

# **Fragile States: the Birthplace of Non-State Armed Groups in West Asia**

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## **Abstract**

Due to both internal and external factors, Western Asia has long been suffering from security tribulations and political instability. The institution of various military and militia groups in the region in the absence of powerful central governments is the leading cause of most crises in Western Asia. The development of such security and military interactions outside the sovereignty framework paves the way for foreign interventions, making the region unstable and insecure. Working at times as proxy agents, these groups take action in the absence of a powerful stable central government in short term, and set the ground for sustained unrest, dispersion and the development of irresponsible armed groups in long term. These groups proliferate when the central governments lack the necessary persuasive power or lose the ability to manage crises and to exercise exclusive power for reasons such as lack of effective military power, disagreement over the quality of interaction with opposition groups, losing the monopoly of military power, intervention of regional or transboundary powers, high financial and organizing abilities of the militia, etc. This article is based on the hypothesis that the development and continuous growth of non-state armed groups stems from various internal and external reasons, causing security crisis in the concerned countries. The most crucial way to end these crises is empowering the central government through national cohesiveness, consensus, and the exclusive practice of hard power based on the law.

**Keywords:** Fragile state, Military power, Non-state armed groups, Unstable security, Western Asia

## 1. Introduction

Western Asia is considered as one of the most insecure regions in the world. Known as “the hinge of the three continents<sup>1</sup>” since ancient times, this region has played a unique role in producing and presenting everlasting religious and ethical messages, and has brought about three universal religions to their audiences for eternity. Although the focus of all three great religions in the world’s religiosity center has been justice and peace, this purpose has thus far been least fulfilled in its own geographic origin. A great number of wars, revolutions, coups, oppressive states, autocratic systems, and the more or less influential interventions of the transregional powers have prevented the experience and realization of stable peace, health, and security. Alongside the above security-threatening factors, during the recent decades, the presence of non-state armed groups, which have constantly and inappropriately intensified the crises during the years after the World War II has been rather important in the region’s endless crises. Considered a new phenomenon, these groups have been able to play a significant role in the continuity of insecurity in the region, through organization, internal cohesion, specific sociopolitical goals, foreign supports, financial resources, weapons possession, as well as their destruction power.

Whether one can call them dependent puppet groups or consider them to have an independent position, there exists no doubt regarding their destructive role in providing security and sustainable stability in the Western Asian region. In addition to foreign interventions’ creating insecurity in the region, especially during the cold war and the intense competitions between the East

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1. I borrowed the term from a book with the same title by Rahmani, 1388 ([2009 A.D.]).

and the West, these groups have long been playing an effective role in fulfilling the needs and the interventive objectives of the two world superpowers. In many cases, these groups were in “proxy wars”, having turned into a tool for applying pressure from one political unit to another on behalf of the interests of the regional powers and superpowers (Amadae, 2003). Amid the inappropriate and stressful relationships in the Cold War years, the above-mentioned groups could appear in different roles with various claims. These roles consisted at times in confronting the ruling tyranny, appeared at other times as liberating movements, or demanded independence in a challenge with a central government and/or the ruling dominant power. Recently, these groups have claimed the necessity of Islamic law execution and the expansion of the prophetic Shari'a in any possible form and at any price. Confronting the dominant central power and challenging state legitimacy have been the focal point of all the quadruple tendencies, which will be briefly discussed in the following sections. Proving the political illegitimacy of the central government paved the way for the NSAGs<sup>1</sup> emergence and actions, and they politically exploited this issue to the utmost level (Schneckener & Schlichte, 2015). It was only under such circumstances that their presence and activities became possible; all the NSAGs primarily followed similar objectives: challenging the central power and/or claiming independence from an established central government.

Prior to beginning this article's main discussion, a common or acceptable definition of these NSAGs must be provided as a means of differentiation between these groups and similar cases, such as coups, rebels, terrorist groups, gangs, military mercenaries, private

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1. Non-State Armed Groups

military companies, etc. (Jayasekera, 2015). Although it is difficult and perhaps impossible to provide a definition that is acceptable to all researchers, one can make use of specialists' opinions in this field, explain the most significant definitions, and present a general and acceptable conceptual framework. In a valuable investigation regarding the status of non-state armed groups in Afghanistan, Mukhopadhyay, a prominent specialist in Afghanistan affairs, mentions three conditions for these substantial groups: they are powerful organizations based on hierarchy, possessing weapons as well as the tendency and the ability to use them, and having control over the land where civilians live (Mukhopadhyay, 2015). Petrasek, who is a specialist and a civil rights activist, believes that the term could be applied to any organization outside the state, which challenges the central power's legitimacy, dominance and power (Petrasek, 2000). Shultz *et al.* attribute the term to any group outside the central power dominance, which relies on using force and violence against militants and civilians for achieving their ethnic, racial, lingual, and other goals (Shultz, 2004). According to him, the most significant aspect of a non-state armed group is breaking the monopoly of the state in using naked power and weapons. The German Development Institute has published a string of different definitions in an investigation by three distinguished researchers. According to them, the main aspect of the opponents' activities is using weapons. Thus, government opponents are divided in two major categories and using weapons is considered as the main distinguishing feature between armed groups and other opponents in opposing governments (Grävingsholt *et al.*, 2007).

Rodgers and Muggah include the various opposing groups that rely on violence and weapons instead of negotiation and dialogue under the title NSAG, whether they are considered as government opponents or not (Rodgers & Muggah, 2009). In his book, Vinci

discusses the issue from another angle. He classifies these groups into two major categories of non-armed and armed opponents, believing the distinguishing feature of the latter to be military power, which is based on a kind of practical dominance and autonomy, independent of and contrary to the state (Vinci, 2009). According to him, this military capability differentiates between armed groups and other opponents, and paves the way for their being taken seriously in power equations at international structures. He considers almost all the non-state armed groups as symbols of terrorism. Considering the changes after September 11 and the unprecedented declaration of existence of many armed groups, or their departure from political and religious activities and entry into the military arena, many theorists have quitted previous definitions and changed the general title of “armed groups” to terrorist groups (Whitfield, 2010).

The abundant number of articles and books written in this regard proves that range of scientific discussions and actions that have taken place in this field. The following definition may be suitable for entering the discussion, as a brief summary of the opinions presented in the above-mentioned works, excluding the political or orientalist points of view toward this issue, which consider all these groups as terrorists according to certain definitions that are contradictory to an academic evaluation:

'A group of trained civilians organized according to military hierarchy (basically unofficial), who get involved in a military confrontation with the government with reliance on weapons and with definite interests and purposes (ethnic, lingual, territorial, ideological, etc.). They exist in, control, or dominate a particular geographic location within the country, and are active in places outside the realm and control of the central government'.

If we consider the above definition as a criterion for the reviews and analyses in this article, a novel categorization may be made through a historical perspective, which will be considerably beneficial in understanding the subject. As mentioned earlier, nearly all armed groups in Western Asia were affected by the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the aftermath of this great historical event, especially the Sykes-Picot agreement. What paved the way for the formation of many of these movements included ignoring the wishes of the natives of the region, the decisions of the war conquerors—who did not have a good reputation among Muslims—in determining the borders, their interventions in internal affairs and in the natives' right to determine their destiny, as well as the violation of national sovereignty during the following three decades (Ottaway, 2015). Moreover, the interventions of the two great powers of the time (the United States and the Soviet Union) and their attempts to neutralize the other's plans and disrupt mutual interactions, their bringing to power and supporting autocratic and totalitarian rulers, the colonization of the region, the plundering of the countries' wealth, and most importantly, the formation of Israel and the superpowers' full support of this country, set the ground for the emergence of these groups.

## **2. The internal and external causes of the emergence of NSAGs**

In order to achieve a better and more accurate understanding of a phenomenon, the foundations and causes of its development must be studied. Thus, it is not possible to examine the status of these groups and the background of their emergence in politics, their actions in the region and their disturbing of the stability and security, which were based on traditional order, without adhering to the causes. Various other factors could be mentioned alongside

historical backgrounds, such as the above-mentioned agreement. As internal causes cannot be ignored in the development of these groups, external causes must also be taken into consideration. Internal and external factors may be classified in the following manner:

| <b>The external causes of NSAGs growth and activities</b>            | <b>The internal causes of NSAGs growth and activities</b>          |
|--|--|
| September 11 and the US attacks to Iraq and Afghanistan              | Confronting authoritarian and oppressive systems                   |
| The war over oil   | Lack of an appropriate respondent state system                     |
| Opposing globalization (Americanization)                             | Economical inefficiency  |
| Making use of experiences from Afghanistan war                       | Class conflict   |
| The role of Afghan Arabs and their return to their own countries     | discrimination   |
| Western supports for the oppressive regimes and dependent agents     | Disregard for the will of minorities                               |
| Confronting the foreign interventions and occupation                 | Lack of a real representative system                               |
| The foundation of Israel and the occupation of Palestine             | Expanded poverty   |
| Opposing the Islamic Republic of Iran and expansionist interventions | Organized corruption   |
| Confronting the infidels' domination of Muslim cities                | The interventions of military and security institutes in politics  |
| Liberating movements   | The weakness of the central government in monopolizing naked power |
| Opposing Shiites   | Weapons accessibility (buying, storing, using)                     |
| Confronting the colonial boundaries of Sykes Pico                    | Establishing a caliphate   |
|  | Reviving Islamic sharia  |
|  | Separatist tendencies and autonomy                                 |

A quick glance at the above factors reveals the multiplicity and variety of the causes for the emergence of a wide range of military groups in the recent half of the century, particularly since the beginning of the twenty-first century. Among the various groups in the region, an attempt was made to include in the list (see below) the most significant and active groups with the widest range of action and the most remarkable operational and organizational capacities. Doubtless, if the names of all the small and significant groups were to be included, the list would have multiplied in length. An extended discussion could be held regarding the analysis of the internal and external causes; however, the hypothesis of the article and the necessity of concentrating on the main issue require that a detailed discussion be avoided. Two internal and external causes are especially highlighted in the current article in comparison with other research, although all the above-mentioned factors may be counted among the causes of NSAG growth and proliferation in the final analysis. State inefficiency in controlling situations as well as in maintaining exclusive possession and use of weapons, or more briefly, central government fragility, may be considered as the focal point of the discussion regarding internal causes. In addition, the author means to emphasize direct foreign intervention and occupation among external factors, as the main reasons for the growth and proliferation of such groups.

According to the above discussion and as the main hypothesis of the article, it may be noted that state inefficiency and fragility, as well as its inability to extend its domination to the “realm of government” are of the most significant causes of threat over the global community, as well as the reasons for the emergence of NSAGs (Patrick, 2011). More accurately, the government provides the background for the emergence and growth of armed groups through its inability to completely control its territory, its loss of



exclusive possession of weapons, as well as its lack of the necessary power in dominating the geography of the out-of-control regions, including the borderlines, minority areas, and lands which are out of reach of the central government. Using the exclusive possession of power in the region, the groups' ease of access to light and heavy weapons, centrifugal tendencies, as well as the acceptance and expansion of the notion of confronting the central government among the civilians living in such areas, pave the way for the proliferation of these groups. The state's continued disregard for this issue expedites the proliferation process, in turn propelling the challenge against the government and governmental institutes. The government's attempt to confront the crisis through military actions does not normally yield desirable results, but in fact expands and deepens the crisis (Krause & Milliken, 2009).

### 3. The background of NSAGs' emergence

Ian Spears mentions three different categories in his analysis of the models of fragile and incapable governments' paving the way for the emergence of NSAGs. He categorizes the states into quasi-states (Somalia), shadow states (Guinea and Kosovo), and failed states (Afghanistan and Yemen), and believes that the states' incapability to expand their exclusive power in their own territory is rather apparent in all three models (Kingston & Spears, 2004).

As the authors of the book *die* believe, government weakness occurs in particular times and under special circumstances. They believe that such a society would deal with intense crises and would face difficult conditions (Grävingholt *et al.*, 2007). They consider the following five conditions necessary for the emergence of NSAG in crisis-stricken communities:

1. The state is a puppet regime or under the support of a foreign occupational government.
2. The state is oppressive and restricts civil and political liberties or plunders the nation's properties through passing particular rules.
3. The state has lost its competency for various reasons (economic inefficiency, widespread corruption or crippling financial policies).
4. The state has lost its legitimacy and cannot represent the nation (racially, ethnically, regionally)
5. The central government is legitimate but the local governors lack legitimacy and efficiency.

Rajeev Chaudhry believes in a direct relationship between human development indicators and the emergence or non-emergence of these groups in countries' domestic policies (2013). In his belief, it is impossible for such groups to exist and be active in countries where there are numerous indicators of democracy, transparency, corruption, economic freedom, free information flow, civil liberties, and free media. In fact, governments that lack substantial indicators pave the way for the emergence and proliferation of military groups and are well suited for the emergence of NSAGs. Chaudhry does not attribute any role to such groups in developed countries and considers their appearance disruptive to state building. He believes that NSAGs do not have any chances of emergence and expansion in countries that enjoy an acceptable level of development as well as power rotation (Chaudhry, 2013).

#### 4. The definition of fragile and incapable states

Considering that the most significant feature of sovereignty is defined as the quality of interaction with citizens and support of their security, and taking into account that the most important function of states is providing its citizens' with safety, basic needs, growth and elevation, providing security could be considered as the most significant pillar of politics as well as the groundwork for other indicators of a valuable state (Humboldt, 2017). Another significant parameter of a worthy governorship consist of providing the necessary backgrounds for a befitting life according to human dignity, such as freedom of speech, political development, economic progress, psychological health and security, civil collaboration, the right to vote and determine destiny, as well as exercising sovereignty and defending interests on a national level (Smith, 2007). Any state that could realize the above parameters and enhance its national ranking among other communities and political units would enjoy a higher level of reliability and worthiness in comparison with others. The existence of multiple various indices and rankings of human development, corruption, hygiene, worthy governorship, transparency, such are proofs of a comparative trend among countries as well as of the significance of this issue among nations.

On the other hand, a country that is unable to obtain the desired parameters and to provide for the basic needs of its citizens, will be accused of inefficiency and will face significant problems, unsolved difficulties and an aggregation of national protests, becoming the cause of its own collapse. Different interpretations are provided on such states in political and international studies. Titles such as weak state, fragile state, failed state, collapsed state, and collapsing state indicate that these states are unable to comply

with the will of their citizens (Rotberg, 2004). As a result, they collapse and pass over the power due to their inability to accomplish the basic needs of their citizens as well as the inefficiency to provide for the social, cultural, religious and political necessities requested by their people. The rise of non-state armed groups, who are in opposition with the central government, is conceivable under such circumstances, whether as a reflection of the public will in the society or as an abuse of the circumstances. Amid this, “citizen security” will be kept hostage by the quality of interaction between the central government and NSAGs, and the civilians will most likely face the highest amount of casualties and losses due to the government’s inadequacy to provide support.

In her article about fragile states, Rosa Brookst mentions the various causes of states’ fragility, arguing that the majority of weak and fragile governments were not successful and could not establish stable security in their country or shoulder responsibility based on democracy (Brookst, 2005). In addition, having contributed much to this issue, Robert Rotberg discusses the differences among weak states, fragile states, and collapsed states, elaborating on the subtle distinctions among these concepts and presenting various indicators for these states in general (Rotberg, 2004). As illustrated in his book, the common denominator in unsuccessful and non-powerful states include ethnic, linguistic, religious, and cultural tensions, weak communication and transportation structures, low gross national product per capita, widespread corruption, inefficient health system, unequal job opportunities, open discrimination, little hope for life, growing political violence, lack of the authority of the law, widespread crime, and lack of control over borderline areas.

An extremely significant issue is mentioned in the detailed report written in this regard by Collier and Others for the World Bank (Others, 2003). This report was prepared by several specialists and professionals in order to solve the problems of failed governments and to help them return to governorship and to revive the cycle of sovereignty. Having studied a great number of examples of weak and fragile states, which are on their way to join failed states, they discuss the void circle of governments' inefficiency, their increasing fragility and widespread insecurity, and the continuity of this cycle of inefficiency and inability to provide security until their complete collapse.

Professor at Yale University, Oliver Richmond presents an extensive elaboration in his book regarding the role of foreign interventions in the increase or decrease of fragility in states/countries. Emphasizing the role of developed countries in assisting the political development of third world countries, he argues that according to the 2010 report of the United Nation Development Program (UNDP), although more than 30 billion dollars has been spent on this issue from 1990 to 2009, the sum is not sufficient and has insignificant role in amending the countries' affairs to help them out of the inefficiency cycle (Richmond, 2014). According to him, the most important means of coming out of the crisis of inefficiency and fragility consist of the assistance of Global Community, the development and proliferation of non-military non-state institutes, as well as dependence on the native elites for managing countries.

In the book *Neverending Wars*, Ann Hironaka, a professor at the University of California, mentions another important issue, which, in her point of view, has been effective in driving countries toward unstable political positions. She discusses colonialists' role in

countries prone to becoming weak and disabled, as well as the mutual influences of unequal wars and conflicts between two sides in driving countries that have recently become independent, toward weakness, considering that independence was achieved through armed groups (Hironaka, 2005).

Regardless of the subtle differences among the above definitions, fragile states could be considered suitable bases for the development and proliferation of NSAGs in the world and especially in West Asia. The Fund for Peace is one of the best sources of analysis, statistics and data gathering regarding fragile states. This institution endeavors to study the states' fragility status and has thus categorized various countries through statistics analysis, based on twelve indicators, which will be discussed in the following sections (Messner, 2017). According to the criteria presented by the Fund for Peace Institution, the indicators of the above-mentioned governments may be illustrated as follows:

In the field of security—how is the security of citizens provided for and does a potential or actual danger threaten citizens' lives? Does the government enjoy exclusive power? How is the relationship between the military and non-military sectors?

In the field of politics—is there responsible leadership? Is the concept of national identity developed? How are resources distributed? Are there equality and equal opportunities? What are the methods of objection and criticism? Can the governor's policies be criticized? Has the state won the loyalty of its people? What is the status of political opponents? Are there constitutional laws, and are they well and equally applied? What is the status of human rights?

In the field of economy—what is the economic status of the country? Is the final consumer satisfied? How much is the country's debt? What is the status of unemployment and inflation? What is the status of Gross National Product and what is the share of each citizen? How are economic opportunities distributed? Does the state encourage transparency and is it far from economic corruption?

In the field of society—has there been social capital development? Does brain drain to other countries occur in this country? Does a considerable income enter the country from those who live abroad? Is there social dynamism? Are there social classes and are there conflicts between the different classes? What is the status of people's health? How is the quality of education and is the necessary knowledge available to all? What are the statuses of public hygiene and hope for life?

The following table adequately illustrates the most recent statuses of countries as well as their level of fragility based on detailed data:

| Iran | Israel | Turkey | Lebanon | Egypt | Pakistan | Iraq  | Afghanistan | Syria | Yemen |                      |
|------|--------|--------|---------|-------|----------|-------|-------------|-------|-------|----------------------|
| 7.5  | 6.9    | 8.3    | 8.7     | 8.1   | 9.1      | 10    | 10          | 9.8   | 9.8   | S A <sup>1</sup>     |
| 9.6  | 8.1    | 9.1    | 9.3     | 8.8   | 8.9      | 9.6   | 8.6         | 9.9   | 9.5   | F <sup>3</sup> E     |
| 9.3  | 10     | 10     | 8.5     | 8.8   | 10       | 9.6   | 8.4         | 9.8   | 9.3   | G <sup>5</sup> G     |
| 6.4  | 3.8    | 6.4    | 6.4     | 8.2   | 6.9      | 6.6   | 8.3         | 8.1   | 9.3   | E C <sup>4</sup>     |
| 5.6  | 6.8    | 5.7    | 5.6     | 6     | 6.5      | 7.3   | 7.5         | 7.7   | 8.2   | U <sup>5</sup> D     |
| 6.5  | 3.8    | 3.9    | 5       | 4.7   | 7.2      | 7.7   | 8.2         | 8.4   | 7.3   | H <sup>6</sup> F     |
| 9    | 6.4    | 7.6    | 7.6     | 8.2   | 8.1      | 9.5   | 9.1         | 9.9   | 9.7   | S L <sup>7</sup>     |
| 4.5  | 4.8    | 4.4    | 5.7     | 4.9   | 7.7      | 8.2   | 9.9         | 9.2   | 9.6   | P S <sup>8</sup>     |
| 9.5  | 7.5    | 7.7    | 7.4     | 9.8   | 8        | 8.7   | 8.5         | 9.8   | 9.7   | H R <sup>9</sup>     |
| 4.9  | 6.0    | 4.9    | 5.6     | 7.1   | 8.4      | 8.6   | 9.3         | 8.2   | 9.3   | D P <sup>10</sup>    |
| 6.5  | 7.3    | 9.2    | 9.3     | 7.3   | 8.7      | 9.9   | 9.8         | 9.8   | 9.4   | R <sup>11</sup> D    |
| 6.5  | 7.5    | 5.4    | 9.1     | 7.9   | 9.4      | 9.7   | 9.7         | 10    | 10    | E X <sup>12</sup>    |
| 85.8 | 78.9   | 80.8   | 88.2    | 89.8  | 98.9     | 105.4 | 107.3       | 110.6 | 111.1 | TOT<br>AL            |
| 72   | 69     | 64     | 43      | 36    | 17       | 10    | 9           | 5     | 4     | Rank in<br>the world |

**Table 1: A selection of fragility levels of countries under study in 2017.**

**Source: (Messner, 2017, pp.33-37)**

- |   |                                 |
|---|---------------------------------|
| 1. Security Apparatus                         | 2. Factionalized Elites         |
| 3. Group Grievance                            | 4. Economic Decline             |
| 5. Uneven Economic Development                | 6. Human Flight and Brain Drain |
| 7. State Legitimacy                           | 8. Public Services              |
| 9. Human Rights and Rule of Law               | 10. Demographic Pressures       |
| 11. Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons | 12. External Intervention       |



## 5. The status of NSAGs' demands in Western Asia

Considering the highest number of non-state armed groups within the countries of the region, the most significant issue would be the desires and tendencies of these groups, or in other words, the main driving power of the most important groups in the chaotic status of the region, its features, as well as the way in which it must be answered. A list of the most significant non-state armed groups in the region is produced in order to answer the main question of the investigation. The general status of the groups is studied and analyzed, and a rather comprehensive list of the most active organizations is provided based on several indicators, such as deployment location, sphere of influence, financial resources, the number of forces, the main purposes of the organization, operational area, areas under control, sponsors and ideological origins<sup>1</sup>. The following table includes a summary of the discussion.

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1. The Muslim Brotherhood movement and the Freedom Movement of Iran are considered as two founder lines of thought, out of which nearly all the various spectrums of the Islam world were born during the following years.

| Areas under control                          | The sphere of influence and action      | Organization purpose  | Year of establishment | Intellectual orientation | sponsors   | Number of forces <sup>1</sup> (×1000) | Funds  | Location of deployment | Group name                     |
|--|---|---|-----------------------|--------------------------|--|---------------------------------------|--|------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Gaza   | Gaza, the West Bank of the Jordan river | The removal of occupation, autonomy   | 1987                  | Salafi Sunni             | The Islamic Republic and the Muslim Brotherhood Movement   | 15 to 20                              | Iran, Syria, and part of the Arabs of the region                 | Palestine              | Hamas <sup>2</sup>             |
| Gaza   | Gaza                                    | Occupation removal  | 1981                  | Moderate Sunni           | Iran   | 3 to 5                                | Iran   | Palestine              | The Islamic Jihad              |
| About one third of Yemen (the Western Coast) | Yemen                                   | Self-rule and confronting the aggression and intervention of Saudi Arabia     | 1998                  | Zaidi Shia               | Iran   | 80 to 100                             | Iran   | Yemen                  | Ansar Allah                    |
| Parts of Syria and Iraq                      | Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Turkey            | The establishment of Caliphate and the implementation of Islamic law (Sharia) | 1999                  | Salafi and Wahhabi       | Qatar and some of the religious Arab figures of the region | 30 to 50                              | Robbery, zakat, the taxes of Qatar and some other Arab countries | Iraq and Syria         | ISIS <sup>3</sup>              |
| Northern Iraq, in particular Arbil           | Northern Iraq                           | Autonomy and independence   | 1946                  | Secular                  | Iran and Israel  |                                       | Oil resources and taxes  | Northern Iraq          | Kurdistan Democratic Party     |
| Southeast Turkey                             | Southern and Eastern Turkey             | Separatism  | 1978                  | Secular                  | undetermined   | 5                                     | Unknown  | Turkey                 | Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) |
| Northern Iraq, in particular Sulaimaniyah    | Northern Iraq                           | Autonomy and independence   | 1975                  | Secular                  | Iran   |                                       | Oil resources and taxes  | Northern Iraq          | Patriotic Union of Kurdistan   |
| Baghdad to Iraqi Kurdistan                   | Arab regions of Iraq                    | Power, anti-occupation  | 2014                  | Shia                     | Iran   | 80 to 120                             | Unknown  | Iraq                   | Popular Mobilization Forces    |
| The center and south of Lebanon              | Iran                                    | Anti-occupation   | 1985                  | Shia                     | Iran   | 20                                    | Iran   | Lebanon                | Hizbullah                      |
| About 40% of Southern Afghanistan            | Afghanistan                             | The establishment of Caliphate and the implementation of Islamic law (Sharia) | 1994                  | Salafi                   | Pakistan <sup>4</sup> and the Emirates                     | 60                                    | Religious funds  | Afghanistan            | Taliban                        |
| Undetermined                                 | Afghanistan and Pakistan                | The establishment of Caliphate and the implementation of Islamic law (Sharia) | 1988                  | Salafi                   | Pakistan   | 10                                    | Religious funds  | Afghanistan            | Al-Qaida                       |

1. The numbers are gathered from various sources and estimated, and the exact number cannot be relied on due to the non-obvious nature of these groups.
2. Confronting the occupation of Israel began since its formation through various groups. Only a few more effective groups are mentioned here.
3. The most scattered and incoherent statistics belongs to this group which is currently being obliterated from Syria and Iraq.
4. See the important article by Sadri Alibalu et al. (1393 [2014 A.D.]) regarding the security threats of these groups in Pakistan toward the Islamic Republic.

|                        |                          |  |      |                |                 |         |                 |                 |  |
|------------------------|--------------------------|--|------|----------------|-----------------|---------|-----------------|-----------------|--|
| Undetermined           | Pakistan                 | The establishment of Caliphate and the implementation of Islamic law (Sharia), anti-Shia | 1985 | Wahhabi Salafi | Pakistan        | 100     | Religious funds | Pakistan        | Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan                          |
| Undetermined           | Pakistan and Afghanistan | The establishment of Caliphate and the implementation of Islamic law (Sharia), anti-Shia | 1990 | Wahhabi Salafi | Pakistan        | 5 to 10 | Religious funds | Pakistan        | Lashkar-e-Taiba                                  |
| Undetermined           | Somali and Yemen         | The establishment of Caliphate and the implementation of Islamic law (Sharia)            | 2006 | Salafi         | Undetermined    | 10      | Unknown         | Somali          | Al-Shabaab                                       |
| Undetermined           | Palestine                | Removal of occupation  | 1974 | Sunni          | Iraq            | One     | Unknown         | Palestine       | Abu Nidal Organization                           |
| Undetermined           | Pakistan                 | The establishment of Caliphate and the implementation of Islamic law (Sharia), anti-Shia | 1980 | Wahhabi Salafi | Pakistan        | 4 to 12 | Religious funds | Pakistan        | Haqqani Network                                  |
| The West bank          | Palestine                | Liberating movement  | 1964 | Secular        | Arab countries  |         | Arab countries  | Palestine       | Palestine Liberation Organization <sup>1</sup>   |
| Gaza and the West Bank | Palestine                | Liberating movement  | 1969 | Secular        | Syria and Iran  | One     | Iran and Syria  | Palestine       | Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine |
| Undetermined           | Iran                     | Separatism   | 1924 | Secular        | Iraqi Kurdistan | Unknown | Unknown         | Iran and Iraq   | Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan            |
| Undetermined           | Iran                     | Undetermined   | 1966 | Secular Shia   | The US          | 5 to 13 | Unknown         | Iraq and Albany | People's Mujahedin of Iran                       |
| Undetermined           | Syria                    | The establishment of Caliphate and the implementation of Islamic law (Sharia)            | 2012 | Salafi         | Turkey?         | 5 to 7  | Unknown         | Syria           | Al-Nusra Front                                   |

**Table 2: Groups and their most important properties**

1. The Palestine Liberation Organization was an inclusive organization for many Palestinian groups and spectrums who had accepted Arafat's leadership.

The announced goals of these groups illustrate the causes of their tendencies toward military action and confronting central governments. The recognition reveals the reasons for which these groups face dead ends in the domestic policy of each political unit, and exposes inefficiencies or deviations from criterion in political interactions. It is natural that independent political units and strong and dominant central governments do not wish to share their sovereignty and resist them full force (Puri, 2015). With their separatist inclinations, these groups can only succeed in taking action when there is not much power for the central government to extend its domination. Subversive attempts and military confrontations with the government take place when government legitimacy is seriously under question and the central government is not able to justify its legitimacy and durability (McCullough, 2015). In addition, the role of liberating and anti-occupation movements should also be taken into consideration. Doubtless, in the absence of a dominant and legitimate government, and especially when the political unit is occupied by other units, it is acceptable that non-state armed groups take action and begin their own activities in defense of their land and on behalf of (part of) the people, even in the presence of a deployed government. In a general analysis and considering the announced goals of these groups, the general politics of NSAGs may be categorized into four different patterns:

### **5.1. Caliphate-oriented groups**

World War I had an extremely bitter end for Muslims. There was no trace of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the war and a 500-year-old grandeur and glory was perished. This played a significant role in reviving Islamic thoughts around the globe, and its

inheritance could not be defended. Numerous books and articles were written to analyze the causes of this incident since the early 1920s, a considerable part of which was in defense of the necessity of the abolition of colonial boundaries and the revival of Caliphate governances (Mahafzah, 2016). In the meanwhile, considering the influential role of infidels and idolaters (the victorious Allies), the popularity of the idea of reviving the Caliphate among many religious people was understandable. Moreover, a wide range of people wished for an ideological reconstruction and for the creation of a new world with old standards and the repetition of Islamic Caliphate nostalgia with the purpose of establishing an Islamic state and implementing Sharia laws. Many advocates attempted to realize this desire, illustrating various roadmaps to reach this goal (Naji, 2013). This issue remained a theory in books and articles for many years, although it never found a chance to be realized due to various reasons, such as the rise of new powerful states and governments who did not believe in the effectiveness of this idea in solving the existing political problems.

The “Sykes-Picot” agreement, the Balfour Declaration (1917) about supporting the establishment of the Jews’ homeland in Palestine, as well as the abolition of the Caliphate, all of which were conducted by Western colonialist countries, caused what was called the most significant “evil” in the world of Islam, which later built the foundations of the emergence of pro-Caliphate-revival groups (Kepel, 2004). In less than a decade from these three significant events, a movement was formed, which considered the revival of the Caliphate its most important mission. The Muslim Brotherhood was a reformative and nurturing movement in the beginning, which gradually came to be the most significant ideological and political provider for the idea of forming a state in Islamic countries during the later decades. Even though this idea

could not yield to desirable results in the country where it originated (Egypt), it could in practice provide a much desired ideological background for other interested groups, in a way to enable them to take action in suitable circumstances and in the absence of a powerful central government, and thus to accomplish their goal in any possible way, even through arming their followers and applying force (The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, 2017). The books of Hassan al-Banna and more importantly those of Sayyid Qutb, came to be the companion books of the religious leaders of the groups that attempted to form their desired state in the absence of a powerful central government, even by means of armed conflict.

Although the liberation point of these groups from the domination of national sovereignty cannot be exactly determined, deviation from national sovereignty is clear in the main texts of many extremist groups and NSAGs, particularly in the ideas of the influential fathers of these groups (Hanafi, 2015). The driving forces of these groups consist of confronting and contradicting states affiliated with the West and Westernized governors, as well as the borders that were drawn among Muslim nations by the West in an attempt to break Islamic lands into pieces, a phenomenon that was founded, executed and supervised by the West. The particular perception of these groups from Islam, the revival of neglected values, especially the Islamic Caliphate, as well as their extreme viewpoints on the execution of Islamic laws and their absolute neglect regarding the reflections of their actions and behaviors in various foreign and domestic communities, have all illustrated an extremely marred face of political Islam. Taliban, Al-Qaeda, Al-Nusra Front, Al-Shabaab, and particularly ISIS, fall under this category (The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, 2017).

## 5.2. Anti-occupation, liberating and anti-colonialism groups

The Middle-East region has always been home to countless conflicts, especially after the World War II. The history of this region contains various civil wars, countries attacking one another, and most importantly, occupation. The main causes of the emergence of liberating groups and movements in the region include the occupation of Palestine and the establishment of another country, the attacks of a newly founded country on other Arabic countries as well as the occupation of parts of neighboring countries. In addition, the Soviet Union's attack on Afghanistan in 1979 and the long-term occupation of this country, the attack of the US and the global coalition on Iraq under the pretext of terminating the Kuwait occupation in 1991, the United States' attack on Afghanistan after September 11 as well as the attack on Iraq and its occupation in 2003, all paved the way for the development and proliferation of non-state armed groups (Policzer, 2005). The significant issue is that the main target in the above-mentioned attacks was the deployed central government in these countries, which had prevented the growth of armed groups and their activities for many years.

A wide range of armed groups with varying sizes and different degrees of foreign supports were formed in all the attacked and invaded countries under different titles, such as self-defense, confronting foreign enemies, liberating movement, defending Islamic lands, etc. (Antonopoulos, 2008). In the occupied lands of Palestine, individual, ethnic and regional defense was substituted with organizational and national defense, and one of the greatest armed anti-occupation organizations called Palestine Liberation Organization was established in less than a decade in 1964. The continuation of occupation and the inefficiency of this organization

in liberating small sections of Palestine paved the way for the activities of other liberating movements and groups; currently, various groups, such as Hamas, Islamic Jihad, the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, as well as various organizations in smaller sizes are active in the region. In addition, Israel's attacks on Lebanon and the occupation of this country in 1982 caused the formation of Hezbollah as the greatest semi-military group in the region.

Similar situation applies to two other occupied countries, Afghanistan and Iraq, since September 11 attacks in 2001. Popular defense was formed in Afghanistan one day after the occupation of the capital, which was gradually transformed into ethnic and tribal movements and then into organizations and groups that enjoyed foreign support as well (Reisman, 1987). Destroying the deployed government and the central dominance and its exclusive power to use weapons, and in general, making the government inefficient in all aspects, played the greatest role in the development and proliferation of armed groups in the region. Lack of a powerful central government and breaking the monopoly of using weapons and naked power set the ground for the emergence of these groups. Liberating cores with national and religious tendencies appeared, which not only did not surrender their weapons (particularly after the dismissal of the Red Army), but also worked harder to subvert the central government—, which did not appeal to them—and to establish the first Islamic emirate<sup>1</sup> in the region. The warlords established local governments in the absence of the central government, which had their own practical field and borderlines.

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1. The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan declared existence in 1996 after Taliban gained power.



This newly founded emirate was based on Islam with a certain perception of Islamic laws (Sharia), which Taliban advertised. The ideological backing of establishing this emirate included a peculiar mix of Sayyid Qutb's doctrines, the anti-American biased operational experiences of two charismatic figures of Afghan Arabs, that is Ayman al-Zawahiri and Osama bin Laden, as well as an attempt to remove the occupation of the region by foreigners, especially Americans. The two groups of Taliban and Al-Qaeda, among armed groups, refused to accept the central government and to join the political process even in the presence of a deployed national government, and fought against the fragile government of Afghanistan to gain power.

The same scenario happened in Iraq, whose central government was destroyed in the military attacks and in the process of its occupation. The United States' attacks to Iraq, carried out due to the supposed intervention of this country in terrorist acts and its possessing massive destruction weapons—which were never proved—led to the occupation of this country (Hinnebusch, 2007). The destruction of the central government, which had become extremely fragile due to the United Nations sanctions, created a suitable place for armed groups with various intensions. In the western regions, Shia armed groups began their activities around religious authorities. Hassand al-Sha'abi was established as a reaction to what was happening in the absence of a powerful central government, which was destroying the country's infrastructures and giving rise to the most extremist group called “the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant”. In the center of the country, Sunni armed groups launched various armed groups with the purpose of removing the US occupation on the one hand, and confronting the growth and superiority of the Shias on the other hand. ISIS was one of the most significant groups, which was

formed in those turbulent conditions in the absence of a powerful central government by holding many attractions (Sulaiman, 2014). The north of the country—which had been under the control of two armed Kurd groups, whose attempts to gain autonomy had been fruitless for decades—underwent changes in the absence of the central government until it was on the verge of independence (Kalhor, 1396 [2017 A.D.]).

### **5. 3. Separatist groups**

As stated above, one of the most important aspects and functions of a powerful central government is supporting the national values and the borderlines of every unit. It may be said that a state is powerful only when it does not allow invasions of its borderlines and when it prevents the division of the country and the undermining of national sovereignty through defensible legal methods. The Western Asia region enjoys the most diverse social tissues around the globe, with the potential to become divided into much smaller units than the current ones. This encouraged many to disintegrate the region into smaller components (Williams, 2008). Considering the mosaic nature of the countries of the region, it is quite likely that every ethnic, lingual, racial, etc. group develop a tendency toward independence and separation from the central government with various motives, practicing autonomy. Thus, among the most important functions of governments are managing such crises and establishing national consensus and unity, as well as driving all centrifugal groups toward practical convergence, obeying the central government and adhering to a common national identity.

Weak and fragile states possess the lowest capability to persuade

people into practicing convergence in such circumstances, especially at the time of foreign attacks and with damaged and crippled military power and their lost reverence. A weak government, together with the strength and power of centrifugal inclinations and foreign supports, provides a suitable background for realizing the purposes of these groups. In the absence of a powerful central government, these groups produce and present the right ideology for detachment from the center, gain access to safe and consistent financial resources for continuing life, develop a well-established organization, create an army and organize hordes of militia. Attaining such power would not be possible in the presence of a powerful central government (Zamani & Zamani, (1394 [2015 A.D.]). The Kurdistan Democratic Party, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan, the Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan, the Kurdistan Workers' Party in Turkey, and the Ansar Allah movement in Yemen are examples of the above-mentioned groups.

#### **5.4. Power-seeking and subversive groups**

The absence of a powerful and dominant central government in countries afflicted with various problems sets the stage for the emergence of groups that promise a better future. Using their organizational power, financial resources, and social media advertisements, many of these organizations attempt to question the legitimacy and efficiency of the government. They justify disobeying the central government under the pretext of the government's inability to administrate justice among citizens, especially in political units with various identity, ethnic, lingual, racial, gaps, and therefore drive others and themselves toward civil, political, and eventually military disobedience. These groups

normally take action in absolute political disturbance, when the central government lacks efficiency and legitimacy, making use of their organizational and financial resources as well as their military power to subvert and control the government. As a result, such groups may be considered political opportunists that confront the central power when it has lost its ability to manage affairs, using any tool and opportunity to subvert the state.

Although these militarized political organizations enjoy an acceptable level of power, they doubtless need to attract the assistance of other political units and to seek powerful supporters beyond their borders, since subverting a government is followed by short-term and long-term side effects, and causes serious fluctuations and malfunctions in the security system of the region. The vast needs of these groups while subverting governments leaves them dependent on extensive support, and a firm bond is inevitably formed between the two sides as they aim for the central government subversion. In such circumstances and in the absence of original views and ideologies and the presence of power-seeking inclinations, these organizations are at times lowered to the level of a hired military contractor, taking on a dependent, non-national, anti-governmental role. In addition, a second scenario could take place based on common theoretical origins between the subversive group and the third party country. In this scenario, the third party country supports its coreligionists and defends their rights, assisting the group against the weak and collapsing central government according to its national goals and based on common resources and common theoretical basis. Both of these methods are only effective when the central government is immensely weak and the military power of the group is beyond the total dominant power. People's Mujahedin of Iran is an example of the first category, while Yemen's Ansar Allah movement falls under the second one.

## 6. The indices of a powerful government

A quick review of the security situation in Western Asia reveals the considerable number of NSAGs in the region (Cordesman, 2017). The study of the conditions of the states in the region indicates that the growth, organization, and proliferation of these groups took place when the central governments were facing crucial crises and had lost their ability to expand their control over the borderlines or even over considerable parts of the country. Various causes eventually give rise to such circumstances; however, all cannot be discussed in such brief space. Still, what commonly took place in countries with similar statuses included the government's collapse or lack of legitimacy, as well as serious issues or weaknesses in using naked power and legal violence, and in exercising national sovereignty. Iraq's central government has lacked the necessary power to control the Iraqi Kurdistan in the last four decades. This government collapsed in its excessive weakness after the UN sanctions and the United States' attack, causing the most prominent NSAGs to form in the region. Syria suffered from a similar situation. NSAGs did not exist as long as a powerful central government existed, and the country was not on the verge of collapse, nor was it experiencing crisis in this regard. The growth and formation of NSAGs became possible only when the central government swayed in its dominance/control of the country.

As demonstrated in the table above, Iran is a successful example of crisis control and appropriate management for maintaining cohesion and national sovereignty in Western Asia. The Islamic revolution and the collapse of the Pahlavi Dynasty provided the background for the emergence of NSAGs with opportunists' centrifugal or subversive tendencies. During the first two years after the revolution, the country faced various crises, civil war, as well as the rise of separatist tendencies in different parts, which

caused significant insecurity and instability in the absence of a powerful central government. Armed separatists in Kurdistan sought independence. Similar cases had become active in Torkaman Sahra and Khuzestan. In the central part of Iran, the two armed groups of Iranian People's Fadaian (Majority) and People's Mujahedin challenged the central government, declaring armed conflict. Moreover, the country was facing foreign invasion by Iraq, who supported all the above groups. The deployment of a powerful government, the enhancement of social cohesion and enjoying utmost legitimacy, did not leave a space for these groups and the above-mentioned problems were either solved or transferred to the outside of borders in less than a decade.

As mentioned earlier, the absence of a powerful central government is considered as one of the most important causes of the emergence of NSAGs in Western Asia. Considering the information presented in the countries' fragility table, one could notice the role of powerful states in decreasing crises and reducing the number of non-state armed players. A powerful central government has the ability to minimize the range of various crises of legitimacy, efficiency, and centrifugality, and to pave the path for the highest level of unity among groups. It can decrease or terminate the groups' dependence on external power states, manage crises, accept and manage different interests of groups, prevent the growth of centrifugal forces and persuade them toward unity and convergence under a specific national identity. It has the ability to produce ideologies and redefine legitimacy foundations, making use of its minimum legitimacy. In addition, its other principal goal is to enhance its legitimacy, to prevent the connection of NSAGs with outside of borders and to attempt to decrease such connections. Furthermore, a powerful state has the possibility to minimize transnational interventions in internal affairs, to produce

laws and to assure their application, to consider it a principle to apply exclusive power while using military authority, to identify and minimize political and military blind spots. Moreover, an authoritative central government has the ability to expand its territory to the borderlines, and to eliminate political and military differences between the center and the surroundings, to minimize chaos. Finally, among its most important missions is to prevent the emergence and proliferation of NSAGs in critical circumstances, and to pursue with determination the process of making these groups move from the military phase to the political phase. This list is not exhaustive; other conditions could be added to this list based on the specific sociopolitical exigencies of particular incidences.

The aim of this article is not to present the characteristics of a powerful government and its way of confronting NSAGs, nor would it be possible to provide a comprehensive definition of the features and performances of powerful central governments in such a short space. By mentioning the above indices, we meant to indicate that the absence of a government with these characteristics provides the background for the growth and proliferation of arms-based centrifugal groups. The most important option for establishing permanent security and stability in Western Asia is establishing a powerful central government and enforcing it in a way that it can separate the insecurity that is inserted in the existence of NSAGs from military actions through a continuous, complicated, expensive and time-consuming process. Once this objective is fulfilled, governments can gradually turn any opposing concerns and issues into a political subject that can be pursued in the realm of politics. No doubt, the only way out of the dead-end and paradox of insecurity, chaos, and NSAGs development, is a powerful state, which enjoys the fewest number of the characteristics mentioned above.

## 7. Conclusion

This article investigated the concept of NSAG and dealt with the causes of its emergence and proliferation in Western Asia. For this purpose, fragile states were first defined in an attempt to demonstrate a direct relationship between the emergence of these groups and the fragile versus powerful situations of the region's states. The hypothesis of the article was validated through various examples of active groups in crisis-stricken regions, emphasizing the fact that these groups grow and proliferate in the absence of powerful central governments. In addition, in the case of Iran, it was stated that according to the indicators presented by valid organizations, Iran has proved to own a powerful central government among crisis-producing countries with a considerable number of NSAGs. Iran has been successful in applying sovereignty and has been able to bring stable security to its citizens and remove the danger of opposing groups or else transfer it to outside of borders.

A powerful central government stems from a powerful and cohesive society. Moreover, there are times when a legitimate and powerful government can return peace and security to a divided society that has undergone severe tensions. Disconnected or divided societies with multiple identities and various deep gaps can only experience permanent security, peace, and happiness when there is an appropriate and powerful management. A powerful government has the ability to partly defend the rights of all communities with common political lobbying and prevent greater dangers toward macro security and the violation of national sovereignty. The continuance of such crises at national levels, the prolongation of this process, and the absence of a powerful central government provide the background for the abuse and interference



of neighboring political units and the security environment members, lengthening the crisis and multiplying the risk of the country being divided and the crisis being deepened.

The most crucial solution for removing insecurity and guaranteeing permanent security in the region lies in using the model of an authoritative government. Without a doubt, many of the states dealing with this issue are weak, broke, or on the verge of collapse. The global community and the powerful countries of the region must strengthen state-building and assist in the process of enhancing the power of the central government within the framework of the law and on the basis of the principles, values, and norms of international relations, in order to guarantee the security of citizens and the stability and permanence of regional security.

Directing NSAGs from the military to the political arena is a difficult, fragile, expensive, and time-consuming process. Much patience is required to provide legal legitimacy and produce a mechanism for their joining the political process, upon which the groups would agree. The transformation of warlords and forcing them to obey the law on the one hand, and preventing the central government from being caught into the previously-experienced dictatorships under the pretext of providing security for the citizens and the necessity of law execution on the other hand, allow for a two-way success.

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