asia-Pacific Region. He is a contributor to different well-known sites and platforms, like Asia Power Watch, the Atlas Institute of International Studies, and Modern Diplomacy. Ramzi Bendebka is a section editor, editorial board member, and reviewer in several journals. He edited several books, and his recent research paper, "New regionalism" in the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA): an evaluation of its characteristics, Journal of International Studies.

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