Nonprofit and Civil Society Studies
An International Multidisciplinary Series

Moosa Elayah *Editor*

Governance without Government in the MENA Region

State, Non-State Actors and Evolving Paradigms

OPEN ACCESS

Springer

Nonprofit and Civil Society Studies

An International Multidisciplinary Series

Editor-in-Chief

Inés Pousadela, CIVICUS, Montevideo, Uruguay

Series Editors

Andrea Bassi, Political and Social Sciences, University of Bologna, Bologna, Italy

Ingrid Srinath, Co-impact, Mumbai, Maharashtra, India

Initiated by Helmut Anheier in 1999, the Nonprofit and Civil Society Series is a first and unique publication space dedicated to interdisciplinary studies of the third-sector and global promotion of this research field. Published in cooperation with the International Society for Third-Sector Research (ISTR), the Series publishes books of interest to a wide-ranging audience of researchers, advanced students, policymakers, and practitioners in this international area of study and practice.

The Series welcomes manuscripts by scholars from all relevant academic disciplines, including sociology, political science, economics, history, human geography, development studies, cultural studies and more. Books that focus on in-depth case studies or apply comparative and quantitative methods are all valued. Topics are open while preferences are given to the scholarship with theoretical innovation, challenging case evidence, imminent social impact, interdisciplinary edge, and/or cross-sectoral collaboration.

Authors are strongly encouraged to get in touch with the editors directly to get more information about how to publish into the Series. Queries regarding the submission process may also be directed to the Springer publishing editor.

Moosa Elayah
Editor

Governance without Government in the MENA Region

State, Non-State Actors and Evolving Paradigms

Springer

Editor
Moosa Elayah
Associate Professor of Public Administration
Doha Institute for Graduate Studies
Doha, Qatar

ISSN 1568-2579
Nonprofit and Civil Society Studies
ISBN 978-3-032-03952-1 ISBN 978-3-032-03953-8 (eBook)
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-03953-8

This work was supported by Qatar National Library and Doha Institute for Graduate Studies.

© The Editor(s) (if applicable) and The Author(s) 2026. This book is an open access publication.

Open Access This book is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.
The images or other third party material in this book are included in the book's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the book's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.
The use of general descriptive names, registered names, trademarks, service marks, etc. in this publication does not imply, even in the absence of a specific statement, that such names are exempt from the relevant protective laws and regulations and therefore free for general use.
The publisher, the authors and the editors are safe to assume that the advice and information in this book are believed to be true and accurate at the date of publication. Neither the publisher nor the authors or the editors give a warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the material contained herein or for any errors or omissions that may have been made. The publisher remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

This Springer imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

If disposing of this product, please recycle the paper.

"Protracted conflicts have disastrous effects on public policy and public service provision. This book dedicates much needed attention to the governance of public policy in conflict areas and especially to the role of non-state actors. Building on empirical exploration of the role NGOs have played in conflict regions in the Middle East and Africa, the book presents valuable lessons and proceeds to offer a theoretical reflection on the role of non-state actors in peacebuilding. Thus, this book provides an invaluable resource for policy makers, researchers, and practitioners seeking to address the challenges of post-conflict policy making."

—Antoaneta L. Dimitrova, Professor of Comparative Governance, Institute of Security and Global Affairs, Leiden University

"'Governance without Government' offers a compelling exploration of novel policy challenges in the MENA region. I endorse this groundbreaking work as a vital guide for comprehending and shaping the future of governance in an ever-changing landscape.

A must-read for those seeking a deeper understanding of the region's complexities."
—Rahel M. Schomaker is a distinguished professor of economics and public administration, holding positions at Carinthia University of Applied Sciences and the German University of Administrative Sciences.

"I enthusiastically endorse 'Governance without Government.' This thought-provoking book not only captures the essence of policy challenges in the MENA region but also serves as an indispensable guide for envisioning a sustainable future. A compelling exploration that sheds light on the complexities of governance in this dynamic landscape."
—Cristina D'Alessandro is a Research Associate Professor specializing in governance, urban planning, and environmental governance at the University of Ottawa and PRODIG Research Centre.

"I wholeheartedly endorse 'Governance without Government.' In this groundbreaking book, I find a profound exploration of novel policy challenges in the MENA region. Addressing post-2011 issues, this work lays a strong foundation for sustainable progress. 'Governance without Government' is a must-read for anyone seeking valuable insights into the ever-evolving dynamics of governance in the Middle East and North Africa."
—Hiam Elgousi is a Research Associate Professor and a passionate advocate for gender equality and women's rights, with an impressive career spanning advocacy, research, and academia at UN Women.

Preface

Embark on an intellectual journey through the pages of "Governance without Government," a collaborative scholarly effort aimed at illuminating the intricate tapestry of governance in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Departing from conventional narratives primarily focused on conflicts and geopolitics, this book represents a distinctive contribution to academic discourse. Crafted through collective scholarly endeavors, it seeks to fill a significant gap in existing literature by delving into public policy issues post-major conflicts, with a particular emphasis on the ongoing conflicts in MENA, notably the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This intellectual endeavor transcends conventional analyses, providing a nuanced exploration of governance dynamics in the aftermath of conflicts. By shedding light on public policy issues, the book aspires to significantly contribute to the scholarly landscape, offering fresh perspectives and insights for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners navigating the challenges of governance in post-conflict MENA. As you navigate through the chapters, a wealth of insights drawn from diverse countries across the MENA region awaits you. Unlike traditional works in the field, this book places a deliberate emphasis on the aftermath of conflicts, providing a nuanced understanding of governance dynamics during these transformative periods. Each meticulously curated chapter offers a specialized and focused exploration, presenting a clear, coherent, and compelling narrative.

Tailored for the intellectual appetites of upper-level undergraduates, postgraduates, and researchers specializing in politics, international relations, and political economy within the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, this book transcends its specific academic niche. With an interdisciplinary and international appeal, it extends its relevance to a broader audience. The overarching goal is to enrich reading lists globally, fostering a deeper and more nuanced understanding of governance complexities in these vital regions. By offering diverse perspectives and insights, the book strives to be a valuable resource for academics, students, and practitioners seeking comprehensive knowledge about governance dynamics in the MENA region.

What sets this book apart is its originality and composition, standing as a testament to a decade of evolution since the Arab Spring. The fusion of empirical and theoretical approaches enhances its value, making it an indispensable resource for policy-oriented graduate students, researchers, and professionals deeply engaged in or focusing on the MENA region and Africa. The chapters in this volume do more than present information; they break new ground, both conceptually and empirically. In doing so, they offer not only a snapshot of case studies but also a wellspring of policy-relevant concepts and ideas. Addressing the enduring issues post-2011, the book lays a foundation for these regions to progress toward a more sustainable future.

As you delve into "Governance without Government," consider it not just as a book but as a guide. A guide for comprehending and shaping the future of governance within the ever-changing landscape of the MENA region.

Doha, Qatar Moosa Elayah
November 13, 2024

Contents

About the Contributors

Elie Abouaoun is a senior scholar and practitioner specializing in peacebuilding, humanitarian affairs, philanthropy, and human rights across the MENA region. With more than two decades of experience, he has contributed to research and policy development in conflict-affected contexts, supporting civil-society governance and stabilization processes. Elie is an Associate Member of the Canadian Association of Management Consultants and continues to engage in research and advisory work on peace processes, conflict mediation, and humanitarian governance.

Abubakr Ahmed is a master's student in Public Administration at the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies. He co-authored the chapter *Empowering Communities for Development in a Fragility Situation: A Study of Community-Based Initiatives in Sudan*.

Rashed Al Jayousi is a doctoral candidate in Management at Tohoku University. He earned a BA in Economics with a minor in Human Rights and International Law from Al-Quds Bard College and an MSc in Finance and Economic Development from the University of Glasgow. His research focuses on development, civil society, governance, and donor aid. He authored the chapter *Trapped in Governance Dilemmas: Civil Society Organizations in Conflict Areas—Insights from Palestine*.

Rawan Al-Mansori is a master's student in Public Administration at the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies. She co-authored the chapter *Humanitarian Aid Partnerships in Yemen's Conflict: Understanding the Relationship Between the United Nations and Local Non-Governmental Organizations in Humanitarian Endeavors*.

Hamid E. Ali is an Associate Professor of Peacebuilding and Conflict Studies at the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies, where he was previously the Dean of the School of Public Administration and Development Economics. He holds an M.Sc. in Economics and a Ph.D. in Economics and Public Policy from the University of

Texas at Austin. He co-authored the chapter *Empowering Communities for Development in a Fragility Situation: A Study of Community-Based Initiatives in Sudan*.

Moosa Elayah is an Associate Professor of Public Administration at the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies in Qatar. His research focuses on governance in fragile and conflict-affected states, the development of the third sector in the Gulf, humanitarian policy, and the political economy of war, with a particular emphasis on Yemen and the wider MENA region. He has published scholarly work in peer-reviewed journals, contributed to multiple edited volumes, and led national and regional research projects on state capacity, civil society, philanthropy, digital governance, and public policy reform. In addition to his academic career, Moosa is actively engaged in policy advisory and capacity-building initiatives with government bodies, civil organizations, and international research networks.

Molly Gallagher is a Project Specialist at the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) in Tunisia. She previously worked as a Research Assistant at USIP Headquarters in Washington, D.C. She holds a Bachelor's degree in International Relations with a minor in Arabic Language from American University. She co-authored the chapter *Armed Non-State Actors in Lebanon and Libya: A Comparative Analysis*.

Ali Bakir Hamoudi is a researcher with expertise in human rights and social service approaches in conflict regions. He authored the chapter *Civil Society Organizations' Social Service Approaches in Iraq: Examining the Role of Human Rights*.

Husam Ibrahim is a Ph.D. researcher in Global Public Policy at Fudan University, Shanghai, and a lecturer at the University of Khartoum. He holds a Master's degree in Public Administration from the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies. His academic interests focus on multi-level governance reform and public management development in the Arab regional context. His latest research examines the trajectory toward decentralization in post-war Sudan, highlighting both structural constraints and strategic opportunities.

Riham Ahmed Khafagy is an Assistant Professor at the College of Humanities and Social Science, Zayed University, UAE, and an Advanced Higher Education Fellow. She received her Ph.D. from the Faculty of Economics and Political Science at Cairo University. Her work focuses on civil society, non-state actors, and philanthropic foundations. She authored the chapter *Claiming Sovereignty and Cultivating Legitimacy of Non-State Actors in the MENA Region: Theoretical Insights*.

David Mednicoff is a professor with a research focus on third-sector engagement in contested spaces and state-non-state actor dynamics. He authored the chapter *Syrian Refugee Governance at the Intersection of Non-state and State Actors: Lessons for Third-sector Engagement in Contested Spaces of the MENA*.

Husam Mohammed is a Ph.D. researcher in Global Public Policy at Fudan University and a researcher at the Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies in Doha, Qatar. His work focuses on governance transitions, institutional reform, and administrative structures in Sudan. He has served as a lecturer at the University of Khartoum and worked as a consultant in feasibility studies, environmental policy, and development planning. His research interests include post-conflict recovery, state restructuring, and public sector transformation in the Arab region.

Dina Ramadan is the Co-founder and CEO of the AlSalam Institute for Women's Studies (SWS). She has been a CWFL Fellow at the Institute of Global Engagement and a Chevening Visiting Fellow at the University of Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies. Dina conducts research in English and Arabic on diverse political and social issues. She authored the chapter *The Role of Emerging Local Think Tanks During Conflict: A Case Study of Syrian Diaspora Think Tanks*.

Noureddine Selmi is a researcher specializing in state governance and conflict resolution in Libya. He authored the chapter *Libya: The Path from State Absence to the Long-Awaited Government*.

Houssine Soussi is an Associate Professor at the National School of Business and Management, Ibn Zohr University, Morocco. He serves as Vice President of the African Business and Entrepreneurship Research Society (ABERS) and chairs the International Conference on Entrepreneurship, Creativity, and Innovation Management. His expertise includes communication, public administration, public policies, entrepreneurship, innovation, peace, and conflict studies. He contributed the chapter *Dynamics of Activism and Governance in Tindouf Refugee Camps: The Emergence of New Political Actors*.

Akiko Yoshioka is a Senior Analyst at the JIME Center—Institute of Energy Economics, Japan. Her research interests include contemporary Iraqi politics, the Iraqi Kurdistan Region, and fragile state governance. She holds a Ph.D. in Public Affairs from Chiba University. She authored the chapter *Hybrid Governance with Armed Non-State Actors in a Fragile State: The Case of Iraq and The Kurdistan Region*.

Faouzia Zeraoulia is a scholar focusing on peacebuilding and civil society organizations in conflict zones. She authored the chapter *Civil Society Organizations and Peacebuilding in Libya: Reality and Challenges*.

Chapter 1
Introduction

Moosa Elayah

Abstract This chapter provides the conceptual and theoretical foundation for the book *Governance Without Government in the MENA Region*, focusing on the evolving governance landscapes in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. It introduces key frameworks such as hybrid governance, non-state actor (NSA) legitimacy, and "governance without government," offering a lens to understand authority beyond the state in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and parts of Africa. Through a detailed analysis of historical, socio-political, and institutional transformations—especially in the wake of the Arab Spring—the chapter argues for a multidimensional approach to governance. It explores how non-state actors, including armed groups, civil society organizations, think tanks, and tribal networks, negotiate authority, deliver services, and influence policy in contested spaces. The chapter advances the notion of governscapes and introduces a novel legitimacy framework comprising rightful occupancy, basic justice, and collective self-determination. By bridging empirical case studies with theoretical innovations, this foundational chapter sets the stage for understanding governance as a pluralistic, adaptive, and negotiated process in the absence or fragmentation of formal state structures.

Keywords Hybrid governance · Non-State Actors (NSAs) · Governance without government · Fragile states · Conflict-affected regions · MENA · Service delivery · Grassroots governance · Authoritarianism · Civil society · Public policy · Decentralization · Institutional collapse

M. Elayah (✉)
Public Administration, Doha Institute for Graduate Studies, Doha, Qatar
e-mail: moosa.elayah@dohainstitute.edu.qa

© The Author(s) 2026

M. Elayah (ed.), *Governance without Government in the MENA Region*,
Nonprofit and Civil Society Studies,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-03953-8_1

1.1 Contextual Background

This introduction lays the conceptual groundwork for the book, focusing on hybrid governance, the legitimacy of non-state actors (NSAs), and the concept of governance without government as central frameworks to analyze authority, power-sharing, and governance in fragile states. These concepts help frame the analysis throughout the volume and are especially relevant for understanding the evolving governance dynamics in conflict-affected areas of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Governance in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and parts of Africa remains a critical issue shaped by historical, socio-political, and economic complexities. The region's governance dynamics are heavily influenced by colonial legacies, resource dependency, and entrenched socio-political divisions (Koch, 2020). Over time, these factors have interacted with recurring conflicts, authoritarian regimes, and weak state institutions, creating persistent governance challenges. The Arab Spring of 2010–2011 catalyzed unprecedented socio-political upheaval in the MENA region, sparking demands for democracy, accountability, and social justice (Bishara, 2019; 2023). While some states, such as Tunisia, embarked on tentative paths toward democratization (Alaoui, 2022), others descended into protracted conflicts, as witnessed in Syria, Yemen, and Libya. These developments underscored the fragility of existing governance structures and the limitations of traditional state-centric models in addressing the complex realities of the region (Amirah-Fernández & Moufti, 2022).

One of the key governance issues in the MENA region is the prevalence of hybrid and fragmented governance systems (Ali, 2024), where state and non-state actors (NSAs) coexist, compete, and collaborate (Ahram, 2020). This dynamic has been particularly evident in conflict zones, where state institutions have weakened or collapsed, creating power vacuums filled by a variety of actors, including armed groups, civil society organizations (CSOs), and international bodies. These actors often assume governance roles, providing services, maintaining order, and influencing policy in areas where state authority is limited (Elayah & Lambert, 2023). The concept of "governance without government" is central to understanding these dynamics. Coined to describe governance arrangements that transcend traditional state-centric frameworks, it emphasizes the role of nonhierarchical and decentralized governance mechanisms in managing societal affairs (El-Affendi, 2011). This approach is particularly relevant in the MENA region, where governance often involves negotiations among a diverse array of stakeholders with competing interests and goals. The socio-political landscape of the MENA region is further complicated by factors such as sectarianism, tribalism, and the interplay between local and global forces. The region has experienced significant external interventions, both military and economic, which have shaped governance trajectories and exacerbated existing tensions (Ehteshami, Rasheed, & Beaujouan, 2020). At the same time, the region faces pressing developmental challenges, including high youth unemployment, gender inequality, and the impact of climate change on livelihoods (Mason, 2021).

This book aims to address these complex issues by examining the roles of state and non-state actors in navigating governance challenges in the MENA and African regions. Through a combination of theoretical exploration and empirical case studies, it seeks to shed light on the multifaceted dynamics of governance in contested and fragile settings. In focusing on the intersections of conflict, governance, and public policy, the book provides a nuanced understanding of how different actors shape governance outcomes and contribute to stability and development. In particular, the book delves into several key dimensions of governance in the MENA and African regions. It explores *hybrid governance and legitimacy*, highlighting the coexistence of state and non-state actors and examining how legitimacy is negotiated and sustained within these dynamics. It also addresses *conflict and humanitarian challenges*, focusing on the impact of conflict on governance structures and the critical role of humanitarian actors in addressing governance deficits. Furthermore, the book investigates the role of *civil society and grassroots movements*, emphasizing the contributions of civil society organizations (CSOs) and grassroots initiatives to governance and public service delivery. Lastly, it examines *the role of international actors*, analyzing how international organizations, foreign aid, and external interventions shape governance dynamics. This comprehensive approach underscores the necessity of innovative, inclusive, and adaptive governance models to address the unique challenges facing these regions. In integrating diverse disciplinary insights and perspectives, the book aims to enhance understanding of governance in complex environments while offering practical pathways to foster resilience and stability.

1.2 Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This book builds on several foundational concepts to explore governance dynamics in contested, fragile, and post-conflict spaces, particularly within the MENA and African regions. These theoretical pillars provide a comprehensive framework for analyzing the interactions between state and non-state actors (NSAs), the adaptation of governance structures, and the complexities of authority and legitimacy in challenging socio-political contexts. In defining and elaborating these concepts, the framework offers a nuanced understanding of governance processes and situates the book's contributions within broader theoretical debates.

The concept of governance without government, introduced by Rosenau (1992), fundamentally challenges the traditional state-centric understanding of governance. Instead of framing governance as a linear and hierarchical process dominated by state authority, this approach redefines it as a decentralized and dynamic process involving a multitude of stakeholders (Head, 2022). In fragile and conflict-affected contexts, the absence or weakness of centralized state authority necessitates alternative mechanisms of governance. These mechanisms often emerge through negotiated relationships among NSAs, international organizations, and local communities (Hili, 2024). The relevance of this concept is particularly acute in the MENA region, where governance vacuums created by the collapse of state institutions have been filled by diverse actors (Kamel, Ed., 2017). For instance, in Syria, Yemen, and Libya, armed groups have assumed responsibilities for law enforcement and territorial control, while CSOs and international organizations have stepped in to deliver essential services (Ahram, 2020). These governance arrangements underscore the adaptability of nontraditional actors in assuming governance roles and highlight the capacity of local and international networks to address immediate needs in the absence of a functioning state.

Governance without government also reflects the negotiation of authority in fragile contexts. Power is distributed across a spectrum of actors, each with varying degrees of legitimacy, resources, and capacity (Börzel & Risse, 2021). For example, religious institutions in parts of the MENA region often play critical roles in community mobilization and moral leadership, influencing public opinion and governance strategies (Walton & Aslam, 2024). Similarly, tribal networks in Yemen have historically functioned as governance structures, providing dispute resolution and security in regions where state reach is limited (Elayah & Lambert, 2024). This theoretical framework provides lens for analyzing governance as a fluid and evolving process. It acknowledges the inherent complexity and pluralism of governance in contested spaces and offers insights into the innovative and adaptive strategies that emerge in the face of political fragmentation and institutional collapse.

One such foundational concept is governscapes, which refers to the layered, dynamic, and intersecting arenas of governance where both formal and informal actors operate simultaneously. In contrast to conventional models that treat governance as a static, state-centered process, *governscapes* recognize that power, authority, and decision-making are dispersed across multiple actors and levels (Choueiri, 2022). This framework captures the complex interplay between state institutions, armed groups, tribal and religious networks, civil society organizations, and international actors, all of whom exert influence within fragmented or contested political spaces. Governscapes are especially relevant in regions like the MENA, where governance is not monopolized by the state but emerges from overlapping claims to legitimacy, competing ideologies, and negotiated power arrangements. By conceptualizing governance through this lens, the book provides a more realistic and context-sensitive understanding of how authority is exercised, challenged, and transformed in settings marked by conflict, fragmentation, and institutional weakness.

Non-state actors are integral to governance in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. Broadly defined, NSAs include entities that operate outside formal state mechanisms but play significant roles in shaping governance, public policy, and societal outcomes (Bisong, 2022). These actors encompass a wide spectrum, ranging from CSOs, grassroots movements, and think tanks to armed groups, religious organizations, and international agencies (Muraya, 2023). Their involvement in governance is often multifaceted, encompassing service delivery, advocacy, and conflict mediation and even exercising authority in certain domains (Al Jayousi, 2024). In the MENA region, NSAs have been particularly influential in addressing governance deficits created by weakened or failing states. CSOs, for example, have stepped in to provide essential services, including healthcare, education, and humanitarian aid, particularly in conflict zones (Costantini & Donelli, 2022). These organizations have also been at the forefront of advocating for human rights, gender equality, and social justice, often challenging entrenched power structures and promoting inclusive governance (Choueiri, 2022). While NSAs often address critical governance gaps, their expanding authority raises important ethical concerns. Legitimizing sovereignty claims of NSAs—especially those of armed groups—can inadvertently entrench parallel power structures, challenge national unity, and complicate future state-building efforts. Questions of accountability, representativeness, and long-term stability are central to evaluating their legitimacy.

Similarly, think tanks and research institutions in the region have contributed to governance by fostering dialogue among stakeholders, offering evidence-based policy recommendations, and facilitating knowledge-sharing across sectors (Kasak et al., 2023). For instance, Syrian diaspora think tanks have played a crucial role in shaping narratives around reconstruction and transitional governance, offering alternative frameworks for addressing the country's protracted crisis (Bhatnagar, 2020). However, the roles of NSAs are not without challenges and contradictions. The legitimacy and accountability of these actors are often contested, particularly when their activities intersect with the interests of powerful local or international stakeholders (Dehnavi et al., 2024). For example, armed groups that provide security in conflict zones may gain localized legitimacy but face criticism for undermining state authority and perpetuating cycles of violence (Amirah-Fernández & Moufti, 2022). Similarly, CSOs and international NGOs often grapple with the dual pressures of meeting donor expectations while remaining responsive to the needs of local communities (Elayah, et al., 2025). The diversity of NSAs and their varying impacts on governance highlight the complexity of their roles in fragile contexts (El-Affendi, 2011). While they often act as vital complements to state institutions, their activities also raise critical questions about the sustainability and inclusivity of governance arrangements in the long term (Dehnavi et al., 2024).

Hybrid governance is a concept that encapsulates the coexistence, collaboration, and competition between state and non-state actors in managing societal affairs (Motadi & Sikhwari, 2024). This model recognizes that governance is rarely monopolized by the state, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected regions. Instead, it emerges as a negotiated and adaptive process involving diverse actors with overlapping and sometimes conflicting interests (Paalo, 2021). The MENA region offers compelling examples of hybrid governance. In Iraq, the central government shares authority with regional entities and armed non-state actors, resulting in a complex and fluid political order (Moheimany, 2021). This arrangement reflects both the challenges and opportunities of hybrid governance, where power-sharing mechanisms can foster stability but also create tensions and inefficiencies (Furness & Trautner, 2020). In Sudan, informal networks and community-based organizations have stepped in to fill governance gaps, demonstrating the potential for grassroots actors to complement formal state institutions in service delivery and conflict resolution (Elayah & Lambert, 2024).

Hybrid governance also provides a framework for understanding the dynamic and context-specific nature of governance arrangements. It emphasizes the interplay between formal and informal structures, highlighting how actors negotiate power, legitimacy, and resources in response to shifting political and socio-economic conditions (Charountaki, 2022). For instance, in Libya, the hybrid governance model is shaped by the coexistence of local councils, tribal authorities, and international actors, each contributing to governance in distinct but interrelated ways (Ahram, 2020). One of the key insights offered by the hybrid governance framework is its emphasis on adaptability (Anholt, 2022). In fragile and conflict-affected contexts, governance structures are often in flux, responding to changes in the balance of power, resource availability, and societal needs (Elayah & Alzandani, Eds. 2024). This adaptability is both a strength and a challenge, as it allows governance systems to evolve in response to local conditions but also introduces unpredictability and potential instability. In examining this hybrid governance, the book highlights the innovative and often unconventional arrangements that emerge in the absence of strong state authority (Bakreski, & Miovska 2024). It also underscores the importance of understanding governance as a pluralistic and negotiated process, shaped by the interactions of diverse actors operating at multiple levels (Perera, D. 2022).

Among the key conceptual contributions of this book are three interrelated criteria for evaluating the legitimacy of non-state governance: rightful occupancy, basic justice, and collective self-determination. These concepts are relatively new and serve as innovative tools to understand how non-state actors claim, exercise, and justify authority in the absence—or collapse—of formal state structures. Rather than treating legitimacy as a binary or abstract notion, these criteria allow for a more grounded, context-sensitive assessment of governance in fragile settings. Rightful occupancy refers to the capacity of an actor to establish and maintain a credible presence over a specific territory or population, often grounded in historical claims, social recognition, or the ability to maintain order. Basic justice reflects an actor's ability to provide essential public goods—such as security, healthcare, education, or dispute resolution—that meet the minimum standards of fairness, dignity, and human welfare. Collective self-determination refers to the extent to which governance reflects the will, identity, and aspirations of the governed community, allowing for inclusive participation and self-governance. These are not merely theoretical benchmarks; they are tested and illustrated throughout the book in diverse empirical settings. For example, Chap. 3 examines how Kurdish authorities in Iraq assert *rightful occupancy* by drawing on historical legitimacy and sustained territorial control. Chapter 5 highlights the practice of *basic justice* through community-based initiatives in Sudan, where grassroots actors deliver vital services in contexts of state withdrawal. Chapter 11 explores the dynamics of *collective self-determination* in the Tindouf refugee camps, where new political actors emerge from within displaced populations to articulate governance structures aligned with communal identity and aspirations. Taken together, these concepts provide a robust analytical framework for understanding how legitimacy is claimed and practiced beyond the bounds of the nation-state.

The book bridges theoretical and empirical perspectives by weaving together conceptual insights with real-world governance dynamics in fragile, contested, and post-conflict contexts. By systematically defining and analyzing foundational concepts—such as governance without government, non-state actors (NSAs), and hybrid governance—the book provides a robust framework that not only guides its chapters but also contributes to broader discussions on governance, state-building, and conflict resolution. Governance, particularly in the MENA and African regions, is an evolving and multifaceted process. The theoretical foundation presented in this book emphasizes the interplay of diverse actors, interests, and socio-political contexts that shape governance dynamics in regions marked by state fragility and conflict (Motadi, & Sikhwari, 2024). These concepts are not merely abstract but are deeply connected to empirical realities, illustrating the challenges and innovations that arise in the governance landscape. One of the key strengths of this book lies in its ability to connect theoretical constructs to empirical observations. For instance, the concept of governance without government moves beyond traditional state-centric approaches to consider decentralized and adaptive governance processes. This shift is not purely theoretical—it reflects real-world scenarios where formal state institutions are absent or ineffective, as seen in countries like Libya, Yemen, and Syria. In these contexts, the book examines how governance vacuums are addressed by a variety of actors, including local communities, armed groups, and international organizations, each bringing their own capacities, challenges, and perspectives to the table (Ahram, 2020). The empirical case studies in the book, drawn from the MENA and African regions, serve as critical touchpoints for validating and refining theoretical ideas. For instance, the role of NSAs in providing essential services, maintaining security, and fostering resilience during prolonged conflicts illustrates the practical implications of the theoretical discussion on hybrid governance (Greenberg, 2021). In examining specific contexts and actors, the book enriches its theoretical framework with grounded insights that resonate with policymakers, practitioners, and academics.

The book's framework highlights the inherently multifaceted nature of governance, particularly in regions experiencing socio-political fragmentation and resource scarcity. Governance is portrayed not as a linear or monolithic process but as a dynamic interplay of state and non-state actors operating across various levels (Chenoweth & Lawrence, 2010). This complexity is vividly illustrated in the case studies, which explore how governance is negotiated and contested in fragile states. For example, the interplay between state institutions and NSAs in Iraq demonstrates the fluid and contested nature of governance, where authority is often shared, overlapping, or in direct competition. Similarly, in Sudan, community-based organizations and informal networks complement state efforts in service delivery and conflict resolution, showcasing the collaborative potential within hybrid governance models (Elayah & Lambert, 2024). These empirical cases validate the theoretical assertion that governance in fragile contexts is both adaptive and decentralized, driven by the need to respond to immediate societal challenges.

The book's theoretical foundation underscores the potential of adaptive and inclusive governance models to address the unique challenges of fragile and conflict-affected states. The concept of governance without government, for instance, illustrates how decentralized governance arrangements can foster resilience and stability in the absence of centralized state authority. Empirical evidence from the book's chapters further demonstrates how these adaptive models emerge, evolve, and operate in practice. In the MENA region, adaptive governance is exemplified by the roles of grassroots movements and CSOs in bridging gaps left by weakened state institutions. These actors not only deliver essential services but also create spaces for dialogue, advocacy, and community engagement, highlighting the potential for inclusive governance to address societal inequalities and marginalization (Choueiri, 2022). Similarly, hybrid governance models in countries like Iraq and Libya showcase how diverse actors can collaborate to maintain order and provide public goods, even amidst political instability and resource constraints (Furness & Trautner, 2020).

In bridging theory and practice, the book offers valuable insights for multiple audiences. For policymakers, the framework provides a nuanced understanding of governance challenges and opportunities in fragile states, emphasizing the need for context-specific and inclusive approaches. For researchers, the integration of theoretical and empirical perspectives opens avenues for further exploration of governance dynamics, particularly in regions where traditional governance models have failed. Practitioners, including development professionals and civil society leaders, can draw on the book's insights to design interventions that leverage the strengths of NSAs and hybrid governance arrangements while addressing their limitations. The book's emphasis on linking theory to practice also facilitates a deeper understanding of governance as a shared responsibility. By highlighting the contributions and challenges of various actors, the book underscores the importance of collaboration, negotiation, and adaptability in building governance systems that are resilient, legitimate, and effective. In systematically bridging theoretical and empirical perspectives, the book enriches the discourse on governance in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. It provides a comprehensive lens for understanding the complexities of governance dynamics, offering a blend of conceptual clarity and practical relevance. This approach not only sets the stage for the detailed analyses in subsequent chapters but also contributes to broader governance debates, highlighting the importance of adaptive, inclusive, and collaborative models in addressing the unique challenges of the MENA and African regions.

1.3 Regional Overview

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is a mosaic of cultural richness and political complexity, shaped by millennia of history, diverse societies, and a persistent interplay of stability and upheaval (Ehlers & Amirpur 2021). The post-Arab Spring era, beginning in late 2010, has unveiled both the resilience and vulnerabilities of governance structures across the region (Stel, 2014). The uprisings ignited demands for reform, justice, and dignity, yet they also exposed and, in some cases, exacerbated deep-seated issues related to governance, state legitimacy, and institutional capacity. This period has also seen the rise of non-state actors (NSAs) as key players, often stepping into governance roles traditionally held by state institutions (Ntaka, & Csicsmann, 2021).

Governance in the MENA region has been marked by several interrelated challenges, many of which have their roots in long-standing socio-political and economic dynamics. The Arab Spring served as a catalyst for change, revealing both the potential for transformation and the entrenched barriers to effective governance (Elayah & Lambert, 2024). The MENA region has been profoundly affected by prolonged and often devastating conflicts in countries like Syria, Yemen, and Libya. These conflicts have dismantled state institutions, fragmented societies, and created governance vacuums (Hinnebusch, 2024). In Syria, for instance, the central government's loss of control over significant territories allowed a multitude of actors, including armed groups, local councils, and international organizations, to assume governance roles (Ahram, 2020). Similarly, Yemen's protracted civil war has given rise to a patchwork of governance structures controlled by competing factions, each asserting authority in different regions (Furness & Trautner, 2020). These conflicts have not only disrupted traditional governance but have also created opportunities for alternative authority structures to emerge. Armed groups, tribal councils, and grassroots movements have stepped in to fill the void, often providing basic services, enforcing order, and mediating disputes. While these actors address immediate needs, their presence raises questions about long-term stability, legitimacy, and the prospects for rebuilding cohesive state institutions (Elayah & Lambert, 2024).

The MENA region's governance landscape is further complicated by deep sociopolitical fragmentation. Ethnic, religious, and ideological divides often intersect with political and economic inequalities, creating a volatile environment for governance (Ardemagni & Saini Fasanotti, 2022). For instance, the sectarian divide between Sunni and Shia communities has fueled conflicts in Iraq, Bahrain, and Yemen, while ethnic tensions between Arabs, Kurds, and other groups have complicated governance in countries like Iraq and Syria (Ehteshami & Beaujouan, 2020). These divisions are not merely internal but are often exacerbated by regional and international interventions. Rivalries between regional powers, such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, have turned local conflicts into proxy wars, further undermining governance and stability (Cellino & Perteghella, 2020). The result is a governance landscape characterized by competing authorities, contested legitimacy, and a lack of cohesive national identities. Inclusive and adaptive governance approaches are essential to address these divides and foster long-term reconciliation and stability. The MENA region is home to some of the world's most severe humanitarian crises, driven by conflict, displacement, and economic instability (Anderson & Shannon, 2021). According to the United Nations, millions of people in the region require urgent humanitarian assistance, including food, shelter, healthcare, and education. The Syrian civil war alone has displaced over 12 million people, both internally and as refugees in neighboring countries, creating immense pressures on host communities and international aid systems (Amirah-Fernández & Moufti, 2022).

In Yemen, the world's worst humanitarian crisis has unfolded, with widespread famine, disease outbreaks, and a collapsing healthcare system. The conflict has disrupted traditional governance mechanisms, leaving local and international non-state actors to shoulder much of the burden of humanitarian response (Maxwell & Hailey, 2021). Similarly, Libya's ongoing instability has left significant portions of the population without access to basic services, requiring coordinated efforts from state institutions, NSAs, and international organizations (Abubakar& Wapmuk, 2021). The scale and complexity of these crises underscore the need for innovative governance solutions. Non-state actors, including civil society organizations (CSOs), international NGOs, and grassroots movements, have played critical roles in addressing these emergencies (Elayah & Verkoren, 2020). Their involvement highlights the importance of governance without government as a framework for understanding and addressing the region's humanitarian challenges (Elkahlout, 2022).

Amid these challenges, NSAs have emerged as pivotal players in the governance landscape of the MENA region. Their roles extend beyond service delivery to include advocacy, conflict mediation, and capacity building. In many cases, they have proven more effective than state institutions in responding to crises, fostering community resilience, and addressing the needs of marginalized populations (Choueiri, 2022). For example, think tanks and research institutions have contributed to policy debates and capacity building, offering evidence-based solutions to governance challenges (Bhatnagar, 2020). Religious institutions and grassroots movements have mobilized communities, providing a sense of stability and purpose in times of uncertainty. Meanwhile, international organizations have brought resources and technical expertise to support governance and humanitarian efforts, though their interventions are not without controversy (Pourmokhtari, 2023). The involvement of NSAs also raises important questions about legitimacy and accountability. While these actors often fill critical gaps, their activities may lack oversight and coordination, leading to inefficiencies and power imbalances. Understanding the complex roles of NSAs is essential for developing governance models that are both inclusive and sustainable.

The challenges outlined above underscore several key themes that are central to the book's analysis of governance in the MENA region. These include:

- Decentralization and Adaptability: The need for governance models that can adapt to the realities of fragmented authority and limited state capacity.
- Legitimacy and Accountability: The importance of ensuring that governance actors, whether state or non-state, are perceived as legitimate and are held accountable for their actions.
- Collaboration and Innovation: The potential for collaborative approaches that leverage the strengths of diverse actors, from local communities to international organizations.

The MENA region's governance landscape is a complex and evolving tapestry shaped by conflict, fragmentation, and resilience. The challenges of conflict dynamics, socio-political divides, and humanitarian crises require innovative and inclusive approaches to governance. This regional overview provides a critical foundation for understanding the themes and case studies explored in this book. By focusing on governance without government and the roles of NSAs, the book seeks to illuminate pathways for addressing the region's most pressing challenges and fostering long-term stability and development.

1.4 Themes and Structure of the Book

This book provides a nuanced exploration of governance dynamics in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and African regions, focusing on the roles and strategies of non-state actors (NSAs). Structured into two interconnected sections, it delves into theoretical foundations and empirical case studies, creating a cohesive narrative that links key concepts, challenges, and innovations in governance. The chapters are carefully arranged to reflect the interplay between governance frameworks, NSAs, and socio-political contexts, providing valuable insights for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners. Part I lays the groundwork by introducing the concepts of hybrid governance, legitimacy, and the roles of NSAs in conflict-affected and post-conflict regions. It focuses on the mechanisms through which governance emerges in fragile environments, setting the stage for deeper analysis in Part II. Part II builds on these foundations, shifting the focus to how NSAs establish legitimacy and influence governance frameworks. By linking theoretical and empirical perspectives, the book captures the dynamic evolution of governance in contested spaces.

1.5 Part I: Dynamics of Governance, Conflict, and Humanitarianism.

The first section establishes the analytical framework for understanding governance in conflict-affected regions, focusing on how NSAs interact with state institutions and international actors to navigate governance vacuums. *Chapter 2: Claiming Sovereignty and Cultivating Legitimacy of Non-State Actors in the MENA Region: Theoretical Insights* (Riham Ahmed Khafagy)This chapter introduces the theoretical underpinnings of NSA legitimacy and sovereignty. It examines how NSAs navigate contested spaces, asserting authority through social, political, and territorial claims. By grounding the analysis in theoretical perspectives and regional case studies, it provides a foundation for understanding the dynamics explored in subsequent chapters. Building on this theoretical lens, *Chap. 3: Hybrid Governance with Armed Non-State Actors in a Fragile State: The Case of Iraq and The Kurdistan Region* (Akiko Yoshioka) explores the practical manifestations of hybrid governance. This chapter highlights the coexistence of state and non-state authorities in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region, showcasing how governance is negotiated in fragmented political landscapes. The interplay of formal and informal power structures outlined here complements the theoretical insights of Chap. 2. Expanding the discussion to the intellectual dimensions of governance, *Chap. 4: The Role of Emerging Local Think Tanks During Conflict: A Case Study of Syrian Diaspora Think Tanks* (Dina Ramadan) focuses on the contributions of Syrian diaspora think tanks. These organizations influence governance by shaping narratives, advocating for policy reforms, and offering evidence-based recommendations. Their role demonstrates how NSAs can impact governance beyond traditional service delivery, building on the hybrid and legitimacy themes of Chaps. 2 and 3.

Shifting the focus to grassroots governance, *Chap. 5: Empowering Communities for Development in a Fragility Situation: A Study of Community-Based Initiatives in Sudan* (Moosa Elayah, Abubakr Ahmed, Hamid Ali, Husam Mohammed) examines community-based initiatives (CBI) CBIs[1] provide essential services and foster social cohesion in the absence of effective state institutions. This chapter ties into the broader themes of NSA adaptability and resilience discussed earlier in the section. The final chapter in this part, *Chap. 6: Humanitarian Aid Partnerships in Yemen's Conflict: Understanding the Relationship Between the United Nations and Local Non-Governmental Organizations in Humanitarian Endeavors* (Moosa Elayah and Rawan Al-Mansori), bridges the discussion of governance and legitimacy. It explores the complexities of UN-local NGO partnerships, highlighting how collaboration enhances governance in humanitarian crises. This chapter sets the stage for Part II by emphasizing the importance of legitimacy and cooperative governance.

1.6 Part II: Non-state Actors and Legitimacy in Governance.

The second section deepens the analysis by focusing on how NSAs establish legitimacy and influence governance frameworks. By examining their contributions to stability, peacebuilding, and innovation, this section complements the foundational themes introduced in Part I. *Chapter 7: Syrian Refugee Governance at the Intersection of Non-state and State Actors: Lessons for Third-Sector Engagement in Contested Spaces of the MENA* (David Mednicoff) builds on the humanitarian themes of Chap. 6. It examines how third-sector organizations govern Syrian refugees, filling gaps left by weakened state institutions. This chapter expands the discussion of NSA roles by addressing the governance challenges of displacement and crisis management. Focusing on Lebanon and Libya, *Chap. 8: Armed Non-State Actors in Lebanon and Libya: A Comparative Analysis* (Elie Abouaoun, Molly Gallagher) explores the governance and security roles of armed NSAs. It provides comparative insights into their strategies for gaining legitimacy, linking to the hybrid governance frameworks discussed in Part I. Building on the Libyan context, *Chap. 9: Libya: The Path from State Absence to the Long-Awaited Government* (Noureddine Selmi) delves into the challenges of rebuilding governance structures in the post-Gaddafi era. It examines socio-political fragmentation and institutional

[1] A Community-Bally rooted, collective action undertaken by members of a community to address shared needs, challenges, or aspirations, often in contexts where state institutions or formal organizations are absent, weak, or distrusted. CBIs are typically participatory, rely on indigenous knowledge and local resources, and can take diverse forms such as service delivery, conflict mediation, livelihood support, or social mobilization. They play a crucial role in fostering resilience, strengthening social capital, and creating pathways for community empowerment and sustainable development (Elayah et al., 2024).

weaknesses, connecting these issues to the broader themes of legitimacy and inclusivity introduced earlier. *Chapter 10: Civil Society Organizations and Peacebuilding in Libya: Reality and Challenges* (Faouzia Zeraoulia) highlights the contributions of CSOs to reconciliation and development in Libya. This chapter ties into discussions of grassroots governance in Sudan (Chap. 5) and humanitarian partnerships in Yemen (Chap. 6), emphasizing the role of local actors in promoting peace and stability.

In *Chap. 11: Dynamics of Activism and Governance in Tindouf Refugee Camps: The Emergence of New Political Actors* (Houssine Soussi), the focus shifts to grassroots initiatives in the Tindouf refugee camps. This chapter explores how alternative governance models emerge in response to political vacuums, linking these developments to broader discussions of NSA legitimacy and adaptability. *Chapter 12: Trapped in Governance Dilemmas: Civil Society Organizations in Conflict Areas—Insights from Palestine* (Rashed Al Jayousi) explores the governance challenges faced by Palestinian CSOs. It highlights issues such as donor dependency and internal power dynamics, tying these themes to the broader discussions of NSA roles and governance frameworks. Finally, *Chap. 13: Civil Society Organizations' Social Service Approaches in Iraq: Examining the Role of Human Rights* (Ali Bakir Hamoudi) examines the intersection of human rights and CSO strategies in Iraq. This chapter ties into the themes of inclusivity and governance innovation, rounding out the book's discussion of NSA contributions to governance.

The book concludes with Chap. 14: Conclusion (Moosa Elayah), synthesizing the key themes and insights. It reiterates the importance of hybrid governance, NSA legitimacy, and the need for inclusive, context-specific strategies. By bridging theoretical foundations with practical applications, this book offers a comprehensive framework for understanding governance in fragile and contested spaces, providing a roadmap for future research and policy development.

1.7 Book's Contributions

The primary objective of this book is to deepen the understanding of governance in contested and fragile spaces, particularly within the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and African regions. Through a focused exploration of the roles of non-state actors (NSAs), the book seeks to contribute to theoretical, empirical, and policy discourses, offering a comprehensive analysis of governance challenges and opportunities in conflict-affected settings. Its contributions are framed around theoretical innovation, empirical exploration, and practical relevance. At the theoretical level, the book develops and refines frameworks that address the dynamics of governance in contexts where state authority is absent or weakened. Central to this endeavor are the concepts of "governance without government" and "hybrid governance," which provide a robust foundation for analyzing governance structures in contested spaces. By systematically defining and expanding upon these concepts, the book moves beyond traditional state-centric perspectives, instead emphasizing the decentralized and multi-actor nature of governance. This theoretical groundwork highlights the interplay between state and non-state actors and explores how governance models evolve in conflict zones through negotiation, collaboration, and adaptation. These insights aim to fill gaps in existing scholarship by presenting governance as a dynamic and context-specific process.

Empirically, the book offers a rich array of case studies that illuminate the diverse roles and strategies of NSAs in governance. Drawing from contexts such as Iraq, Sudan, Syria, Libya, and Yemen, these case studies provide grounded analyses of how NSAs contribute to public service delivery, conflict resolution, and the rebuilding of institutional frameworks. In Sudan, for instance, community-based initiatives demonstrate the capacity of grassroots organizations to address public service deficits where state institutions are absent or ineffective. In Libya and Lebanon, the coexistence and interaction between armed non-state actors and formal institutions reveal the complexities of hybrid governance. Similarly, in Syria, diaspora think tanks illustrate how intellectual and policy-oriented NSAs influence governance narratives during conflict, while in Yemen, partnerships between the United Nations and local NGOs highlight collaborative governance efforts to address humanitarian crises. These case studies not only validate the theoretical concepts presented but also provide a nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities associated with governance in contested spaces. They offer a unique lens into how governance dynamics unfold in specific contexts, shedding light on the practicalities of addressing fragility, conflict, and socio-political fragmentation.

The book also makes a significant contribution to policy discussions by offering actionable insights for fostering stability and effective governance in fragile and conflict-affected regions. By bridging theoretical analysis with empirical evidence, it provides a resource for policymakers, international organizations, and practitioners involved in governance, development, and peacebuilding. The book underscores the importance of designing inclusive and adaptive governance models that accommodate the diverse needs and perspectives of local communities. It advocates for strategies to enhance the legitimacy and accountability of NSAs and emphasizes the need for collaborative frameworks that foster partnerships between state and non-state actors. A key strength of this book is its ability to bridge theory and practice. In integrating theoretical and empirical perspectives, it addresses a critical gap in existing literature, which often separates conceptual analyses from practical applications. The case studies and thematic chapters are grounded in real-world governance dynamics while remaining anchored in robust theoretical frameworks. This interdisciplinary approach ensures that the book serves as both a scholarly resource and a practical guide, facilitating a deeper understanding of governance in fragile contexts for academics, policymakers, and practitioners alike.

Overall, this book advances the discourse on governance in contested spaces by offering theoretical innovations, empirical richness, and policy relevance. It invites readers to engage critically with the complexities of governance and to explore adaptive, inclusive, and collaborative governance models. In doing so, the book not only enhances academic and policy discussions but also contributes to the development of strategies for promoting stability, resilience, and sustainable development in regions marked by conflict and socio-political upheaval.

References

Abubakar, D., & Wapmuk, S. (2021). Libya: The proliferation of small arms post-Gaddafi. In *The Palgrave handbook of small arms and conflicts in Africa* (pp. 739–759). Palgrave.

Ahram, A. I. (2020). Hybrid security, frozen conflicts, and peace in MENA. *MENA's Frozen Conflicts,* 10–14.

Al Jayousi, R. N. R. (2024) Beyond NGOization in conflict: From institutionalization to informalization in palestinian civil society (Doctoral dissertation, Tohoku University).

Alaoui, H. (2022). *Pacted democracy in the Middle East: Tunisia and Egypt in comparative perspective*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Ali, H. E. (2024). Governance and global collaboration in non-democratic countries. *Public Administration Review, 85*(4), 1038–1069.

Amirah-Fernández, H., & Moufti, S. (2022). Scenario two: Fragile states and non-state actors. In *NATO and the south: A tale of three futures* (pp. 28–35). IOS Press.

Anderson, L., & Shannon, V. (2021). *Federal solutions for fragile states in the Middle East: Right-sizing internal borders*. World Scientific.

Anholt, R. M. (2022). *Governing (in) security and the politics of resilience: The politics, policy, and practice of building resilience in fragile and conflict-affected contexts*. Vrije Universiteit.

Ardemagni, E., & Saini Fasanotti, F. (2022). *From warlords to statelords: Armed groups and power trajectories in Libya and Yemen*.

Bakreski, O., & Miovska, L. B. (2024). The position and role of state and non-state actors in the 21st century. *Security Dialogues, 15*(1), 35–49.

Bhatnagar, S. (2020). *India's Pakistan policy: How think tanks are shaping foreign relations*. Taylor & Francis.

Bishara, A. (2019). Remarks on external factors in democratic transition. *AlMuntaqa, 2*(2), 40–60.

Bishara, A. (2023). Political culture: General remarks. *Tabayyun, 12*(45), 9–35.

Bisong, A. (2022). Invented, invited, and instrumentalised spaces: Conceptualising non-state actor engagement in regional migration governance in West Africa. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 48*(12), 2945–2963.

Börzel, T. A., & Risse, T. (2021). *Effective governance under anarchy: Institutions, legitimacy, and social trust in areas of limited statehood*. Cambridge University Press.

Cellino, A., & Perteghella, A. (2020). *Conflicts, pandemics, and peacebuilding: New perspectives on security sector reform in the MENA region*. Ledizioni.

Charountaki, M. (2022). Conceptualising non-state actors in international relations. In *Mapping non-state actors in international relations* (pp. 1–16). Springer International Publishing.

Chenoweth, E., & Lawrence, A. (2010). *Rethinking violence: States and non-state actors in conflict*. MIT Press.

Choueiri, Y. M. (2022). *Narratives of Arab secularism: Politics, feminism, and religion*. Taylor & Francis.

Costantini, I., & Donelli, F. (2022). Sponsor-proxy dynamics between decentered multipolarity and non-state actors: Evidence from the MENA region. *Small Wars & Insurgencies,* 1–23.

Dehnavi, E. A., Niafar, M. M., & Ahmadzada, K. (2024). An overview regarding the US domestic economic strategies: Role of think tanks. *Development (IJHED), 6*(5), 26–28.

Ehlers, E., & Amirpur, K. (2021). The MENA region: Climate, culture, and conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa. In *Middle East and North Africa* (pp. 1–36). Brill.

Ehteshami, A., Rasheed, A., & Beaujouan, J. (2020). Islam, IS and the fragmented state: The challenges of political Islam in the MENA region. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429280047

El-Affendi, A. (2011). Political culture and the crisis of democracy in the Arab world. *Democracy in the Arab World: Explaining the Deficit, 27*, 11.

Elayah, M., Al-Awami, H., Al-Qobati, E., & Schulpen, L. (2025). Financial sustainability and influence dynamics in Yemen's conflict-affected NGO landscape: Unveiling 'Sheikh' organizations. *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, 1–14.

Elayah, M., Al-Sameai, N., Khodr, H., & Gamar, S. (2024). Community-based initiatives and public services delivery in a fragile context: The case of Yemen. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly, 53*(1), 5–28. P3.

Elayah, M., & Alzandani, B. (2024). *Conflicts in the Middle East and Africa: State, non-state actors and unheard voices*. Taylor & Francis.

Elayah, M., & Verkoren, W. (2020). Civil society during war: The case of Yemen. *Peacebuilding, 8*(4), 476–498.

Elayah, M. A., & Lambert, L. A. (Eds.). (2024). *Conflict and post-conflict governance in the Middle East and Africa*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Elkahlout, G., Milton, S., Yaseen, T., & Raweh, E. (2022). Localisation of humanitarian action in war-torn countries: The experience of local NGOs in Yemen. *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction, 75*, 102921.

Furness, M., & Trautner, B. (2020). Reconstituting social contracts in conflict-affected MENA countries: Whither Iraq and Libya? *World Development, 135*, 105085.

Greenberg, M. A. (2021). Not seeing like a state: Mandated reporting, state-adjacent actors, and the production of illegible subjects. *Social Problems, 68*(4), 870–885.

Head, B. W. (2022). *Wicked problems in public policy: Understanding and responding to complex challenges*. Springer Nature.

Hili, M. (2024). Investigating engagements between international police agencies and non-state actors in peace and stability operations (Doctoral dissertation, RMIT University Australia).

Hinnebusch, R. (2024). Understanding state weakness in the Middle East and North Africa. *Emerging Democracies, 55.*

Kamel, L. (Ed.). (2017). *The frailty of authority: Borders, non-state actors and power vacuums in a changing Middle East*. Edizioni Nuova Cultura.

Kassak, K., Mourad, Y., Nameh, N., Baroud, M., & Soufan, Z. (2023). *Overview of knowledge ecosystems on forced displacement in the Middle East: Examples from Lebanon and Jordan*.

Koch, C. (2020). *The evolution of the regional security complex in the MENA region* (pp. 19–39). Springer International Publishing.

Mason, R. (Ed.). (2021). *New perspectives on Middle East politics: Economy, society, and international relations*. American University in Cairo Press.

Maxwell, D., & Hailey, P. (2021). Analysing famine: The politics of information and analysis in food security crises. *Journal of Humanitarian Affairs, 3*(1), 16–27.

Moheimany, M. (2021). *NGOs, policy networks and political opportunities in hybrid regimes*. Springer Singapore.

Motadi, M. S., & Sikhwari, T. (2024). Understanding hybridity governance in Africa: A theoretical framework for hybrid structures, policies, and practices. *International Journal of Business Ecosystem & Strategy, 6*(4), 122–136.

Muraya, K. (2023). Exploring eastern Africa's landscape: A scoping study on an independent civil society-UN counter-terrorism engagement mechanism. *African Journal of Empirical Research, 4*(2), 157–168.

Ntaka, B., & Csicsmann, L. (2021). Non-state armed groups and state-building in the Arab region: The case of post-Gaddafi Libya. *South African Journal of International Affairs, 28*(4), 629–649.

Paalo, S. A. (2021). A systemic understanding of hybrid peace: An examination of hybrid political orders in African peace governance. *African Conflict & Peacebuilding Review, 11*(1), 1–31.
Perera, D. R. (2022). *States, non-state actors, and the imposition of restrictions on NGOs* (Doctoral dissertation, UCL).
Pourmokhtari, N. (2023). How applicable are leading mainstream social movement theories to the MENA region? *The myth of Middle East exceptionalism: Unfinished social movements,* 71.
Rosenau, J. N. (1992). *Governance without government: Order and change in world politics*. Cambridge University Press.
Stel, N. (2014). Governance and government in the Arab spring hybridity: Reflections from Lebanon. *Contemporary Readings in Law and Social Justice, 6*(1), 49–69.
Walton, O., & Aslam, G. (2024). Challenging and reinforcing the status quo: Services, civil society and conflict in the MENA region. World Development, 181, 106685. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2024.106685

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

Part I
Dynamics of Governance, Conflict, and Humanitarianism: Exploring Non-State Actors in the MENA Region

Chapter 2
Claiming Sovereignty and Cultivating Legitimacy: Theoretical Insights on ANSAs' Politics in the MENA Region

Riham Ahmed Khafagy

Abstract This chapter explores the evolving dynamics of sovereignty and legitimacy among Armed Non-State Actors (ANSAs) in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), challenging the dominant state-centric international order. Using Ann Stilz's theory of "territorial sovereignty"—which requires rightful occupancy, basic justice, and collective self-determination—as a normative benchmark, the chapter evaluates the governance claims of MENA ANSAs such as Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houthis, and Kurdish actors. Complementing this with Stepputat's framework of "emerging governscapes," it categorizes ANSAs into red, brown, and grey zones based on their interactions with national state structures. The analysis reveals that many ANSAs exercise substantial political authority and can claim limited sovereignty due to their capacity to uphold essential governance functions and cultivate internal legitimacy. Drawing on empirical cases, the chapter argues for a reconceptualization of sovereignty in fragile contexts, emphasizing the need for indigenous understandings of governance, particularly in postcolonial, conflict-ridden societies. It concludes by calling for a more inclusive international legal and political framework that acknowledges ANSAs as de facto political entities in contemporary global order.

Keywords Sovereignty · Legitimacy · MENA region · Territorial sovereignty · Failed states · Emerging governscapes · Armed Non-State Actors (ANSA) · Non-State Actor (NSA)

R. A. Khafagy (✉)
College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Zayed University, Dubai, UAE
e-mail: Riham.Khafagy@zu.ac.ae

© The Author(s) 2026

M. Elayah (ed.), *Governance without Government in the MENA Region*, Nonprofit and Civil Society Studies,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-03953-8_2

2.1 Introduction

Several regions experienced significant governance transformations due to the rise of armed non-state actors (ANSAs). They emerged as critical players in areas where weak state institutions fail to deliver essential services or maintain security. By confronting traditional state authority, ANSAs redefine governance in fragile and conflict-affected areas. Accordingly, theoretical debates sparked to revisit the current state-centric international order and analyze the politics of ANSAs in various disputed zones. Offering a moral justification for the state-centric order, Ann Stilz developed the concept of "territorial sovereignty," endorsing states' legitimacy based on upholding the rights of occupancy, basic justice, and collective self-determination (Stilz, 2019). Contrarily, other scholars claimed limited sovereign features to Armed Non-State Actors (ANSAs) by articulating meaningful concepts such as "emerging governscapes" (Stepputat, 2018) and "governance without government" (Menkhaus, 2006; Raeymaekers et al., 2008).

Debating Ann Stilz's "territorial sovereignty" framework, this chapter investigates whether ANSAs in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region could claim sovereignty and legitimacy due to their de facto political influence and actions. I explore their compatibility with Stilz's criteria of rightful occupancy, basic justice, and collective self-determination exclusively assumed for states. Focusing on Stepputat's colorful governance classification, the chapter also applies governance theories and utilizes emerging concepts to contextualize ANSAs' governance in their fragile states. Historically, the Westphalian state-centric system was established to guarantee states' territorial sovereignty and authority as the sole organized political unit. Max Weber relevantly suggested traditions, charisma, or legal–rationality as appropriate sources for legitimacy. Since the early twenty-first century, these settings have increasingly been challenged by cosmopolitan theories or other geographically limited modes of governance developed by non-state actors (NSAs), such as militia, indigenous communities, or tribes (Ochoa, 2021). Expanding power beyond states' borders or claiming it partially within both redefines the concept of sovereignty and related legitimate practices.

Emerging critical governance concepts assume sovereign practices of ANSAs within their national territories; examples from African, Asian, and Latin American countries confirm these arguments and reveal their states' delicate authority. ANSAs' motivations, limitations, and forms vary from one case to another but share similar contexts. Weak or failed states that cannot fulfill their citizens' basic moral and material needs implicitly invite other powerful actors to accomplish these missions. Fragile states and capable ANSAs could be observed in the MENA region. They challenge Stilz's standardization of states' sovereignty criteria (Stilz, 2019) and, instead, shape indigenous understandings of sovereignty and sources of legitimacy.

In this chapter, I seek to contribute to the theoretical debate examining ANSAs" growing roles in protracted crises. Considering MENA's practices, I highlight the main characteristics of the state-centric order from proponents" and opponents" perspectives and develop a homegrown interpretation of sovereignty and legitimacy. Initially, I elaborate on various theoretical models of ANSAs' governance in their controlled territories before analyzing their politics, considering Stepputat's colorful governance classification and Stilz's concept of "territorial sovereignty." Then, I explore their designed mechanisms for cultivating legitimacy as a necessary condition to facilitate their present governance and secure future sustainability.

Despite not being internationally recognized, I argue that MENA ANSAs exercise substantial features of political authority and governance over their controlled territories. Thus, they could claim limited sovereignty based on Stilz's theory due to fulfilling the three core values required for legitimate "territorial sovereignty." They practically acquire occupancy rights, handle basic justice, and apply collective self-determination. Meanwhile, their persistent path to establish domestic legitimacy through various moral and material mechanisms is carefully observed.

Therefore, the chapter is divided into four parts. The first evaluates ANSAs as "territorial sovereign actors," studying different theoretical insights before devoting the second part to classifying MENA ANSAs according to their interactions with the national state's institutions. The third part explores the possibility of claiming sovereignty for these ANSAs based on Stilz's sovereignty core values. Finally, the fourth part explains MENA ANSAs' efforts to establish domestic legitimacy through shaping a social order, achieving security, and providing public services for their communities. The conclusion addresses the importance of developing indigenous understandings of sovereignty and legitimacy in non-Western societies.

2.2 Firstly: Sovereignty Dilemma…States vs ANSA

The contemporary international order recognizes states as the only possible political sovereign units. Built upon the development of the European experiences, this order hardly addresses the degree of "state-ness" that various political units enjoy in other regions (Bhuta, 2015). Furthermore, protracted conflicts usually challenge the state's sovereignty and might increasingly favor other dynamic political players, such as community leaders, militia, businesspeople, or armed groups. The scale of states' lost sovereignty and ANSAs' gained influence varies depending on their accumulated material power and moral assets. The following discussion theoretically addresses ANSA's claimed sovereign practices before reflecting on MENA cases.

2.2.1 Fragmented Sovereignty…Causes and Consequences

Sovereignty refers to the state's ability to regulate people"s lives in its territories, enjoy the right to nonintervention in domestic affairs from foreign actors, and control its borders and resources. States with defined territories, inhabited population, and unified government are considered fully sovereign units (Lansing, 1913; Thomson, 1995; Onwe & Nwogbaga, 2015; Stilz, 2019). By examining these rights in other historical forms of governance, such as tribes or empires, Stilz concludes that none can holistically claim sovereign rights as much as the modern state (Stilz, 2019). It might be argued that modern Western nation-states were authorized to adopt such an ideal mode of sovereignty. However, weak or failed states in protracted conflicts could hardly claim it, as other political actors increasingly dispute sovereign features with official institutions (Mohamedou, 2020).

Stilz developed the concept of "territorial sovereignty" to decisively associate this power with states' institutions based on upholding three core principles: rightful occupancy, basic justice, and collective self-determination. Rightful occupancy refers to a community's legitimate claim to inhabit a specific territory. Basic justice requires establishing functional legal and social systems to protect rights and duties. Collective self-determination ensures that governance reflects the shared will of the governed society (Stilz, 2019, 2021).

Analyzing non-Western cases, Finn Stepputat (2018) differentiates between three kinds of "emerging governscapes" dynamics in which influential ANSAs partially share weak states exercising domestic sovereignty. The first governscape is shaped in the "red area," developed through competing and conflicting processes between states and other political actors on sovereignty. Despite being done mainly by violence, Stepputat argues that ideological and pragmatic methods could also be utilized to obtain legitimacy among targeted populations. Red areas primarily arose following revolutions, military coups, or armed struggles. Claiming domestic sovereignty in this case is a zero-sum game between national regimes and disputing ANSAs, which might eventually seek international acknowledgement or recognition.

Second, governscape dynamics are executed in "brown areas" where states can hardly exercise power due to limited reach and effectiveness. Thus, states formally or informally outsource their authority to other effective private powers. Finally, when states' authorities marginalize urban settlements and ignore their necessary social services and safety, "grey spaces" are developed there. Accordingly, local leaders or criminal organizations implement security arrangements in these areas to offer protection and services to populations. State institutions accept these arrangements de facto (Stepputat, 2018). In the brown and grey areas, sovereignty was shared through the state's and non-state actors' mutual will, although this is an act of necessity for the former.

Unlike Stilz's state, which appropriately upholds its functions and enjoys its rights, various non-Western cases express close connections to Stepputat's "emerging governscapes." The latter accurately explains dysfunctional, disputed, weak, or withdrawn states that had to abandon some of their responsibilities to local ANSA. These states can no longer exclusively assume full sovereignty, while practically other political actors could claim a sovereign share.

The process of state-building in non-Western regions has significantly endorsed the existence of other forms of social contracts (Barakat, 1993; Mohamedou, 2020), which eventually shaped Stepputat's "brown" and "grey" areas. The existence of robust traditional tribal systems, or sectarian divisions, alongside the formation of post-colonial institutionally fragile states, promoted various levels of authority outsourcing in these regions. For example, in the Middle East and North Africa, few countries could dominantly control their disputed borders, fulfill their domestic functions, and claim full sovereignty (Ayubi, 1995). In contrast, some MENA authoritarian regimes had to partially delegate their influence to local leaders or groups within a patrimonial model to secure the latter's loyalty (Al-Dawsari, 2012; Mugahed, 2022). Without democratic mechanisms, "consensual" sharing of domestic sovereignty has secured the sustainability and stability of ruling regimes. Interestingly, these regimes have never tolerated the development of any "red" zones, in which their tamed sovereignty could comprehensively be disputed.

2.2.2 Moral Sovereignty…Validity of Justification

In parallel to the power of enforcement, states should also rely on a moral justification that explains their emergence as the most convenient and acceptable form of governance. In this regard, Stilz highlights states' rightful occupancy, preservation of basic justice, and representation of the collective self-determination (Stilz, 2019; 2021). Nevertheless, she admits that most contemporary states do not enjoy a clean history regarding these three core values. Stilz refers to colonization practices, enforced displacement, and cultural homogenization. Still, in her view, a ruling regime with limited territorial legitimacy is the only method to provide appropriate governance to inhibited occupants. Examples of similar regimes include colonial forces, humanitarian intervention coalitions, or minimally just states (Stilz, 2019). This moral contradiction could theoretically claim internal sovereignty for any political structure rather than the state that can control the authority and enforce its rules. Therefore, various scholars examined Stilz's theory and questioned its validity.

Moral Justification…Cores and Critics

Ann Stilz discusses states' moral justification throughout their divergent phases. Initially, the geographical prerequisite of occupancy should be acceptable, stating the concept of "rightful occupancy," which she defines as:

> Allowing people to use specific geographical places to realize the social, economic, and cultural practices they care about free from interference, as long as they do not encroach on others' reciprocal rights to do likewise (Stilz, 2019, p. 10).

Accordingly, a newly established state assumes a distinctive territorial sphere for people, entitles them to limited "property-like" rights, and benefits from international protection by securing the right to noninterference. This establishes the state's geographical exclusiveness. Then, founding a functional legal system and enforcement institutions reflects the state's ability to protect the "basic justice." Its sole right to decide and interpret domestically adopted laws is another form of the state's exclusiveness. While the right of occupancy sets geographical borders toward outsiders, the basic justice draws the limits of domestic rights (Stilz, 2019).

Representing people's collective self-determination is the cornerstone of the state's moral justification. The rightful occupants shared will pave the way for establishing a social order, in which they would be committed to specific political values and procedures. Local governments formulate the agreed value system in relevant functional structures. Residents believe that adopted values and implemented procedures reflect their aspirations and serve their interests. So, they accept and obey related laws and regulations, even though a minority of residents might still disagree with a few of these laws and norms (Stilz, 2019, 2021). Per Stilz, this path reflects individuals' "autonomy," as people enjoy their independence in setting, revising, and implementing their life plans according to their beliefs and ideas. Comprehensive autonomy covers stable geographical location, official protection, and the process by which political institutions are developed to respect independent choices (Stilz, 2021). It is argued that such autonomy could hardly be reached except through the state's governance.

Stilz's moral justification for the state-centric order is increasingly criticized for various aspects. Alejandra Mancilla rejects assumptions about people's stable life plans as rightful occupants as globalization growingly endorses occupants' "dynamic" life plans that connect them to several places (Mancilla, 2020). Widening the occupancy scope, Margaret Moore stresses that historical claims of indigenous people should be promoted as a group-based merit alongside individuals' right of residency (Moore, 2020). Stilz endorsed Moore's comment to, in turn, prove the rightful occupancy for immigrants and newly settled groups in modern states alongside maintaining indigenous group-based historical claims (Stilz, 2020), an explanation that practically legitimized colonial settlements' occupancy with an ambiguous understanding of the indigenous groups' rightful occupancy. However, it could interestingly validate the rightful occupancy of foreign combatants, who are widely active in MENA ANSAs as elaborated in the following parts.

Consistent with the chapter's argument, Pauline Ochao Espejo invites other forms of political organizations, such as militias or tribes, on board. They could construct different workable social contracts that are not different from the state's (Ochoa, 2021). Ochao Espejo and others refer to various non-Western examples in which "states" could not uphold their functions and values, so other forms of governance have been formed (Ochoa, 2021; Menkhaus, 2006; Raeymaekers et al., 2008; Stepputat, 2018). MENA ANSAs developed similar forms of governance, practically bypassing national regimes' sovereignty, utilizing the latter's dysfunctionality and weakness. For example, between 2014 and 2017, the Islamic State for Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), a radical transnational group, controlled one-third of the Syrian territories, which was more than the Assad regime's governed regions at that time (Timeline: The Rise, Spread, and Fall of the Islamic State, 2019).

Questioning the state's protection of basic justice, Arthur Hill addresses the critical situation of alienated groups suffering injustice but still willing to affirm their political participation, conditional on the state's consideration of their grievances (Hill, 2020). Lacking convenient representative mechanisms, and the large scope of political and economic marginalization in the MENA region (Human Development Report 2021–2022) significantly motivates resistance and unrest that encourage the establishment of ANSA. Therefore, Cara Nine argues that all members of society might not necessarily accept the state's founded social order as it could be restrictive or discriminatory for some rightful occupants (Nine, 2020). In her response, Stilz recommends establishing decentralized pluralist structures to enhance minorities and immigrants' political autonomy and facilitate their practice of the right of self-determination (Stilz, 2020). A suggestion that stimulates discussions to investigate existing MENA structures and their limitation in expanding influence and exercising sovereign rights to counter the state's fundamental discrimination and harsh responses.

2.3 Secondly: MENA ANSAs and National States…Colors of "Emerging Governscapes"

The historically engineered formation of MENA states slowed their pace to develop consensual political institutions. Colonial allocation of the right of occupancy to certain influential elites or groups went alongside assigning restrictive self-determination rights to local occupants. Limited efforts were exerted to create consensus on the adopted social order. Focusing on eight cases, Nazih Ayubi argued that Arab states mainly operated coercively and through clientelism to consolidate domestic power (Ayubi, 1995). Successful use of these means has qualified Arab states to claim full sovereignty and assume their moral justification, regardless of the effectiveness of established political institutions or their legitimizing value system.

However, since the Arab Spring in 2011, states have witnessed a considerable deterioration in their clientelism strategies due to financial difficulties alongside critical security challenges (Kitchen, 2012; Sly, 2021). The peaceful protests of the Arab Spring were met with brutal responses in some countries, which triggered militant reactions from local opposition groups. Conceptually, non-state actors (NSAs) run independently from any central government in terms of their funding or control and usually are ideologically/ethnically driven, and some of them operate across borders of more than one state (Durac, 2015; Baybars-Hawks, 2018). They might oppose local regimes but rarely clash with official political institutions or conduct hostile activities against them. Contrarily, ANSAs resist national ruling regimes and engage in militant conflicts against them. Durac investigated their incentives in Libya, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. They flourished in failed states that could not provide basic social services and security for residents, while exercising massive coercion toward them and marginalizing certain social groups (Durac, 2015).

Finn Stepputat (2018) red zones quickly appeared in Syria and Libya as several ANSAs were formed to counter the regimes' attacks and defend local civilians there. Older ANSAs, like the Yemeni Houthis, accumulated enough power to challenge the declining ruling regime, and slowly moved from "brown" or "grey" areas to "red" zones. Earlier models of Hamas in the Gaza Strip and Hezbollah in Southern Lebanon inspired emerging groups to exercise some governance practices. The scopes and forms of conflict areas and practiced sovereignty varied from one state to another. These ANSAs gradually gained limited pragmatic international acknowledgement to facilitate humanitarian relief or initiate a conflict resolution process (Darwich, 2021).

2.3.1 MENA ANSAs Colorful Models

Red Zones

The highest level of conflict between an ANSA and its national state is reflected in the development of "red zones," in which the former disputes sovereignty and authority with the latter's institutions. Three MENA cases represent this model: the Palestinian Hamas, the Yemeni Houthis, and the Syrian Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (2017–2025).

Hamas was established in 1987 during the first Palestinian uprising (*Intifada*). The movement takes its name from an Arabic acronym, which stands in English for "Islamic Resistance Movement," and is committed to armed resistance to Israel. Hamas won most seats in its first parliamentary election in 2006, leading the Palestinian government. One year later, political divisions between Hamas and Fatah, another powerful movement steering the internationally recognized Palestinian Authority, led to an armed conflict that concluded with Hamas in control of the Gaza Strip, while Fatah governs the West Bank (Abu-Amr, 1993; Hawaleshka, 2023; Robinson, 2024). In October 2023, Hamas launched a surprising attack on Israel, killing about 1200 Israelis and taking around 250 hostages to force Israel to release Palestinian prisoners. Then, Israel waged a destructive war on the Gaza Strip, killing, until early 2025, more than 50 thousand Palestinians (Al Jazeera, 2025).

Since 2006, Hamas has exercised full authority over the Gaza Strip in terms of the provision of social services, managing borders, legislation, and enforcement of laws (Hawaleshka, 2023; Robinson, 2024). The movement set its foreign policy and actively interacted with international organizations and some states that accepted its de facto government (Darwich, 2021). Since the beginning of the Gaza War, indirect negotiations for exchanging Israeli hostages and Palestinian prisoners have been repeatedly organized between Hamas and Israel through Qatari and Egyptian mediators. Despite the movement's statement that it will give up its control of the Strip as part of proposed war-ending arrangements, alternative substitutes have not been settled (Owda, 2024). Until then, Hamas practically governs the Strip (Rasgon & Abuheweila, 2025).

The Yemeni Houthis are another example of the MENA red zones. The Zaydi Shii group was established in the 1990s, opposing the former president Ali Abdullah Saleh (1979–2012). In the early 2000s, Saleh notably oppressed the movement and killed its leader in 2004. Despite signing a ceasefire in 2010 with Saleh, the Houthis joined the Arab Spring protests against him in 2011. With the increase of their followers, they gradually consolidated their territorial control and finally took over the capital, Sanaa, in 2014. The internationally recognized government, led by Abd Rabbuh Mansour Al Hadi, fled south to Aden and requested Saudi support. The latter formed an international coalition and waged a war until signing a truce with the Houthis in 2022. The latter enjoys Iranian support, which is claimed to be upgraded to security coordination (Glenn et al., 2022; Riedel, 2017; Al Jazeera Staff, 2025).

The Houthis developed a tribal style of governance, excluding top leaders, while relying on youth (Al-Dawsari, 2024). Due to the humanitarian crisis in Yemen, various international organizations interacted with them to facilitate aid delivery, mainly since the movement was not classified as a terrorist group until 2023, except for the last month of Donald Trump's first term. In addition to its domestic governance, the movement has been very influential regionally as well as internationally. The Houthis condemned the Israeli war on Gaza, launched several rounds of missiles and drones against Israel, and officially entered the war in late October 2023. They also attacked commercial ships, either Israeli or directed to, and practically restricted the navigation in the Red Sea, which affects international trade. In March 2025, the United States and the United Kingdom started coordinated air strikes on Houthi targets (Center for Preventive Action, 2025). Simultaneously, with the growth of the Houthis' influence, the internationally recognized government has lost most of its local and regional impact.

Traveling from an example of red zones to a state regime is the Syrian Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (2017–2024). Known as HTS, it was founded as a union of several Islamist jihadi movements established to resist the Assad regime since 2011. The leading group among them was Al Nusra Front, previously affiliated with Al-Qaeda. Between 2017 and 2024, HTS controlled most of Northwestern Syria and set tailored governance structures, including the Syrian Salvation Government and local councils. These structures managed several administrative tasks, ran the border crossing with Turkey, collected taxes, and designed educational curricula (Khalifa, 2024; Alhajj, 2024; Al Jazeera, 2024). HTS, with the support of other militant groups, launched a rapid series of attacks that overthrew the Assad regime in December 2024. The movement, interestingly, was reclassified from an ANSA to the state's political regime. A few months later, Ahmed Al-Sharaa, the HTS former leader, became the Syrian President and integrated the movement into the national defense army. It is argued that HTS's governance experience in its previously controlled territories could enhance its state-building process, although not enough conditions for success (Agha, 2024).

The three MENA ANSAs, Hamas, the Houthis, and HTS (2017–2025) expressed considerable independence from their internationally recognized national regimes. They acted similarly to states' practices, either locally or internationally. Ironically, Hamas and HTS have been classified as terrorist groups since their inception; the Houthis joined them in late 2023.

Brown Zones

The Lebanese Hezbollah is the most significant and oldest armed non-state actor in the MENA region. It is an important Shi'i Muslim political party and militant group established in the mid-1980s during the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990). Since its initiation, Hezbollah has maintained close connections with Iran, being the latter's main proxy in the region. Hezbollah is also known for its long commitment to resistance to Israel, so it refused to abandon its militant capabilities after the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000. Since 1992, it has participated in the Lebanese public elections and enjoyed a considerable political influence (Norton, 2007; Hezbollah's Record on War & Politics, 2023; CFR.org Editors, 2024).

Despite not visibly disputing the national authorities, Hezbollah used to control Southern Lebanon exclusively, especially since it reached political deals with opponents after the Beirut militant Conflict in 2008 (Hezbollah's Record on War & Politics, 2023). Without consulting the local government, its involvement in the Gaza War was also an independent decision. However, following the Israeli severe attacks on Hezbollah and the assassination of its charismatic leader Hassan Nasrallah in September 2024, the party asked the national government to negotiate a ceasefire. Since then, the latter became responsible for negotiations and implementing its terms, including Hezbollah's handing over its sites in southern Lebanon to the national army (News Wires, 2025). This behavior is consistent with "brown zones" governscapes, which are pragmatic outcomes of multilateral compromises involving national regimes and powerful ANSAs. These settlements stop earlier militant clashes among the involved parties, with the risk of being resumed upon any change in the balance of power.

Grey Zones

Marginalized for a long time, Iraqi Kurds benefited from the decline of Saddam Hussein's regime after the Gulf War in 1990–1991. When the Coalition Forces enforced a no-fly zone in Kurdistan, the Iraqi Kurdistan Front, an alliance of political parties, organized parliamentary and presidential elections and established the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG). In 2003, the Kurdish militant Peshmerga supported the American troops in overthrowing Hussein. Therefore, the new Iraqi federal regime endorsed the existence of the Kurdish Regional Government, which currently identifies itself as a parliamentary democracy. The Government has official legal jurisdiction over Erbil, Duhok, and Sulaymaniyah, in addition to de facto influence on another three provinces since the collapse of the Iraqi security forces in clashes with the Islamic States of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in 2014 (The Kurdish Project, n.d.).

The Kurdish Regional Government sets regional plans, designs the judicial system, and controls local economic resources (The Official Site of the Kurdish Regional Government; n.d.; World Bank, 2018). The Kurdish referendum 2017 targets a smooth transition from this "grey zone" toward a "red one," seeking to establish an independent state. Despite the massive local support for independence, the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government failed to claim peaceful international recognition for its de facto domestic authority. Thus, it has been locked in the "grey zone" of governance since then.

"Grey" governscape actors can hardly claim full sovereignty if national regimes are still recognized. Instead, they usually secure de facto authority and unrecognized sovereign practices. Menkhaus's study of failed Somalia in the 1990s identifies these "governance without government" modes. While lacking a sovereign government, armed militia, local leader, and businessmen had to set security and economic arrangements for residents (Menkhaus, 2006). Despite their influence and contributions, they have never been internationally recognized.

2.4 Thirdly: Claiming Sovereignty… "*Sovereign*" ANSAs in "*Over-Stated*" States

Considering the elaborated ANSAs' practices in the MENA region in the previous part, I examine their adherence to Stilz's core values required of sovereign states in the following discussions and explore their chance to claim limited sovereignty.

2.4.1 The Rightful Occupancy

The rightful occupancy implies people's right to live freely in certain geographical places that serve their social and political plans. Still, it should identify the process of borders' demarcation; regulate immigrants or newcomers' rights, and control multilateral relations with other "states."

Stilz's theory is criticized for lacking clear criteria regarding the border demarcation process during state formation. Through civil wars, MENA ANSAs forcefully controlled sizeable areas of their national territories, depriving the states' ruling regimes of practicing any sovereign rights in these regions. Hamas and Hezbollah first seized power by force, but their influence was restricted to the already-demarcated Strip and the Shi'i-majority areas in southern Lebanon, respectively. The Yemeni Houthis and the Syrian HTS shared the tendency to expand their "red zones" by force. The Iraqi Kurdish parties also enjoyed group-based historical claims in the regions they controlled (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.). While Turkey, as a regional ally to the Syrian opposition, implicitly endorsed this forceful demarcation of borders, Saudi Arabia was much harsher in rejecting the Houthis' expansion. Conditional on their classification, international organizations have cooperated with these ANSAs to facilitate humanitarian relief or launch peaceful negotiations (Elayah & Verkoren, 2020). Thus, Hamas and HTS received the minimum aid from these organizations, while the collaboration with the Houthis was welcomed until 2023, when they were classified as a terrorist group.

People who inhabited disputed areas under states' governance can still enjoy the "rightful occupancy" regardless of the governing ANSAs. These people maintain their residency as old occupants with already settled life plans in conflict zones. Differently, regulating immigrants' rights seems a more complicated task. The term "newcomers" refers to supporters of the ruling ANSAs who fled to disputed areas. Newcomers are either citizens of the same state who used to occupy other domestic provinces or foreign combatants. Stilz argues that immigrants could be granted the rightful occupancy right, conditional on avoiding any interruption to current occupants' life plans. An exception from this condition is offered to desperate immigrants, such as refugees or displaced individuals (Stilz, 2019).

A positive correlation emerges between MENA ANSAs' power and their smooth management in granting the displaced local groups the rightful occupancy merit in the disputed territories without disturbing existing residents. Citizens' legitimate freedom of mobility supports the right of occupancy to newcomers from other provinces of the same state. Even proponents of the state-centric approach can hardly deny these occupancy rights due to holding the same citizenship. Governing ANSAs could design and implement convenient settling-in plans to facilitate their residency. Usually, welcoming procedures depend on newcomers' loyalty to the ruling armed groups.

Hamas was practically under an Israeli siege, so it has never received newcomers from other Palestinian provinces, not to mention foreign combatants. Contrarily, the Houthis and HTS encouraged locals from other provinces to flee to their red zones as a show of support for these groups or opposing states' political regimes. HTS's controlled territories included various refugee camps hosting about two million people escaping from the Assad regime. In southern Lebanon and Kurdistan, people enjoyed the freedom of mobility with a considerable concentration of the Shii Muslims and Kurds, respectively. In both cases, no special accommodations were made.

Various MENA ANSAs welcomed foreign combatants, usually ideologically aligned with local groups. Foreign combatants' occupancy can hardly be explained based on state-centric arguments. Inspired by the communist legacy, it could be argued that these combatants show cross-national solidarity with local armed groups based on a shared ethnic affiliation or religious ideology. The continuity of their de facto occupancy merits depends on their cooperation and coordination with local ANSAs. The latter might terminate foreign combatants' occupancy merits to gain international acknowledgment or be involved in final peaceful settlements.

Thousands of foreign fighters traveled to Syria to support the opposition groups. Following the collapse of the Assad regime, the new administration, previously the HTS leadership, expressed a will to integrate these fighters into society, grant them and their families Syrian citizenship, and give their commanders senior posts in the national army (Usher, 2024; The Economist, 2025). Closely, Turkey frequently accuses the Iraqi Kurdistan security forces of training and sheltering foreign fighters from Turkish Kurds affiliated with the militant Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) (Al-Arabiya News, 2023). Belonging to the same ethnic background and sharing historical grievances could explain the Kurds' assumed behaviors.

Pragmatically, multilateral relations have been achievable between ANSAs and other regional "states" or international organizations. These groups usually seek a minimum level of alliance or coordination with one or more regional powers. Iran significantly assisted in building the Yemeni Houthis and Hezbollah's military arsenal through weapons transfer, training, and intelligence cooperation (Robinson, 2025). Despite being less close than the former two Shii groups, Hamas received Iranian training and intelligence information (Skare, 2023). The Syrian HTS got various forms of militant and political support from Turkey. Syrian-Kurdish militias are linked to their counterparts in the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government.

International organizations and great powers usually get involved in, direct or indirect, talks and negotiations with ANSAs to secure the flow of humanitarian relief, reach appropriate conflict resolutions, and secure their implementation (Stepputat, 2018; Marrone & Muti, 2019; Hofmann and Schneckener, September 2011; Paczyn'ska, 2021; Halawa, 2022). In early January 2021, Trump's administration designated the Houthis as a terrorist movement. Biden's administration shortly revoked this decision due to fears of an aid shortage and aimed to participate in peace talks prospectively. Regardless of the Arab states' opposition, this classification was only changed following the Houthis' attacks on Israel in late 2023. In March 2025, the US envoy held secret talks with Hamas to negotiate the release of an American hostage despite the Israeli refusal (Roth & Burke, 2025). Scholars warn that any recognition of ANSAs will weaken states' ability to exclusively consolidate power (Pfeifer et al., 2022; Widiatmaja & Rizqi, 2020).

May Darwich (2021) studied the foreign policy of Hamas and Hezbollah, evaluating the role of individual leadership, group dynamics in the decision-making process, and the public opinion's weight in shaping external behaviors. She concluded that both groups operate state-like goals at international levels and enjoy the significant role of individual leadership alongside their sensitivity to public opinion. Darwich recommended adopting the foreign policy analysis toolkit to explain these groups" external behaviors.

2.4.2 The Basic Justice

The state's sovereignty is associated with its ability to establish domestic rules. MENA regimes strictly control the legislative and judicial responsibilities. However, the Arab protestors' calls for "bread, freedom, and social justice" expressed a serious shortage of the core basic justice and procedural dimensions. MENA ANSAs can hardly claim to have implemented democratic mechanisms to consolidate power in their controlled territories. The only exception is Hamas's victory in the Palestinian legislative elections in early 2006, before its forceful control of the Gaza Strip 1 year later. Most ANSAs suffer a substantial deficiency of economic resources, adopt non-democratic structures of decision-making, and face wide allegations of corruption. Thus, the possibility of securing a fair distribution of wealth and power under their governance is highly questioned. Meanwhile, governing armed groups' capacity to set laws and regulations and execute them also seems to be a controversial issue.

However, the expansion of their controlled territories, governance stability, and the number of occupants reflect a practical success of their executive authority. The Houthi movement has controlled one-third of the total Yemeni territories, including the capital Sanaa, since 2015. While the rest is fragmented between the internationally recognized "legitimate government" and the Southern Transitional Council, a secessionist group in South Yemen. Between 2007 and 2023, Hamas exclusively governed the Gaza Strip, with considerable influence even during the Gaza War (Rasgon & Abuheweila, 2025). The Syrian Salvation Government, which was affiliated with HTS, set up relatively transparent and accountable governance structures (Al Jazeera, 2024). Single controlling ANSAs, like the Houthis and Hamas, can better provide a solid unitary judicial and legislative system than the divided governance of multiple groups.

Practically, militant groups that belong to the red zones usually express more freedom to set an independent judicial framework different from the state. Hezbollah has successfully run southern Lebanon since 2000 and has been popular among its constituencies, as reflected in the number of its parliamentary seats. However, it is still compliant with the Lebanese laws. The Kurdistan Regional Government is an interesting exception in this regard, as it has its distinct judicial setting from the Iraqi government (World Bank, 2018).

2.4.3 The Collective Self-Determination

Stilz argues that the collective self-determination could refer to the "majority" of occupants, who agreed to join the newly established social order. Despite MENA ANSAs, except Hamsa, have never been democratically elected, they can claim they have already secured considerable voluntary consensus, or at least tolerance, among rightful occupants for their governance. In Syria and Yemen, many "newcomers," local occupants, fled from state-controlled territories due to their political opposition to the ruling regimes. Their refusal to return implies an implicit acceptance of the HTS and the Houthis' governance compared to the states' ruling regimes. In 2023, the population in HTS-controlled territories was about six million, two-thirds of whom are displaced from other Syrian regions. The movement was countered with limited resistance in its path to consolidate the Assad regime's territories in December 2024. In Iraqi Kurdistan and southern Lebanon, ethnic and sectarian solidarity significantly cements the collective self-determination. Occupants also actively participate in ad hoc political institutions, including local councils and executive offices, and ongoing societal activities. Additionally, providing the necessary social services and security has traded off with occupants' acceptance of the de facto governance.

By admitting the possibility of establishing decentralized pluralist structures to facilitate self-determination of minorities and indigenous communities, Stilz considers the diversity in occupants' interests and political choices. In this case, rightful occupants could reassess their earlier collective self-determination and affiliation with states' institutions to be replaced by belonging to other political structures. This right is connected to the cases of Hezbollah and Iraqi Kurdistan, in which both the ethnic and sectarian motives guided the establishment and sustainability of these armed groups.

2.5 Fourthly: Cultivating Legitimacy by Social Order, Security, and Services

Claiming sovereignty could be a theoretical exercise if not associated with cultivating internal legitimacy. Alongside being internationally recognized, MENA states historically gained their legitimacy through monopolizing the use of violence and the allocation of national resources. Some also developed cementing ideologies promoted by charismatic leaders, while others built their power upon traditional legitimacy (Barakat, 1993; Ayubi, 1995). By the Arab uprisings, the question of legitimacy has been rigorously raised due to states' financial and political corruption alongside the use of brutal coercion toward their citizens.

The de facto ruling ANSAs have sought to fill the legitimacy gap, conditional on their moral and material cultivated assets. In this case, Schlichte and Schneckener (2015) refer to legitimacy as "the belief in the rightfulness of an armed group's agenda and violent struggle" (Schlichte & Schneckener, 2015, p. 413). Scholars investigated three critical issues relating to the legitimacy of ruling armed groups: legitimizing the use of violent means, accumulating moral and material support, and addressing various domestic and international audiences. Per them, armed groups should regulate the criteria according to which the use of violence legitimizes or delegitimizes actors. ANSA"s initial opposition to authoritarian regimes might not hold as an exclusive source of internal legitimacy; additional assets are needed. A variety of addressed local, regional, and international audiences requires ruling groups to use different, but consistent, strategies. Schlichte and Schneckener stress that moral and symbolic legitimizing sources are essential in the formation period, but performance-based sources will be more durable (Schlichte & Schneckener, 2015).

MENA ANSAs utilized various moral and symbolic sources for legitimacy in earlier formation phases. Since its establishment, Hamas has committed itself to militant resistance to Israel and has been motivated by Islamist ideology. HTS shared a similar moral justification with Hamas but opposed the Assad regime instead. Hezbollah and the Houthis primarily relied on Shiism to recruit followers, alongside highlighting their opposition to Israel and the Yemeni former President Ali Saleh, respectively. Ethnic grievances played a decisive role in forming the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government. These non-national sources of legitimacy have significantly boosted the formation of MENA ANSAs.

Sharing the controversy of their foundations and practices and the lack of effective representative political institutions, ANSAs could benefit from legitimizing sources of non-democratic regimes. Besides using coercive means, the latter could learn lessons from the legitimization process in the former, until they develop their unique political institutions (Soesr & Grauvogel, 2015). Building upon Schlichte and Schneckener"s addressed issues and Soesr and Grauvogel's recommendations to non-democratic regimes, I argue that MENA ANSAs possibly depend on three legitimization sources: articulating a new social order, achieving security, and providing services.

2.5.1 Articulating Social Order

The historical formation of Western civil society was associated with governing elites' aspiration to articulate popular norms and values through which the former might secure their cultural and political hegemony (Kaldor, 2003). A restricted civil society promotes official narratives and mobilizes occupants under non-democratic regimes' flags. Narratives usually refer to historical events since the state's formation that followed a liberation struggle or civil war and propagating charismatic leadership (Soesr & Grauvogel, 2015).

ANSAs usually share ideological or ethnic commitments, collective group loyalty, and a sense of pertinence (DCAF, 2011). MENA groups actively participated in national uprisings under the leadership of charismatic figures or declared their commitment to resistance to Israel. Portraying these contributions in symbolic narrative has been a stepping-stone to cultivating their internal legitimacy. Hamas, Syrian Islamists, Iraqi and Syrian Kurdish groups, Hezbollah, and Shi'i Houthis have promoted their ideologies and highlighted their local authenticity. Their charismatic leadership has encouraged or hindered legitimization depending on the targeted audiences. Locally welcomed leaders boost domestic legitimacy, but they might delay regional or international recognition due to their controversial backgrounds. Ahmed Al-Sharaa, the former leader of HTS and the current president of Syria, is an example of these controversies.

A creative formula of symbolic narratives and prospective aspirations has articulated the early features of new social orders in the MENA ANSAs territories. Most occupants oppose national regimes and seek new social contracts. People in Lebanon and Kurdistan shared collective historical grievances and future goals, despite not directly opposing their regimes. Built upon their military and symbolic significance, armed groups have proposed unique identities, ideologies, values, and interests within a holistic outline of the prospective social order. This order usually depends on local traditions and experiences, addresses occupants' concerns, and reflects their shared struggle and expected durable solidarity against the national authoritarian regimes (Schlichte & Schneckener, 2015).

Hamas' narrative relies on the Palestinians' religious struggle against Israel. Between 2017 and 2024, the Syrian opposition group, HTS, recalled the grievances of Hama's massacre in 1982 and the' oppression of protests since 2011 and labeled Assad's family and regime as "sectarian." They justified their conflicts and appreciated relevant struggles, emphasizing the necessary societal solidarity with the ruling groups. Repeatedly, Hamas emphasized this narrative during the Israeli war in Gaza to ensure people's solidarity with the movement. After overthrowing the Assad regime, HTS has utilized its narrative to enhance the ongoing state-building process. Remarkably, Hezbollah's narrative was reinterpreted to explain its losses due to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in October 2024, ensuring the solidarity among its followers.

Current region-based armed actors still lack sufficient attention to develop a collective social order. They either enforce their adopted ideologies or ignore the urgency of shaping new ones. Thus, the Houthis and Hamas were criticized for lacking democratic governance mechanisms. The religious structure of Hezbollah rarely raises similar concerns among its supporters, despite losing its charismatic leadership in 2024. Differently, the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government has been more progressive in setting various development plans and political mechanisms, including the Kurdistan referendum, which encouraged the launching of holistic societal discussions on prospective social contact and order (The Kurdistan Regional Government, n.d.). The significant shift of HTS's governance model in Syria from an ANSA to a state government excludes its current work in state-building from the scope of this paper.

2.5.2 Achieving Security

After years of civil wars, MENA states as well as ANSAs had to set interim de-escalation or ceasefire arrangements due to their grave exhaustion alongside a regional and international will to reach reliable compromises. These arrangements implied a pragmatic acknowledgement of ruling ANSAs, which has practically enhanced their local authority. External powers, in turn, closely observed the armed groups' ability to achieve security within their local "sovereign territories." Security concerns are classified into three categories: protection from regimes' attacks, developing a convenient legal system to fight crimes, and, since October 2023, the Israeli attacks on various MENA ANSAs.

Using different mechanisms, region-based militant groups have neutralized their first security concern. Since 2007, Hamas concluded its militant conflict with the Palestinian Authority through its exclusive control over the Gaza Strip. The Houthis announced a long-term truce with the International Coalition, including the Yemeni recognized government, in 2022. Neither Hezbollah nor the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional

Government has experienced security concerns from their ruling regimes due to a critical balance of power and political arrangements among these parties. Before overthrowing the Assad regime in 2024, HTS managed the regime's attacks according to de-escalation or ceasefire arrangements. The scale and level of defensive or counterattacks depended on the group's militant capabilities and coordination with its regional and international allies. Interestingly, national regimes' attacks usually mobilize occupants of armed groups' territories to run around the flag of their de facto rulers. Both defend their current life plans and shared goals.

Following Hamas' surprising attacks in October 2023, Israel has launched a series of military actions against Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis. Israel waged a war on the Gaza Strip in the same month. Due to their entering the war in support of Gaza, Israel also invaded Hezbollah's areas in southern Lebanon and frequently bombarded the Houthis' controlled territories by air strikes. The Israeli attacks have significantly weakened Hamas's control on the Strip; however, scenarios of alternative governing entities have been under investigation until late 2024 (Barakat & Porteous, 2024). The Houthis experienced relatively limited damage, enabling them to sustain their attack on Israel, which encouraged the United States and the United Kingdom to coordinate a series of other air strikes on Yemen starting from March 2025. Hezbollah suffered the highest level of destruction as it lost most of its political and military leaders and had to withdraw from some of its controlled territories in southern Lebanon. The Israeli attacks against the Syrian regime, which assumed power after the collapse of the Assad regime, although led by HTS's leaders, are out of this paper's scope.

For domestic security, most ruling armed groups had to set legal frameworks to administer their controlled territories properly. They identified legal responsibilities and clarified relevant expectations, tasks, and penalties. Regulating violence to legitimize or delegitimize actors based on clear criteria was a priority for them (Schlichte & Schneckener, 2015). The appropriateness of these operating legal frameworks is still disputed due to the lack of consensual social orders. A unitary legal framework exists, even without satisfactory social discussions, under the Houthis (Al-Dawsari, 2024) and Hamas' governance, thanks to the unified commands. A similar model was active under HTS and its executive arm, the Syrian Salvation Government (Khalifa, 2024; Al Jazeera, 2024; Ghadbian, 2023; Ali, 2023). The Kurdistan Regional Government has set its legal framework to be executed in its controlled provinces (World Bank 2018).

2.5.3 Providing Services

The matrix of state-society relations is a determining factor in providing social services. The suspension of states' control was associated with terminating their provision of basic services for the ANSAs' controlled territories in the cases of disputing groups. This implies a modification of settled arrangements for the allocation of resources. Both are valuable sources for internal legitimacy.

Contemporary cases in post-war African societies illustrated a prominent level of creativity in coping with limited statehood through creative efforts by armed and non-armed NSAs to provide services. Models of running governance without governments are traced in Somalia, Congo, and Sudan (Menkhaus, 2006). Thus, African scholars developed a new sociology of governance, bypassing the state-centric model, toward examining a rising system based on the interactions between semi-public institutions and intermediate societal actors and organizations, in which the state is one of the players, not necessarily the most powerful one (Raeymaekers, Menkhaus, & Vlassenroot, 2008).

Moving from symbolic sources of legitimacy, providing necessary social services is the core of performance-based legitimizing sources. The barely fulfilled basic needs were an existential demand for millions of local occupants and displaced people. MENA armed groups administer available resources and revenues as part of their territorial control, run their international borders, and receive humanitarian aid. International organizations strictly allied their humanitarian and developmental work with imposed sanctions on ANSAs. However, donor organizations later adopted a pragmatic approach to ensure access to affected areas through direct or indirect coordination with ruling groups. However, the latter are frequently accused of corruption, selective and arbitrary distribution of resources, and weakening other independent societal actors (Elayah & Verkoren, 2020).

HTS's performance after the devastating earthquake in February 2023 improved its local image. It successfully overcame the severe shortage of resources due to international restrictions and the national regime's blockade. The movement improved its fiscal and administrative governance by seeking professional consultations (Ghadbian, 2023; Ali, 2023). The Houthis' control of the Yemeni capital and its central bank gives the movement an advantage in generating the funds needed for social services. Nevertheless, the fairness of their allocation is questioned.

Despite maintaining the overall structure of the governmental institutions from the Palestinian Authority, Hamas established parallel judicial institutions for Gaza, assimilating its norms and rules. The whole staff of the judicial sector was replaced, and Hamas's government covered the salaries of the newly hired. It also created mechanisms for taxing imports, business, and property and even smuggled goods through tunnels from Egypt. The educational and healthcare sectors were run administratively by Hamas, while salaries were covered by the Palestinian Authority (Hovdenak, 2010). Reports confirm that Hamas is still in control of the Gaza Strip after the 15-month war. During the January ceasefire, the movement sought to impose security, remove rubble, and provide a degree of law and order (Rasgon & Abuheweila, 2025). Since the early 2000s, Hezbollah has established a vast network of affiliated organizations that provide social services, including education, healthcare, and financial support. Recipients include not only loyal people but also desperate and poor groups, who in turn owe their improved lifestyle to Hezbollah. Additionally, employees in these organizations consider their work a mission and an act of resistance (Flanigan & Abdel-Samad, 2009).

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter demonstrates that ANSAs in the MENA region can claim limited sovereignty and legitimacy by fulfilling certain criteria of territorial governance. While they meet the requirements of rightful occupancy and, to some extent, basic justice, their governance often lacks inclusivity and long-term sustainability. For a long time, the state-centric order has dominated theoretical perspectives; it claims sovereignty and legitimacy exclusively for states as the most convenient organized political units. Contemporary macro and micro politics have challenged the state's superiority in the international order. Cosmopolitan theories investigate global issues beyond states' borders; other academic literature examines active ANSAs within the borders of failed states. Recent changes in the MENA region are aligned with these theoretical debates. Contributing to these debates and building upon concepts addressed in ANSAs" governance in other regions, I argued that the region-based ANSAs can claim limited sovereignty and internal legitimacy in their controlled territories. After classifying them according to Stepputat's colorful governance zones of "emerging governscapes," this chapter proved that MENA ANSAs' governance moderately meets Stilz's core values for legitimate and sovereign states. They enjoy considerable levels of rightful occupancy, practice a judicial basic justice, and relatively endorse occupants' collective self-determination. The missing cornerstone of their sovereignty is international recognition, a privilege that depends on global norms that reject serious border re-demarcation.

Stilz's state-centric model fits well to analyze European experiences regarding forming its political units and current functions. Establishing states in other regions has undergone distinct phases and gained local characteristics. In the latter model, states are less "sovereign," while other NSAs, armed or non-armed, gain more influence and functionality. Civil wars usually empower local ANSAs on the front lines of weak or failed states. Thus, the former usually expand their geographical control, practice domestic authority, and accumulate symbolic and material assets. Notably, other non-state actors in non-Western regions exhibit Stilz's distinctive characteristics.

Inspired by the African literature, I conclude that the state mode of governance is not the only globally applicable one. An appropriate local governance mode depends on the level of "state-ness" recognized states enjoy and the degree of legitimacy and sovereignty that other NSAs claim. This chapter sought to contribute to the regional scholarship that addresses indigenous societal and political contexts in which various political actors interact and formulate their representative structures. I explored local implications of "sovereignty" and "legitimacy" to generate a creative local understanding of these Eurocentric concepts. Alongside promoting diversity in the current globalized world, a similar multiplicity is urgently needed in academics. There should be a substantial adjustment for the NSAs, armed or non-armed, in international politics to be appropriately well-classified and legalized instead of merely defined as the "non"-"state" actors. Contemporary changes re-endorse differences. Policymakers should consider incorporating ANSAs into peacebuilding processes, acknowledging their role in governance while addressing gaps in legitimacy.

Future studies should explore the sustainability of ANSAs' governance models and their potential integration into international frameworks. It might elaborate in various cases of MENA and other regions' ANSAs, considering their distinct features, identities, capabilities, sources, regional support, and international recognition. Do they face specific limitations or restrictions on their governance? Will their governance model be sustainable or ad hoc? The academic scholarship should develop indigenous understandings of fundamental political concepts in the context of dysfunctional or failed states.

References

Abu-Amr, Z. (1993). Hamas: A historical and political background. *Journal of Palestine Studies, 22*(4), 5–19. https://doi.org/10.2307/2538077

Agha, M. O. (2024, December 14). Governing the day after in Syria. *Middle East Institute*. https://www.mei.edu/publications/governing-day-after-syria

Al Jazeera. (2024, September 6). Syrian Salvation Government: Technocrats run HTS's controlled areas. *Al Jazeera*. https://aja.ws/pdmjam (In Arabic).

Al Jazeera. (2025, March 23). Israel's war on Gaza has killed 50,000 Palestinians since October 2023. *Al Jazeera*. https://aje.io/35kgqd

Al Jazeera Staff. (2025, March 18). Who are the Houthis? A simple guide to the Yemeni Group. *AL Jazeera*. https://aje.io/j5pa5m

Al-Arabiya News. (2023, September 21). Kurdish official denies Turkey's claim of foreign fighters in deadly drone strike. *Al-Arabiya News*. https://ara.tv/vphmt

Al-Dawsari, N. (2012, April 24). Tribal governance and stability in Yemen. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.* https://carnegie-production-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/static/files/files__yemen_tribal_governance.pdf

Al-Dawsari, N. (2024). Houthi governance: An examination of engagement with tribes, in Joana Cook, and Shiraz Maher (eds), The rule is for none but Allah: Islamist approaches to governance (2023; online edn, Oxford Academic, Retrieved February 22 2024, From), doi:https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197690390.003.0013.

Alhajj, M. (2024, April 8). How are the Northern Syrian regions Governed? *Al Jazeera*. https://aja.ws/y1oomw (In Arabic).

Ali, H. Haj. (2023, January 23). Post war generation's needs: Educational gaps in Northeastern Syria. *Omran Strategic Studies*. (In Arabic). https://bit.ly/3HH45oP

Ayubi, N. N. (1995). *Over-stating the Arab state: Politics and society in the Middle East*. I. B. Tauris.

Barakat, H. (1993). *The Arab world: Society, culture, and state*. University of California Press.

Barakat, S. & Porteous, P. (2024, September). *Leadership and reconstruction for the "day after"*. University of Geneva, Geneva Center for Humanitarian Studies. https://humanitarianstudies.ch/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Gaza-Leadership-and-Reconstruction-for-the-Day-After-sept.pdf

Baybars-Hawks, B. (2018). *NSAs in conflicts: Conspiracies, myths and practices*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Bhuta, N. (2015). Measuring stateness, ranking political orders: Indices of state fragility and state failure. In A. Cooley & J. Snyder (Eds.), *Ranking the world: Grading states as a tool of global governance* (pp. 85–111). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316161555.005

Center for Preventive Action. (2025, March 26). Conflict in Yemen and the Red Sea. *Global Conflict Tracker*. Council on Foreign Relations. https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/war-yemen

CFR.org Editors. What is Hezbollah? (2024, October 29). *Council on Foreign Relations*. https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/what-hezbollah

Council on Foreign Relations. (n.d.) 1920–2022: The Kurds' long struggle with statelessness. *Council on Foreign Relations*. https://www.cfr.org/timeline/kurds-long-struggle-statelessness

Darwich, M. (2021). Foreign policy analysis and armed NSAs in world politics: Lessons from the Middle East. *Foreign Policy Analysis*. https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/orab030

DCAF, Geneva Call. (2011, December 20). Armed NSAs: Current trends & future challenges. *DCAF Horizon 2015 Working Paper*. No. 5. https://www.dcaf.ch/armed-non-state-actors-current-trends-future-challenges

Durac, V. (2015). *The role of NSAs in Arab countries after the Arab uprisings*. European Institute of the Mediterranean. IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook 2015. https://www.iemed.org/publication/the-role-of-non-state-actors-in-arab-countries-after-the-arab-uprisings/

The Economist. (2025, January 27). Syria's new rulers say they are keen to integrate foreign fighters. *The Economist*. https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2025/01/27/syrias-new-rulers-say-they-are-keen-to-integrate-foreign-fighters

Elayah, M., & Verkoren, W. (2020). Civil society during war: The case of Yemen. *Peacebuilding, 8*(4), 476–498. https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2019.1686797

Flanigan, S. T., & Abdel-Samad, M. (2009). Hezbollah's social Jihad: Nonprofits as resistance organizations. *Middle East Policy, 16*, 122–137. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4967.2009.00396.x

Ghadbian, N. (ed.). (2023, August). *Governance in Syria after 2011: Challenges and opportunities*. Omran Strategic Studies and Center for Mediterranean Studies (MEDAR) at Medipol University. (In Arabic) https://bit.ly/3YUlHEW

Glenn, Cameron (primary author), Garrett Nada, and Mattisan Rowan (Update authors). (2022, July 7). Who are Yemen's Houthis? *Wilson Center*. https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/who-are-yemens-houthis

Halawa, H. (2022). Nonstate actors, geopolitics, and conflict in the Middle East. In R. Youngs (Ed.), *Global civil Society in a Geopolitical age: How civic activism is being reshaped by great power competition* (pp. 43–48). Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Global_Civil_Society_in_a_Geopolitical_Age3.pdf

Hawaleshka, D. (2023, October 11). History illustrated: The story of Hamas and its fight for Palestine. *Al Jazeera*. https://www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2023/10/11/history-illustrated-the-story-of-hamas-and-its-fight-for-palestine

Hezbollah's Record on War & Politics. (2023, October 25). *Wilson Center*. https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/hezbollahs-record-war-politics

Hill, A. (2020). Legitimacy, self-determination, and conditional cooperators. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy, 23*(6), 780–787. https://doi.org/10.1080/13698230.2020.1797391

Hofmann, C., & Schneckener, U. (2011). Engaging non-state armed actors in state- and peace-building: Options and strategies. *International Review of the Red Cross., 93*(883), 603–621. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1816383112000148

Hovdenak, Are (2010). *The public services under Hamas in Gaza: Islamic revolution or crisis management?* PRIO Report: 3. Oslo: PRIO. https://www.prio.org/publications/7374

Human Development Report (2021–2022). *Uncertain times, unsettled lives shaping our future in a transforming world*. United Nations Development Programme. https://hdr.undp.org/system/files/documents/global-report-document/hdr2021-22pdf_1.pdf

Kaldor, M. (2003). Civil society and accountability. *Journal of Human Development, 4*(1), 5–27. https://doi.org/10.1080/1464988032000051469

Khalifa, D. (2024). Idlib and the Hayat Tahrir al-sham conundrum in Syria, in Joana Cook, and Shiraz Maher (eds.), *The rule is for none but Allah: Islamist approaches to governance* (2023;

online edn). Oxford Academic. Retrieved February 22, 2024, from https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197690390.003.0012.

Kitchen, N. (Ed.). (2012). *After the Arab spring: Power shift in the Middle East? IDEAS reports - special reports*. SR011. LSE IDEAS, London School of Economics and Political Science. https://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/Assets/Documents/reports/LSE-IDEAS-After-the-Arab-Spring.pdf

Lansing, R. (1913). A definition of sovereignty. *Proceedings of the American Political Science Association, 10*, 61–75. https://doi.org/10.2307/3038417

Mancilla, A. (2020). Occupancy rights: Dynamic as well as located. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy, 23*(6), 765–772. https://doi.org/10.1080/13698230.2020.1797389

Marrone, A., & Muti, K. (2019, November 28). Policies and tools for dealing with nonstate actors. In: Tomáš, V. (Ed.), *New perspectives on shared security: NATO'S next 70 years*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Carnegie Europe. https://carnegieendowment.org/files/NATO_int_final1.pdf

Menkhaus, K. (2006). Governance without government in Somalia: Spoilers, state building, and the politics of coping. *International Security, 31*(3), 74–106. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4137508

Mohamedou, M. (2020). In search of the non-Western state: Historicising and De-Westphalianising statehood. In D. Berg-Schlosser, B. Badie, & L. Morlino (Eds.), *In search of the non-Western state: Historicising and De-Westphalianising statehood* (Vol. 3, pp. 1335–1348). Sage. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781529714333.n82

Moore, M. (2020). Occupancy rights: Life planners and the Navajos. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy, 23*(6), 757–764. https://doi.org/10.1080/13698230.2020.1797388

Mugahed, R. (2022, January 21). *Tribes and the state in Yemen*. Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies. https://sanaacenter.org/publications/main-publications/16156

Nine, C. (2020). Self-determination, group identity, and the common will. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy, 23*(6), 788–794. https://doi.org/10.1080/13698230.2020.1797392

Norton, A. R. (2007). *Hezbollah: A short history (STU-student edition)*. Princeton University Press. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt7srbn

Ochoa, E. P. (2021). The state and its alternatives: Comments on Anna Stilz's *territorial sovereignty*. *Journal of Social Philosophy, 52*, 31–39. https://doi.org/10.1111/josp.12380

Onwe, S. O., & Nwogbaga, D. M. E. (2015). Conceptual issues and theoretical analysis of sovereignty. *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences, 5*, No.3. https://www.iiste.org/Journals/index.php/RHSS/article/view/19812/20446

Owda, N. (2024, February 6). The day after in Gaza: Four post-war scenarios. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2024/02/the-day-after-in-gaza-four-post-war-scenarios?lang=en

Paczynska, A. (2021). "New" state actors and conflict-affected states: Confronting violence, shifting ambitions, and adjusting principles. *Frontiers in Political Sciences, 3*, 663432. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2021.663432

Pfeifer, Hanna., Geis, Anna. & Clément, Maéva. (2022). *The politics of recognition, armed NSAs, and conflict transformation*. PRIF report 4/2022. Peace Research Institute Frankfurt. https://doi.org/10.48809/prifrep2204.

Raeymaekers, T., Menkhaus, K., & Vlassenroot, K. (2008). State and non-state regulation in African protracted crises: Governance without government? *Afrika Focus, 21*(2). https://doi.org/10.21825/af.v21i2.5045

Rasgon, A., & Abuheweila, I. (2025, January 23). Hamas takes charge in Gaza after 15 months of war. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/23/world/middleeast/hamas-gaza-israel-cease-fire.html

Riedel, B. (2017, December 18). Who are the Houthis, and why are we at war with them? *Brookings*. https://www.brookings.edu/articles/who-are-the-houthis-and-why-are-we-at-war-with-them/

Robinson, K. (2024, October 17). What is Hamas? *Council on Foreign Relations*. https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/what-hamas
Robinson, K. (2025, March 24). Iran's support of the Houthis: What to know. *Council on Foreign Relations*. https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/irans-support-houthis-what-know
Roth, A. & Burke, J. (2025, March 10). The US Envoy's secret talks with Hamas anger Netanyahu administration. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/mar/10/us-envoy-secret-talks-hamas-anger-netanyahu-administration
Schlichte, K., & Schneckener, U. (2015). Armed groups and the politics of legitimacy. *Civil Wars, 17*(4), 409–424. https://doi.org/10.1080/13698249.2015.1115573
Skare, E. (2023, December 18). Iran, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad: A marriage of convenience. *European Council on Foreign Relations*. https://ecfr.eu/article/iran-hamas-and-islamic-jihad-a-marriage-of-convenience/
Sly, L. (2021, January 24). Lost decade: The unfinished business of the Arab Spring. *The Washington Post*.
Stepputat, F. (2018). Pragmatic peace in emerging governscapes. *International Affairs, 94*(2), 399–416. https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix233
Stilz, A. (2019). *Territorial sovereignty: A philosophical exploration*. Oxford University Press.
Stilz, A. (2020). Reply to my critics. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy, 23*(6), 795–806. https://doi.org/10.1080/13698230.2020.1797393
Stilz, A. (2021). Territorial sovereignty: A brief introduction. *Journal of Social Philosophy, 52*, 6–9. https://doi.org/10.1111/josp.12404
The Kurdish Project. (n.d.). KRG: Kurdish Regional Government. *The Kurdish Project*. https://thekurdishproject.org/history-and-culture/kurdish-democracy/krg-kurdistan-regional-government/
The Official Site of the Kurdish Regional Government. (n.d.). https://gov.krd/english/
Thomson, J. E. (1995). State sovereignty in international relations: Bridging the gap between theory and empirical research. *International Studies Quarterly, 39*(2), 213–233. https://doi.org/10.2307/2600847
Timeline: The Rise, Spread, and Fall of the Islamic State. October 28, 2019. *Wilson Center*. https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/timeline-the-rise-spread-and-fall-the-islamic-state
Usher, S. (2024, December 31). Foreign fighters given senior Syrian Army posts, Reports Say. BB News. https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c86w27d4qpeo.
von Soest, C., & Grauvogel, J. (2015, August). *How do non-democratic regimes claim legitimacy? Comparative insights from Post-Soviet Countries.* German Institute of Global and Area Studies Research Programme: Legitimacy and Efficiency of Political Systems. No 277. https://www.giga-hamburg.de/en/publications/giga-working-papers/non-democratic-regimes-claim-legitimacy-comparative-insights-post-soviet-countries
Widiatmaja, A., & Rizqi, F. (2020). The rise of NSAs in the globalization and democratization era: Terrorist groups versus state actors. *Jurnal Sentris, 2*, 47–62. https://doi.org/10.26593/sentris.v2i2.4180.47-62
News Wires. (2025, February 16). Hezbollah leader says Lebanon's government must ensure Israeli withdrawal. *France, 24*. https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20250216-one-killed-in-lebanon-as-israel-hezbollah-truce-deadline-looms
World Bank. (2018, June 12). *Iraq - Kurdistan regional government (KRG): Comprehensive review of legislation* (English). World Bank Group. http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/760851537392719616

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

Chapter 3
Hybrid Governance with Armed Non-State Actors in a Fragile State: The Case of Iraq and the Kurdistan Region

Akiko Yoshioka

Abstract This chapter explores Iraq's hybrid governance, where formal state authority and armed non-state actors (ANSAs) coexist in a fragile and contested political order. Through case studies of Iraq and the Kurdistan Region, it examines how this hybrid governance is established, sustained, and contested. The chapter highlights the evolving relationship between the central government and ANSAs, shedding light on the dynamics of political stability in fragile states.

Since 2003, the Iraqi state has struggled to monopolize the legitimate use of force, leading to the emergence of various ANSAs with diverse backgrounds. Rather than framing Iraq solely as a failed state, this chapter considers it as an instance of hybrid governance—a fluid and contested political order shaped by both the central government and ANSAs. It further argues that the Kurdistan Region represents a distinctive case of hybrid governance, simultaneously acting as a formal authority and as an ANSA within Iraq's political structure.

Drawing a parallel to the international system, where order is maintained through mutual recognition of international laws and regimes, the chapter contends that the authority of the central government—even when fragile and non-hierarchical—remains essential in shaping a certain political order. By examining how such a hybrid governance structure can achieve political order and stability, this chapter offers broader insights into the possibilities and limitations of political order in fragile states where formal authority and ANSAs coexist.

Keywords Iraq · Kurdistan Region · ANSAs · Hybrid governance · Fragile state

A. Yoshioka (✉)
JIME Center-IEEJ, Tokyo, Japan
e-mail: yoshioka@jime.ieej.or.jp

© The Author(s) 2026

M. Elayah (ed.), *Governance without Government in the MENA Region*,
Nonprofit and Civil Society Studies,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-03953-8_3

3.1 Introduction

Since the regime change in 2003, Iraq has experienced a prolonged period of political turmoil and violence. The country has witnessed anti-US armed resistance, intense sectarian conflict, and the rise of the jihadist organization Islamic State (IS), which at its peak controlled approximately one-third of Iraqi territory. Despite these challenges, a new political process gradually took root. Between 2005 and 2021, six parliamentary elections were held, and successive governments were formed based on the electoral outcomes. This contradictory reality—where formal political institutions exist alongside persistent instability and violence—raises important questions about the nature of governance in post-2003 Iraq.

To understand this complex political landscape, it is essential to examine not only Iraq's formal political institutions, such as its constitution, government, elections, and laws, but also the informal and often destabilizing factors that have shaped the country's governance. These include civil wars, counter-terrorism campaigns, anti-government protests, and secessionist movements. Such events have not only undermined Iraq's political order but have also, at times, contributed to its transformation.

A key feature of post-2003 Iraq is the state's inability to monopolize the legitimate use of force. Instead, various armed non-state actors (ANSAs) have emerged, operating alongside and sometimes in opposition to formal state institutions. This chapter argues that some of these ANSAs have become embedded within Iraq's political system, contributing to a form of hybrid governance—a fluid and contested political order in which formal institutions and informal actors coexist.

Among these ANSAs, particular attention must be paid to the Kurdistan Region and its governing body, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). While the KRG is formally recognized as an autonomous government within Iraq, it possesses its own military forces and exercises considerable authority independent of the central government. In this sense, the KRG can also be conceptualized as an ANSA that plays a central role in Iraq's hybrid governance. This chapter examines how the KRG's dual character—as both an official governing authority and an actor operating outside the central government's control—reflects and shapes the dynamics of hybrid governance in Iraq. By analyzing the relationship between the KRG and the Iraqi state and by exploring the internal governance structure of the Kurdistan Region itself, this chapter seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the nature of Iraq's political order and the broader implications of hybrid governance in fragile states.

In this chapter, section 3.2 reviews the existing literature on state fragility and hybrid governance. It discusses key theoretical debates and conceptual frameworks that help explain governance in contexts where state authority is weak or contested. Drawing on these discussions, the section formulates the research questions that guide the analysis of Iraq's political order, with a particular focus on the Kurdistan Region.

Section 3.3 examines the development of Iraq's hybrid governance since 2003. It explores the establishment of formal political institutions alongside the persistent presence of armed non-state actors and chronic instability. The section analyzes how the interplay between state and non-state actors has shaped Iraq's political landscape, highlighting the conditions under which hybrid governance has emerged and evolved.

Section 3.4 turns to the Kurdistan Region as a case study of hybrid governance within Iraq. It investigates the relationship between the KRG and the Iraqi central government, analyzing the KRG's role as both an autonomous regional authority and an armed non-state actor. The section also explores the internal governance structure of the Kurdistan Region itself, focusing on how formal institutions and informal powerholders—such as armed political parties—interact to form a distinct hybrid political order. By comparing the governance structure of the Kurdistan Region to that of Iraq as a whole, the section aims to shed light on the broader patterns and implications of hybrid governance in fragile states.

Previous studies have often treated the autonomy of the Kurdistan Region as an exceptional case, analytically separated from the broader issue of the role of ANSAs in Iraq. This chapter seeks to bridge this gap by examining the Kurdistan Region as an integral part of Iraq's hybrid governance structure, highlighting both its external relations with the central government and its internal dynamics shaped by ANSAs. Through this analysis, the chapter seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how hybrid governance functions in post-conflict and fragile contexts, and what lessons can be drawn from the Iraqi case for the study of state-building and political order.

3.2 Reexamining State Fragility

3.2.1 A Fragile State and Hybrid Governance

Since the 1990s, the concepts of "fragile states," "state failure," and "state collapse" have attracted increasing scholarly attention. This is largely because many newly independent states—whether emerging from decolonization or the dissolution of the former Soviet Union—lacked the administrative capacity and enforcement power necessary to maintain order, even though they were recognized as sovereign entities within the international system. These states differed significantly from those that underwent a long process of state formation in Europe, during which authority was gradually consolidated and control over territory was established through the monopoly of legitimate violence (Spruyt 2007).

In the Middle East, many states attempted to forge national unity by imposing a single identity within their territories and limiting transnational connections (Owen 2004). However, these efforts were often unsuccessful, as seen in the political unrest that followed the Arab Spring. Iraq has been a notable example of persistent fragility. The Fragile States Index, published by the Fund for Peace, ranked Iraq as the second most vulnerable state in 2007. While its ranking improved slightly to seventh in 2010 and 17th in 2020,[1] Iraq remains one of the most fragile states globally.

Yet, the very notion of "state fragility" has been critically reexamined in recent years. Scholars, particularly in African studies, have argued that this concept overlooks local forms of governance that operate alongside formal state institutions.[2] Boege et al. (2008) introduced the concept of hybrid political orders, emphasizing that what is conventionally labeled as "fragile states" often consist of complex and competitive governance environments where formal state structures coexist with informal actors (Boege et al., 2008; Endo, 2013).[3]

In this chapter, I adopt the concept of hybrid governance. It refers to a political order composed of formal and informal governance structures and is shaped by both the central government and ANSAs, in contexts where state authority is weak or contested. ANSAs emerge in areas where the government's authority is limited or absent. While they are often associated with criminal or terrorist activities, ANSAs can also provide governance functions, such as maintaining security or delivering public services, thereby contributing to local stability (Keister, 2014; Mazarr, 2014).

In the broadest sense, ANSAs can be situated within civil society, alongside NGOs, social movements, religious institutions, and informal authorities such as tribal leaders. In fragile states, these actors often play vital roles in governance and directly impact the lives of citizens by providing services and maintaining order. For instance, in Somaliland, customary institutions rooted in clan-based society have worked in tandem with modern state institutions to sustain political order (Boege et al., 2008).

However, this chapter focuses specifically on ANSAs that play a role in the security dimension of hybrid governance. For analytical clarity, I exclude purely criminal organizations such as mafias or transnational crime groups whose primary objective is economic gain and who lack political aspirations. ANSAs, as defined in this chapter, are armed groups capable of exercising sustained territorial control and conducting coordinated military operations to achieve political objectives (Yeşiltaş & Kardaş, 2018).

It is important to note that the absence of effective state governance does not manifest uniformly. Fragile contexts range from "black spots" controlled by criminal networks to unrecognized or de facto states that, despite lacking international recognition, possess many of the attributes of sovereignty (Stanislawski, 2008). Governance in such settings is typically fluid, unstable, and fragmented. Nevertheless, in a fragile state, governance resembles the international system in

[1] https://fragilestatesindex.org/.

[2] For example, see Meagher (2012).

[3] In recent years, as more countries in the Middle East, such as Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, have experienced instability in domestic governance, debates on the hybrid political order of state and non-state actors have emerged in the Middle Eastern studies as well. See, for example, (Yeşiltaş & Kardaş, 2018; Polese & Santini, 2019).

terms of its absence of an enforcer or hegemon, but anarchic conditions allow for cooperation (Risse, 2013). In the international community, the recognition of the legitimacy of international law and an international regime by each state forms a certain order. Similarly in hybrid governance, the recognition, at least nominally, of the authority of the central government, which may be weak but still exists, could be the key to bring order to multiple competing ANSAs.

In the context of hybrid governance, the recognition—whether formal or nominal—of the central government's authority is a key factor in maintaining political order among competing ANSAs. As Krasner (1999) notes, while control may be achieved through brute force, authority is rooted in mutual recognition. In Iraq, although the central government has often lacked the capacity to monopolize the legitimate use of violence, its authority has nevertheless been acknowledged by many ANSAs, at least nominally. The authority possessed by the central government is likely to be an important factor for establishing a certain level of order. This is because a central government is in a position to negotiate with all of the various ANSAs in a territory and exercise power in the form of allocating budgetary funds or asserting a certain legitimacy, even if the central government is weak and lacks the ability to govern hierarchically (Risse, 2013).

This dynamic of hybrid governance is particularly relevant to the case of the Kurdistan Region. As subsequent sections will show, KRG occupies a unique position in Iraq's governance structure. While the KRG is formally recognized as an autonomous entity under the Iraqi constitution, it maintains its own military forces and exercises substantial authority independent of the central government. In this sense, the KRG can be analyzed as an ANSA embedded within Iraq's broader hybrid governance framework. Understanding the theoretical underpinnings of state fragility and hybrid governance is therefore essential to analyzing the relationship between the Iraqi government and the Kurdistan Region, as well as the internal governance structure of the Region itself.

3.2.2 Iraq and the Kurdistan Region Since 2003

The case of Iraq since 2003 illustrates how hybrid governance has developed in a fragile state. Following the fall of the Ba'ath regime, Iraq experienced significant political and security turmoil. Nevertheless, the postwar political process led to the establishment of formal political institutions, including the enactment of a new constitution in 2005, the implementation of parliamentary elections, and the formation of successive governments. Although the country witnessed repeated political crises, anti-government protests, and violent conflicts—including the rise of IS—the authority of the central government and the existing political order persisted and were never fundamentally dismantled.

This continuity of formal authority, even amidst chronic instability, reflected the emergence of a hybrid governance structure in Iraq. Many ANSAs, such as the Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs), maintained their own armed capabilities while recognizing the authority of the central government. They even actively sought to secure their status within the formal political order, as demonstrated by the legalization of the PMUs by the Iraqi parliament. This effort reflected a broader pattern in which ANSAs recognized, at least nominally, the authority of the central government and maintained a relationship with it—often not out of loyalty, but to preserve their own interests and secure political and economic benefits. This pragmatic recognition of state authority contributed to the formation of a loose but persistent political order, in which the coexistence of formal institutions and ANSAs became the foundation of Iraq's hybrid governance. Others, such as most of Sunni insurgent groups and IS, rejected the political order entirely and thus became spoiler forces.[4]

Within this broader hybrid governance framework, the Kurdistan Region represents a particularly distinctive and complex case. Its historical trajectory has been shaped by a long-standing struggle for autonomy and a fraught relationship with the central government. Since the establishment of the Iraqi state in 1921, successive governments have faced persistent difficulties in governing the Kurdish minority in the north. From the 1960s onward, armed conflict between Kurdish forces and the Iraqi government escalated, with cycles of negotiation, ceasefires, and renewed violence (Stansfield, 2003; Bengio, 2010).

A significant turning point occurred after the Gulf War in 1991. Following a popular uprising and the imposition of a no-fly zone by international coalition forces, the Iraqi government withdrew its authority from the Kurdish areas in northern Iraq. This created a power vacuum that enabled the two dominant Kurdish parties—the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)—to establish de facto autonomy over the Region. In 1992, the first KRG was formed; however, inter-party rivalry between the KDP and PUK soon led to political fragmentation and armed clashes, which continued throughout the 1990s (Leezenberg, 2005; Zaman, 2016). It was only after the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the subsequent political transition that the autonomy of the Kurdistan Region was formally recognized and incorporated into the new Iraqi constitution as a federal entity (Galbraith, 2006).

Since 2003, the KRG has exercised broad administrative and security authority over the Kurdistan Region. The influence of the central government within the Region has been extremely limited; no Iraqi army units or federal government offices operate there, and the KRG controls its own security forces, the Peshmerga (Chapman, 2011; International Crisis Group, 2015). As a result, the Kurdistan Region has frequently been referred to as a "de facto state" (Bengio, 2010; Rafaat, 2018).

The characteristics of the Kurdistan Region are consistent with the broader trend observed in unrecognized or quasi-states, where governing authorities seek to build internal legitimacy and effective governance structures despite lacking full international recognition (Caspersen, 2012). For most unrecognized states, since their

[4] The exception is the Awakening Councils, the Sunni tribal forces, which are discussed in Sect. 3.2.2.

ultimate goal is to obtain international recognition as sovereign entities, ruling ANSAs often have an incentive to establish a degree of internal stability and democratic governance to enhance their legitimacy (Closson, 2011). Moreover, it has been observed that hybrid governance led by ANSAs—though inherently unstable—tends to be sustainable in the long term when the governing authority succeeds in securing domestic sovereignty as a quasi-state (Börzel & Risse, 2021). This also applies to the Kurdistan Region, which has sought to strengthen its autonomy and domestic governance capacity.

Concurrently, Kurdish political actors have actively participated in shaping Iraq's post-2003 political order. They played a key role in drafting the 2005 constitution, which introduced federalism and enshrined the autonomy of the Kurdistan Region. Furthermore, Kurdish parties have held influential positions within the federal government, including the presidency and key ministerial posts (Mansour, 2017). Voter turnout in the Kurdistan Region has consistently been higher than in other parts of Iraq, reflecting a certain degree of engagement with the formal political process.

At the same time, the autonomy enjoyed by the Kurdistan Region has also posed significant challenges to the authority of the central government. The KRG has maintained its own military forces and extended its effective control over disputed territories beyond the formal boundaries of the Region, particularly following the security vacuum created by the rise of IS in 2014 (International Crisis Group, 2015; van den Toorn et al., 2016). This has resulted in an inherently hybrid governance structure, in which the central government and the KRG coexist in a fragile and contested political order.

Against this backdrop, this chapter proposes three hypotheses to analyze the dynamics of hybrid governance in Iraq, with a particular focus on the Kurdistan Region:

Hypothesis 1: The relationship between the Iraqi government and the Kurdistan Region constitutes a form of hybrid governance, similar to other parts of Iraq where ANSAs operate alongside formal state institutions.

Hypothesis 2: The Kurdistan Region's pursuit of independence and secessionist tendencies threatens to destabilize this hybrid governance structure by undermining the authority of the central government.

Hypothesis 3: Within the Kurdistan Region itself, a form of hybrid governance exists between the KRG and the dominant Kurdish political parties—the KDP and PUK—which maintain their own armed forces and exert de facto control over security functions.

Through an examination of these hypotheses, this chapter aims to clarify how hybrid governance functions not only at the national level in Iraq but also within the autonomous Kurdistan Region, shedding light on the complexities and contradictions inherent in governance structures in fragile states. In principle, the scope of this chapter is limited to developments up to the year 2021.

3.3 State Authority and ANSAs in Iraq

Before turning to the main alalysis, this section provides an overview of the development of Iraq's hybrid governance at the national level from 2003 to 2021. It first analyzes how the formal political order was established following the regime change, despite persistent instability. It then considers how the presence and activities of ANSAs shaped the country's security environment and contributed to the formation of a hybrid political order.

3.3.1 Establishment of Official Authority

Following the collapse of the Ba'ath regime in April 2003, the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), led by the United States, assumed control of Iraq. The occupation was marked by the CPA's lack of preparedness and the rapid expansion of armed resistance against the occupying forces. In March 2004, the CPA enacted the Law of Administration for the State of Iraq for the Transitional Period (Coalition Provisional Authority, 2004), which outlined a political transition process aimed at ending the occupation and establishing a new Iraqi government. This process culminated in the formation of a formal government in 2006, although the continued instability of the security situation delayed the complete withdrawal of US forces until the end of 2011.

The legitimacy of the first postwar elections in January 2005, conducted under military occupation, was highly contested. Voter turnout was particularly low in Sunni-majority areas, reflecting widespread disillusionment with the political process. Nevertheless, the elections proceeded, and the resulting constitution, drafted without significant Sunni participation, entrenched the new political order. In subsequent elections, political actors increasingly recognized the need to compete within the electoral framework to gain political power.

Elections in Iraq functioned, in effect, as a form of "a racial census" (Horowitz, 1985) with political parties mobilizing support primarily along ethnic and sectarian lines. This trend persisted across successive elections, albeit under evolving coalition dynamics. To manage this pluralistic political environment, a consociational democracy was adopted, characterized by grand coalitions, mutual vetoes, proportionality, and federalism. While this system enabled peaceful transfers of power and helped maintain a functioning regime, it also contributed to the entrenchment of a patronage system in which economic resources were distributed among major political parties. The absence of opposition further weakened checks on governmental authority. Nonetheless, the postwar transition period and the establishment of regular parliamentary elections throughout the country contributed to the consolidation of a formal political order that would form the foundation of Iraq's governance structure.

Despite these developments, the new political order faced growing public disillusionment. Voter turnout remained relatively high until 2014, hovering around 60 to 70 percent. However, in 2018, turnout fell below 50 percent for the first time,[5] reflecting widespread frustration with the government's failure to deliver public services, address corruption, and improve economic conditions. This decline coincided with a series of large-scale anti-government protests, particularly among young people. Demonstrations erupted repeatedly in 2015, 2016, and 2018, demanding political reform, improved governance, and accountability. In response, the government announced reform plans, including administrative reforms and the appointment of technocratic ministers. However, these measures largely failed due to resistance from entrenched political interests (International Crisis Group, 2018).

In 2019, widespread protests escalated into what became known as the October Revolution, centered in Baghdad and southern Iraq. The scale of these demonstrations was unprecedented, resulting in hundreds of casualties as clashes between security forces and protesters intensified (United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq, 2020). Confronted with the gravity of the situation, the government introduced a series of reforms, including the dissolution of governorate councils, the lifting of immunity for lawmakers suspected of corruption, and the reduction of privileges for senior officials. The Iraqi parliament quickly passed amendments to key laws, including the electoral law, which had previously been a subject of protracted political negotiations. For the first time since 2003, the prime minister resigned mid-term, and Mustafa al-Kadhimi, the head of the intelligence service and a nonpolitical figure, was appointed as his successor.

These developments demonstrated that Iraq's political elites, despite their vested interests, could not ignore mass public pressure and were compelled to take steps to preserve the legitimacy of the formal political order. The protests gradually subsided over the following months, partly due to the spread of COVID-19 and partly because key protest demands had been addressed through leadership changes and electoral reforms.[6] While some protesters continued to demand fundamental regime change, others chose to pursue gradual reform within the existing political framework. These events reaffirmed the resilience of Iraq's formal institutions and underscored that, despite recurring protests, election boycotts, and other challenges, the

[5] Even the very first election in the January 2005, when a massive boycott of Sunni populations occurred, the national average of voter turnout was 58%.

[6] It is important to note, however, that one of the reasons why protests came to an end was the harsh repression from the regime side. Over the half of a year between October 2019 and the spring of 2020, when the protests were at the most intense, 487 protesters were killed in clashes (United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq, 2020). Much of the repression was carried out by pro-Iranian Shiite militias, which form ANSAs in Iraq, having their own command structures and weapons independent of the military and police (Middle East Center for Reporting and Analysis, 2020; Day, Felbab-Brown & Haddad, 2020). Since they were deeply involved in existing economic vested interests, they took an extrajudicial and coercive approach to the protesters to protect the political order. Their behavior clearly reveals the problem of ANSAs that use force in association with the official authority in an arbitrary manner without public accountability.

legitimacy and authority of the central government never collapsed but instead remained firmly rooted in Iraq.

3.3.2 Destabilization of the Security Situation and the Presence of ANSAs

While Iraq's formal political institutions took shape after 2003, the security situation remained unstable, and the central government struggled to monopolize the use of force. Various ANSAs emerged during this period, exploiting the power vacuum and the state's limited capacity to ensure security and order. These actors played significant roles in both exacerbating violence and, paradoxically, contributing to the maintenance of a fragile political order.

The rise of the jihadist organizations following the US invasion marked a turning point in Iraq's security landscape. Jihadist and ex-Ba'athist insurgent groups capitalized on widespread resentment toward the occupation and sectarian tensions, particularly among Sunni Arab communities. Between 2004 and 2007, Iraq experienced a sharp increase in violence, culminating in the outbreak of large-scale sectarian conflict in 2006.

The US military surge in 2007 and the Sunni tribal "Awakening" movement temporarily improved the security situation. This improvement was facilitated by a shift in US military strategy, which prioritized cooperation with local actors and emphasized population security over offensive operations (Pirnie & O'Connell, 2008). As part of this strategy, many Sunni tribes entered into alliances with US forces, organizing local militias to combat jihadist groups. These "Awakening Councils" were initially formed in Anbar Province but soon expanded to other governorates as well. At their peak in 2009, approximately 118,000 members were organized under about 130 different groups across the country (Zorri, 2016). By cooperating with US forces, these tribes succeeded in regaining control of their local areas and reducing violence. The Awakening thus represented an early example of how the involvement of ANSAs could contribute to improving local security conditions, even as it further blurred the boundaries between state and non-state authority. However, despite these temporary gains, the underlying political grievances and structural weaknesses of the Iraqi state remained unresolved.

The main factor behind the second peak of insecurity in Iraq during the mid-2010s was the accumulation of Sunni discontent resulting from the government's coercive and exclusionary policies. Heavy-handed arrests, discrimination, and marginalization of Sunni communities by security forces and state institutions deepened grievances and alienation. Anti-government protests began to spread in Sunni-majority areas around 2013, and jihadist organizations, including IS, exploited this discontent to expand their influence. By mid-2014, IS had taken control of approximately one-third of the country, including Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, and declared the establishment of a "Caliphate." This event fundamentally destabilized Iraq's political and security environment.

However, the Iraqi government, with military and financial support from the international coalition, gradually regained control over the territory occupied by IS. Over the course of 3.5 years, the government and allied forces recaptured its territories, and in December 2017, the government officially declared victory over IS. Throughout this campaign, the Iraqi government sought to frame the conflict not as a sectarian struggle between Shiite and Sunni communities but as a law enforcement operation conducted by the legitimate government against a terrorist organization. This careful positioning helped mitigate the perception of sectarian conflict and ultimately contributed to broader acceptance of the existing political order, both at the national level and within local Sunni communities.

In the immediate aftermath of the IS assault in 2014, the official security apparatus—the Iraqi army and police—collapsed or withdrew from many areas, creating a vacuum in which the role of pro-government ANSAs expanded significantly. The PMUs were formed mainly from Shiite militias and volunteer fighters and were deployed widely across Iraq, with the exception of the Kurdistan Region. Sunni tribal forces, known as Tribal Mobilizations, were also established, drawing upon local Sunni populations and incorporated into the PMUs. These forces resembled the earlier Awakening Councils and played a similar role in securing their local areas (Day, Felbab-Brown & Haddad, 2020). Although the presence of the PMUs was not always welcomed by Sunni communities, their involvement was widely accepted as a necessary measure, given the demonstrated incapacity of regular Iraqi forces to defeat IS, even with coalition air support (Haddad, 2017).

In ethnically and religiously diverse areas such as Sinjar, the security landscape became even more complex. Various armed groups, including several PMU-affiliated militias, local forces supported by KRG, and even Kurdish forces from outside Iraq, were deployed simultaneously, resulting in a highly fragmented and contested security environment (van den Toorn et al., 2016). Consequently, while the military campaign succeeded in restoring territorial control at the macro level, it also created a fluid and multi-layered governance structure at the local level, characterized by competition and occasional skirmishes among ANSAs.

Under these circumstances, it was extremely difficult for the Iraqi government to achieve a monopoly over the legitimate use of force or to dismantle the ANSAs and establish hierarchical control over them. Nonetheless, Iraq's formal political institutions—its government, parliament, and security apparatus—survived the war against IS and emerged with increased legitimacy as the sole authority. The PMUs, originally established as volunteer militias, were formally incorporated into Iraq's official security institutions through the enactment of the Law of the PMUs Committee in November 2016 (Ministry of Justice, 2016). This law defined the PMUs as a public organization, guaranteed them the same salaries and pensions as the Iraqi army, and placed them under the direct authority of the Prime Minister as the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces. In practice, however, the Prime Minister's control over the PMUs remained limited.

Even so, the formal incorporation of the PMUs reflected their partial recognition of the state's authority and of the existing political order. At the same time, the PMUs sought to exploit this recognition to advance their own interests. They did not attempt to dismantle or overthrow the state; rather, they sought to secure their share of political and economic resources within the state framework (Natali, 2017). In this sense, as long as they acknowledged the authority of the state, the PMUs and other ANSAs played a complementary role in Iraq's hybrid governance structure by maintaining order and security at the local level.

3.4 The Kurdistan Region in Iraqi Hybrid Governance

This section focuses on the Kurdistan Region and examines its role within Iraq's hybrid governance structure. It analyzes the KRG and the dominant Kurdish parties not only as formal components of Iraq's federal system but also as ANSAs that operate within and alongside the state. Furthermore, it explores how the Kurdistan Region's secessionist movement has posed challenges to the stability of Iraq's hybrid governance. Finally, this section investigates whether the Kurdistan Region itself can be considered a form of hybrid governance, if it is viewed as a fragile quasi-state.

3.4.1 Relation Between Iraq and The Kurdistan Region

The relationship between the Iraqi central government and the Kurdistan Region exemplifies the dynamics of hybrid governance in Iraq. Although the Kurdistan Region is formally recognized as an autonomous federal entity under the 2005 Iraqi constitution, its governance structure is characterized by a combination of formal authority and informal power exercised by the KRG and the dominant Kurdish parties.

To ensure that their autonomy would not be threatened again by the Iraqi regime, the Kurdish parties fully supported the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and actively participated in the postwar political transition process, aiming to formalize their autonomous status. In particular, the KDP and PUK set aside their party rivalry and took a joint stand during the negotiation of Iraq's new constitution in 2005. They successfully introduced federalism into the constitution and secured the official recognition of almost all the governing structures they had established in the 1990s, including their security apparatus, as the rights of an autonomous region (Galbraith, 2006).

After 2003, the involvement and influence of the Iraqi central government within the Kurdistan Region remained extremely limited, much like during the 1990s. The central government exercised little to no control over intra-regional governance and KRG, which was reestablished in 2007, remained the sole governing entity. For these reasons, the Kurdistan Region has often been described as a "de facto state," possessing far greater autonomy than what is typically assumed under a federal system.

Importantly, while maintaining this high degree of autonomy, the Kurdish parties also worked to strengthen the authority of the Iraqi state, recognizing that their own political and economic rights depended on the stability and functionality of the central government. They played a major role in shaping Iraq's postwar political order: members of Kurdish parties have consistently held important positions in the federal government, including the presidency of the Iraqi state, as well as key ministerial posts such as the foreign and finance ministries. The Kurdish parties sought to secure their interests as a minority under Iraq's consociational democratic system.

Furthermore, the Kurdistan Region has generally recorded higher voter turnout in Iraqi parliamentary elections than other areas of the country, reflecting a degree of support for the federal political framework. As mentioned earlier, the Kurdish parties were actively involved in drafting the 2005 constitution and recognized the authority and legitimacy of the Iraqi state as a necessary condition for securing their significant autonomy based on federalism and decentralization. Within this formal framework, the KRG enjoyed budgetary allocations from the federal government and engaged in quasi-diplomatic relations with foreign actors as part of Iraq's broader foreign policy.

One of the main reasons why the central government has been unable to exert effective control over the Kurdistan Region is that the KRG has maintained its own military forces, and the Iraqi government has never achieved a monopoly over the legitimate use of force in the Region. The nascent and fragile Iraqi state lacked the capacity to reestablish authority over the Kurdistan Region after 2003, whereas the KRG and the Kurdish parties had long consolidated local authority and provided security on behalf of the central government.

In this respect, the KRG can be understood as an ANSA. The relationship between the central government and the KRG exemplifies a hybrid form of governance, in which an ANSA that has established a certain degree of local legitimacy recognizes and utilizes the authority of the central government while simultaneously complementing its role by maintaining order and governance in its own territory.

3.4.2 The Secession Movement of the Kurdistan Region

Despite participating in Iraq's federal political framework, the KRG has often challenged the authority of the Iraqi central government. The most prominent example of this was the Kurdistan Region's secessionist attempt. The KRG sought to expand its authority as an autonomous region by taking advantage of the central government's vulnerability, with the expectation that it might ultimately achieve independence.

Officially, the Kurdish parties had consistently demanded autonomy within the Iraqi state, rather than outright independence. However, in July 2014, KRG President Masoud Barzani publicly declared, for the first time, the Kurdistan Region's desire for independence. Several factors motivated this bold move. One was the prospect of achieving financial self-sufficiency, as the KRG had begun independent oil exports 2 months earlier.[7] Another factor was the war against IS, during which the KRG gained effective control over disputed territories whose status had long been contested. Article 140 of the Iraqi constitution, which had aimed to resolve the status of these territories through political settlement, had effectively been abandoned by that time. For the KRG, the incorporation of key disputed areas, including oil-rich Kirkuk, was essential to any prospect of secession. With almost all of these disputed territories under its control amid the conflict, the KRG appeared to believe it could consolidate its annexation of these areas and unilaterally determine the future of the Kurdistan Region.

The results of the independence referendum, held in September 2017, were overwhelmingly in favor of independence, as widely expected. However, the domestic and international backlash was far stronger than the KRG had anticipated. Neighboring Iran and Turkey increased military pressure on the KRG, including conducting joint military exercises with Iraqi forces along their borders. Simultaneously, the Iraqi central government imposed economic sanctions, such as closing air routes to the Kurdistan Region. In October 2017, Iraqi forces and PMUs regained control of large swaths of the disputed territories, including the vital Kirkuk oil fields, through a swift military operation. Faced with mounting pressure, the KRG announced that it would "freeze" the results of the referendum. Shortly afterward, President Masoud Barzani, who had led the referendum initiative, resigned from the presidency of the KRG, a position he had held since 2005.

In general, for a parent state, the loss of part of its territory entails significant costs in terms of security, wealth, and prestige, making it rare for governments not to oppose secession (Bartkus, 1999). Many unrecognized states have managed to overcome the opposition of the central government and neighboring states largely because of the support of a patron state. Such patron states provide military, economic, and diplomatic assistance, including arms, loans, passports, and even mediation in peace negotiations, which enable unrecognized states to sustain their de facto independence despite lacking formal recognition (Caspersen, 2012). In the case of the KRG, however, no such patron exists.

The international community has generally sought to maintain a balance between the territorial integrity of Iraq and the autonomy of the Kurdistan Region (Riegl et al., 2017). Although many Western countries have treated the KRG as a "de facto state" and maintained close and unique diplomatic relations with it, these relations have been framed within their official relations with the Iraqi state. If the Kurdistan

[7] In 2007, the KRG enacted the Law of Oil and Gas for the Kurdistan Region-Iraq (Kurdistan Parliament-Iraq, 2007) and started to sign oil exploration and development contracts with more than 40 international oil companies. Then in May 2014, international oil exports from the Kurdistan Region began through a new oil pipeline built with the help of Turkey.

Region were to declare independence over the objections of the central government, it is certain that the Iraqi government would demand the closure of foreign consular offices in the Region. Ultimately, it is highly unlikely that the international community, which has supported Iraq's post-2003 reconstruction and democratization, would abandon its principle of preserving Iraq's territorial integrity in favor of the Kurdistan Region's claim to self-determination.

While the Iraqi government remains fragile, it possesses a certain degree of authority as the sole representative of the Iraqi state. The ANSAs that recognize this authority have functioned as complements to the central government, helping to sustain Iraq's hybrid governance. The KRG and Kurdish parties have similarly played a complementary role, so long as they acknowledged the authority of the Iraqi state. However, the move toward independence constituted a direct challenge to that authority. Given that the government lacks a formal chain of command over ANSAs, their cooperation with the government depends primarily on their own interests and circumstances. In the case of the Kurdistan Region's unilateral independence attempt, the PMUs and other major Iraqi ANSAs had no interest in supporting the secession, which would have resulted in the loss of Iraqi territory. As a result, their interests aligned with those of the central government, and they actively opposed the KRG's move toward independence. The same was true for neighboring states, which faced similar concerns over Kurdish secessionism. The KRG's move toward independence, which rejected the authority of the Iraqi state, undermined the existing political order based on hybrid governance and triggered a major backlash.

Although the Kurdistan Region, like many unrecognized states, has sought to strengthen its autonomy and establish a state within a state as a step toward independence, it is difficult to imagine that this process will ultimately lead to formal statehood. The extensive autonomy of the Kurdistan Region—often described as a "de facto state"—has been possible precisely because it has stopped short of declaring independence. The current situation appears to represent a point of equilibrium in Iraq's hybrid governance, in which the Kurdistan Region's autonomy is maintained within the framework of the Iraqi state.

3.4.3 Power Structure in the Kurdistan Region

Following the intra-Kurdish conflict of the 1990s and the political changes brought about by the Iraq War, the Kurdistan Region established a formal and unified governing authority. In January 2005, elections were held for the Kurdistan Parliament, and in May 2006, the fifth KRG cabinet was formed. Since then, the KRG has served as the sole official authority representing the Kurdistan Region. Subsequent parliamentary elections were held in 2009, 2013, and 2018. Although government formation negotiations after each election were often protracted, new KRG cabinets were eventually established in accordance with the election results.

It should be noted that previous studies on the Kurdistan Region have tended to consider the KRG as a single actor that governs the Region or negotiates on its behalf with the central government (Aziz, 2011; Ahmed, 2012; Jüde, 2017; Mansour, 2017; Seyder, 2017; Rafaat, 2018). However, the KRG does not have a monopoly on violence and, in practice, has often struggled to function as a unified actor with consolidated decision-making authority over political, social, and economic affairs. This gap between formal authority and actual governance reflects the enduring power of the two dominant Kurdish parties, the KDP and PUK, which continue to exert control over key security and administrative institutions within their respective spheres of influence.

The clearest example of this fragmentation was the armed conflict between the KDP and PUK in the 1990s. At that time, economic conditions in the Kurdistan Region were severe due to the impact of UN sanctions against Iraq. Moreover, after the Iraqi army withdrew from the northern region in 1991, the Iraqi regime demanded that civil servants relocate to government-controlled areas and subsequently imposed an economic blockade. The central government halted salary payments, suspended food distribution, cut off electricity supplies, and restricted the flow of goods to the Kurdistan Region. As a result, the region was left economically vulnerable and became dependent on international aid and limited internal economic resources (Graham-Brown, 1999).

In this context, tensions between the KDP and PUK over economic interests, such as tariff revenues and control of land, escalated and culminated in armed clashes in May 1994 (Leezenberg, 2005). These conflicts, which caused hundreds of deaths on both sides, finally ended in 1998 after US-brokered mediation (Zaman, 2016). The outcome of the conflict was the division of the Kurdistan Region into two areas: the KDP controlled the northwestern area, primarily Duhok and Erbil, while the PUK controlled the southeastern area, mainly Sulaymaniyah (Leezenberg, 2015). The KRG's administrative structure was effectively split, resulting in two parallel KRGs, each dominated by one party. Even after the formal reunification of the KRG in 2006, the actors capable of exercising military force remained the political parties rather than the KRG itself, and this situation has not changed significantly since then. Both the KDP and PUK have continued to maintain effective control over their respective Peshmerga forces, while the authority of the KRG's Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs has remained extremely weak (International Crisis Group, 2015; Chapman, 2011). Similarly, intelligence agencies and the Asayish (internal security forces) are separately controlled by the two parties (International Crisis Group, 2011; Wilgenburg & Fumerton, 2015).

The KDP and PUK also sustain strong patron-client networks, incorporating their supporters through access to economic resources and employment opportunities. Major companies and economic interests in the Region are closely tied to one or the other party, reinforcing these networks (Najm, 2022). These economic interests not only fund their respective security forces but have also fostered corruption and cronyism. For instance, there have been cases of inflated salary payments, with party members and supporters registered as active or retired soldiers, and promotions often tied to party loyalty rather than merit (Saleem & Skelton, 2020).[8]

A key issue is that such economic vested interests can fuel tensions and potential internal conflict, particularly during times of economic crisis, when maintaining the patron-client networks becomes difficult. When the two parties struggle to secure sufficient resources, they may encroach upon each other's interests to survive, as they did during the armed clashes of the mid-1990s.

This structural dynamic was evident in a series of incidents in the late 2010s and early 2020s. In March 2017, while Kurdish forces were in control of Kirkuk, the PUK dispatched special forces to occupy the oil facilities of the Kirkuk oil fields, temporarily halting the export of crude oil. Although Kirkuk Governorate was broadly considered part of the PUK's sphere of influence, the overall oil industry in the Kurdistan Region and Kirkuk was under KDP control. In August 2016, an agreement was reached between the Iraqi central government and the KRG to transport crude oil from Kirkuk to refineries within the Kurdistan Region. This arrangement provoked strong opposition from the PUK, which argued that it enabled the KDP to profit from oil resources located in PUK-controlled areas. The occupation of the oil facilities was resolved only after about a week, when an agreement was reached to distribute crude oil to refineries in Sulaymaniyah Governorate as well.

Tensions flared again in February 2020 over a dispute concerning contracts for the transportation of liquefied petroleum gas (LPG). The conflict originated when the KRG's Ministry of Natural Resources, controlled by the KDP, awarded a new transportation contract to a company less closely aligned with the PUK, excluding the PUK-affiliated company that had previously held the contract. Since the LPG was sourced from the Chamchamal gas field in Sulaymaniyah Governorate, a PUK stronghold, the move was seen as an attempt by the KDP to erode the PUK's economic dominance in this sector. The dispute escalated into armed incidents, including the shooting of 22 LPG trucks, and the PUK imposed an embargo on fuel shipments to KDP-controlled areas in Erbil and Duhok Governorates. This resulted in supply disruptions and a sharp rise in LPG prices. Although the immediate crisis was resolved within a week, it exposed the persistent fragility of economic and security arrangements between the two parties.

These accumulated tensions culminated in April 2020, when, for the first time since the end of the intra-Kurdish conflict in 1998, Peshmerga forces affiliated with the KDP and PUK faced off in an armed standoff at Zini Warte, near the former ceasefire line. The incident was triggered when KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani, citing COVID-19 containment measures, ordered Peshmerga forces under the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs to deploy in the Zini Warte area. The PUK regarded this move as a provocation over a historically PUK-dominated area. In

[8] In response to this, opposition parties calling for a change have entered politics in 2010s, gaining a certain number of seats in the Kurdistan Parliament, but the major parties never relinquished power, and the opposition failed to enact concrete reforms. In the elections held since 2018, citizens' disappointment has appeared in the form of lower voter turnout.

response, the PUK deployed its own forces, resulting in a tense military standoff and underscoring the deep-rooted mistrust and rivalry between the two parties.

These episodes illustrate that the KRG, as an official governing body, lacks the capacity to control the actions of these militarily powerful ANSAs, namely the KDP- and PUK-affiliated Peshmerga, within the Kurdistan Region. Economic interests and party rivalries have repeatedly undermined the potential for unified governance, contributing to a persistent risk of intra-regional conflict.

Another problem arising from the concentration of power within the parties, rather than in the KRG, is that the interests of the parties often take precedence over those of the Region as a whole. During the war against IS from 2014 to 2017, the approximately 1000-kilometer front was divided into eight sections, with KDP-affiliated Peshmerga forces deployed in the northwest and PUK-affiliated forces in the southeast, reflecting their traditional spheres of influence. In areas where both parties sought to maintain influence, such as the oil-rich Kirkuk area, they frequently attempted to limit each other's control, making smooth cooperation difficult (International Crisis Group, 2015; van Wilgenburg & Fumerton, 2015).

These divisions were evident during the 2017 independence referendum as well. The KDP led the initiative and maintained a hardline stance against the Iraqi central government, while the PUK remained skeptical about the feasibility of independence. Following the advance of Iraqi forces and PMUs after the referendum, some PUK members independently negotiated with the Iraqi and Iranian governments and withdrew their forces from Kirkuk without coordinating with the KDP. The KDP condemned this move as "the greatest betrayal in modern Kurdish history," but the military weakness caused by this lack of coordination was clear, and the KDP itself was forced to retreat (Palani et al., 2020). The failure of the two parties to cooperate politically and militarily resulted in the loss of effective Kurdish control over much of the disputed territories.

From the perspective of hybrid governance, the situation within the Kurdistan Region reveals a structure similar to that observed in the rest of Iraq. The official authority of the KRG, which is supposed to represent the autonomous region as a whole, remains weak, while the major Kurdish political parties—the KDP and PUK—exercise significant power as ANSAs, supported by local legitimacy and backed by superior military capabilities. As discussed in the previous sections, at the national level, the KRG has been understood as one of the ANSAs that participate in Iraq's hybrid governance structure alongside the central government. However, within the Kurdistan Region itself, the KRG is supposed to act as the central government, but its ability to do so remains limited. This creates a dual structure in which the KRG functions as the formal authority, but its governance is fragile and relies heavily on the two dominant political parties, which, as ANSAs, both complement and compete with its authority.

A key difference between hybrid governance in the Kurdistan Region and in other parts of Iraq is the limited number of ANSAs. In the Kurdistan Region, the primary ANSAs are confined to the KDP and PUK, and these parties are also the main actors that constitute the KRG itself. In contrast, in the areas under the Iraqi central government's control, there is only partial overlap between the political parties that form the government and those that command ANSAs; many ANSAs operate outside the formal political framework. The limited number of ANSAs in the Kurdistan Region contributes to the relative stability of its governance structure, with less fluidity and fewer shifts in the balance of power compared to the central government's areas. Moreover, unlike the tensions often observed between the Iraqi government and ANSAs such as the PMUs, there is little visible tension between the KRG and the Kurdish parties, given their structural integration.

At the same time, however, this structural closeness means that efforts to strengthen public authority by curbing the power of ANSAs, as well as momentum for administrative and political reforms, are less likely to emerge in the Kurdistan Region than in the central government's domain. Furthermore, because the ANSAs in the Kurdistan Region are not merely militias or local security providers but the very political parties that constitute the KRG, their political survival depends on maintaining their dominant position within the KRG. This has effectively excluded the possibility of them becoming opposition parties. To sustain their status as ruling parties, the KDP and PUK must secure electoral victories at all costs, ensuring continued access to economic resources and control over security forces. This dynamic creates strong incentives to preserve existing patronage networks and may hinder efforts to advance governance reforms, regardless of repeated elections.

In sum, hybrid governance in the Kurdistan Region is characterized by the interdependence of the KRG and the Kurdish parties, which function simultaneously as formal authorities and ANSAs. While this structure has contributed to political stability by limiting competition among ANSAs, it has also entrenched vested interests and obstructed governance reforms. The distinctive nature of hybrid governance in the Kurdistan Region, where the boundary between the state and ANSAs is blurred, underscores the complex interplay between stability and stagnation inherent in this system.

3.5 Conclusions

This chapter has examined the dynamics of hybrid governance in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region. In the case of Iraq, despite persistent political and security turmoil, the authority of the central government and the existing political order were maintained and never collapsed after 2003. While the central government lacked the strength to monopolize the legitimate use of force, it nevertheless preserved a limited capacity to shape the political order by providing salaries and conferring legitimacy on ANSAs, notably the PMUs, that formally acknowledged its authority. These ANSAs played a complementary role by maintaining order in specific local areas where state governance was limited.

In the case of the Kurdistan Region, an autonomous region under Iraq's federal system, the central government has had no control or influence over its internal affairs, including its security forces. The Kurdish parties, while consolidating their authority within the autonomous region, actively participated in shaping Iraq's post-2003 political order and contributed to reinforcing it. If the KRG and the Kurdish parties—backed by their control over the Peshmerga and other security forces—are regarded as ANSAs, they too can be seen as having recognized the authority of the central government and complemented its security functions, while simultaneously building their own local legitimacy based on Kurdish nationalism. In this respect, the Kurdistan Region constitutes a form of hybrid governance alongside the Iraqi government, as suggested in Hypothesis 1.

However, the KRG's pursuit of secession posed a direct challenge to the authority of the central government. This attempt was perceived as a clear threat to the existing political order, not only by the central government but also by other ANSAs and neighboring countries, provoking a major backlash following the independence referendum in 2017. As indicated in Hypothesis 2, the Kurdistan Region's move toward secession destabilized Iraq's hybrid governance structure, revealing that its extensive autonomy as a "de facto state" had been possible precisely because it had remained within the hybrid political order of Iraq.

While the KRG represented the Kurdistan Region in Iraqi politics and foreign relations, a closer examination of its internal power structure reveals that the real authority resided with the two dominant Kurdish parties, the KDP and PUK, rather than with the KRG itself. This was most clearly reflected in their separate control over security forces. During periods of crisis, such as the war against IS and the aftermath of the 2017 referendum, conflicts of interest between the two parties resurfaced, repeatedly threatening to escalate into armed confrontation. The KRG's governmental authority remained weak, while the political parties that controlled the security forces assumed substantial security functions as ANSAs, operating under the nominal authority of the KRG. This supports Hypothesis 3, which argued that if the Kurdistan Region is regarded as a quasi-state, its governance structure can be understood as hybrid governance, constituted by the formal authority of the KRG and the informal authority of the Kurdish parties.

For hybrid governance—characterized by the coexistence of formal and informal political orders—to be sustained, it is essential that the central government possess a certain degree of authority, recognized even nominally by ANSAs. When ANSAs attempt to challenge the political order to secure their own primacy, it provokes opposition not only from the central government but also from other ANSAs who derive their legitimacy from the existing political framework. This dynamic was clearly demonstrated in the reaction to the Kurdistan Region's attempt to secede. However, if the Kurdistan Region had benefited from the support of a patron state, as many unrecognized states do, the outcome might have been different. How external actors influence the equilibrium of hybrid governance remains an important question for future research.

The case of Iraq illustrates how hybrid governance can maintain a fragile but functional political order through a balance between state authority and ANSA autonomy. A comparative view of Iraq's hybrid governance structure reveals important variations between the central government's domain and the Kurdistan Region. In both cases, hybrid governance has emerged as a response to weak state authority and the proliferation of ANSAs, with formal institutions relying on these actors to maintain political order. However, in the central government-controlled areas, the number of ANSAs is large, their organizational structures are fragmented, and their relationships with the state are fluid and often unstable. In contrast, the Kurdistan Region's hybrid governance is shaped by a limited number of ANSAs—the KDP and the PUK—which not only command security forces but also constitute the KRG itself. This structural overlap has contributed to relative stability but at the same time has entrenched patronage networks and limited the space for governance reforms. These findings underscore that hybrid governance can take multiple forms even within a single state.

Across the Middle East, the number of fragile states has increased, particularly since the Arab Spring. However, many of these states are not in a condition of complete anarchy; rather, they are characterized by hybrid governance structures in which weak but recognized governments coexist with ANSAs that play complementary roles in maintaining security. This framework provides a valuable lens through which to analyze the realities of governance in other fragile Middle Eastern countries. Further research should explore the processes through which ANSAs are integrated into formal state governance structures, as well as the role of external actors in stabilizing or destabilizing hybrid governance.

References

Ahmed, M. M. A. (2012). *Iraqi Kurds and nation-building*. Palgrave.

Aziz, M. A. (2011). In I. B. Tauris (Ed.), *The Kurds of Iraq ethnonationalism and national identity in Iraqi Kurdistan*.

Bartkus, V. O. (1999). *The dynamic of secession*. Cambridge University Press.

Bengio, O. (2010). *The Kurds of Iraq building a state within a state*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.

Boege, V., Brown, A., Clements, K., & Nolan, A. (2008). *On hybrid political orders and emerging states: State formation in the context of 'fragility'*. Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management, October. https://berghof-foundation.org/library/on-hybrid-political-orders-and-emerging-states-state-formation-in-the-context-of-fragility

Börzel, T. A., & Risse, T. (2021). *Effective governance under anarchy institutions, legitimacy, and social trust in areas of limited statehood*. Cambridge University Press.

Caspersen, N. (2012). *Unrecognized states the struggle for sovereignty in the modern international system*. Polity Press.

Chapman, D. P. (2011). *Security forces of the Kurdistan regional government*. Mazda Publishers.

Closson, S. (2011). What do unrecognized states tell us about sovereignty? In N. Caspersen & G. Stansfield (Eds.), *Unrecognized states in the international system* (pp. 58–69). Routledge.

Coalition Provisional Authority. (2004). *qānūn idāra al-dawla al-'irāqīya li al-marḥala al-intiqālīya (The Law of Administration for the State of Iraq for the Transitional Period)* March 8. (Arabic).

Day, A., Felbab-Brown, V., & Haddad, F. (2020). *Hybrid conflict, hybrid peace: How militia's and paramilitary groups shape post-conflict transitions*. United Nations University Centre for Policy Research, April 14. https://i.unu.edu/media/cpr.unu.edu/post/3895/HybridConflictFullReport.pdf

Endo, M. (2013). *houkai kokka to kokusai anzen hoshou somaria ni miru aratana kokkazou no tanjou (Collapsed States and International Security: Experience of Somaria and new sovereign statehood)*. Yuhikaku. (Japanese).

Galbraith, P. W. (2006). *The end of Iraq*. Simon & Schuster Paperbacks.
Graham-Brown, S. (1999). *Sanctioning Saddam: The politics of intervention in Iraq*. I.B.Tauris.
Haddad, Fanar. (2017). After sectarianism. *Postwar Watch*, November 20. https://postwarwatch.com/2017/11/20/after-sectarianism/
Horowitz, D. (1985). *Ethnic groups in conflict*. University of California Press.
International Crisis Group. (2011). Loose ends: Iraq's security forces between U.S. drawdown and withdrawal. *Middle East Report*, 99, October 26. https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/99-loose-ends-iraq-s-security-forces-between-u-s-drawdown-and-withdrawal.pdf
International Crisis Group. (2015). Arming Iraq's Kurds: Fighting IS, inviting conflict. *Middle East Report*, 158, The Mayan 12. https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/158-arming-iraq-s-kurds-fighting-is-inviting-conflict.pdf
International Crisis Group. (2018). How to cope with Iraq's summer brushfire. *Middle East Briefing*, 161, July 31. https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/b061-how-to-cope-with-iraqs-summer-brushfire_0.pdf
Kurdistan Parliament – Iraq. (2007). *qānūn al-nafṭ wa al-ġāz li iqlīm kurdistān - al-'irāq. (The Oil and Gas Law for The Kurdistan Region - Iraq)*. http://perleman.org/files/articles/070708090735.pdf (Arabic).
Jüde, J. (2017). Contesting borders? The formation of Iraqi Kurdistan's De facto state. *International Affairs, 93*(4), 847–863.
Keister, J. (2014). The illusion of chaos: Why ungoverned spaces aren't ungoverned, and why that matters. *Policy Analysis*, 766, December. https://www.cato.org/policy-analysis/illusion-chaos-why-ungoverned-spaces-arent-ungoverned-why-matters
Krasner, S. D. (1999). *Sovereignty: Organized hypocrisy*. Princeton University Press.
Leezenberg, M. (2005). Iraqi Kurdistan: Contours of a post-civil war society. *Third World Quarterly, 26*, 4–5. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01436590500127867
Leezenberg, M. (2015). Politics, economy, and ideology in Iraqi Kurdistan since 2003: Enduring trends and novel challenges. *Arab Studies Journal, 23*(1), 154–183. https://pure.uva.nl/ws/files/39229759/44744903.pdf
Mansour, R. (2017). In pursuit of friends: The Kurdistan region's foreign affairs and diplomacy. In G. Stansfield & M. Shareef (Eds.), *The Kurdish question revisited* (pp. 449–461). Hurst & Company.
Mazarr, M. J. (2014). The rise and fall of the failed-state paradigm requiem for a decade of distraction. *Foreign Affairs, 93*, 1. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2013-12-06/rise-and-fall-failed-state-paradigm
Meagher, K. (2012). The strength of weak state? Non-state security forces and hybrid governance in Africa. *Development and Change, 43*(5), 1073–1101. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-7660.2012.01794.x
Middle East Center for Reporting and Analysis. (2020). *Sources close to PMU reveal role of Badr, AAH and pro-Iranian groups in suppressing Iraqi protests*. September 1. https://www.mideastcenter.org/post/sources-close-to-pmu-reveal-role-of-badr-aah-and-pro-iranian-groups-in-suppressing-iraqi-protests
Ministry of Justice. (2016). *qānūn hay'a al-ḥashd al-sha'bī raqam (40) li sana 2016. (The PMU Committee Law Number 40 for 2016)*. https://moj.gov.iq/wqam/4429.pdf (Arabic).
Najm, R. (2022). The illusion of reform in Iraqi Kurdistan. *1001 Iraqi Thought*, July 26. https://1001iraqithoughts.com/2022/07/26/the-illusion-of-reform-in-iraqi-kurdistan/
Natali, D. (2017). Syria's spillover on Iraq: State resilience. *Middle East Policy, 24*(1), 48–61.
Owen, R. (2004). *State, power and politics in the making of the modern Middle East* (3rd ed.). Routledge.
Palani, K., Khidir, J., Dechesne, M. and Bakker, E. (2020), De Facto States Engagement with Parent States: Kurdistan's Engagement with the Iraqi Government, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, 48*:4, pp.770–788. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/13530194.2020.1714429

Pirnie, B., & O'Connell, E. (2008). Counterinsurgency in Iraq (2003–2006). *Rand Counterinsurgency Study*, 2. https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2008/RAND_MG595.3.pdf
Polese, A., & Santini, R. H. (Eds.). (2019). *Rethinking statehood in the Middle East and North Africa: Security, Sovereignty and new political order*. Routledge.
Rafaat, A. (2018). *Kurdistan in Iraq the evolution of a quasi-state*. Routledge.
Riegl, M., Doboš, B., Landovsky, J., & Bar, S. (2017). Kurdistan region's quests for independent statehood: Trapped in internal and geopolitical rivalries. In M. Riegl & B. Doboš (Eds.), *Unrecognized states and secession in the 21st century* (pp. 153–168). Springer.
Risse, T. (2013). Governance under limited sovereignty. In M. Finnemore & J. Goldstein (Eds.), *Back to basics state power in a contemporary world* (pp. 78–104). Oxford University Press.
Saleem, Z., & Skelton, M. (2020). Assessing Iraqi Kurdistan's stability how patronage shapes conflict. *LSE Middle East Centre Paper Series*, 38, July. http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/105775/1/MEC_assessing_iraqi_kurdistans_stability_published.pdf
Seyder, F. I. (2017). The Iraqi Kurds: Historical backgrounds of a nonstate nation. In G. Gürbey, S. Hofmann, & F. I. Seyder (Eds.), *Between state and non-state: Politics and Society in Kurdistan -Iraq and Palestine* (pp. 25–41). Palgrave Macmillan.
Spruyt, H. (2007). War, trade, and state formation. In C. Boix & S. C. Stokes (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of comparative politics* (pp. 211–235). Oxford University Press.
Stanislawski, B. H. (Ed.). (2008). Para-states, quasi-states, and black spots: Perhaps not states, but not 'ungoverned territories' either. *International Studies Review, 10*(2), 366–396.
Stansfield, G. R. V. (2003). *Iraqi Kurdistan political development and emerging democracy*. Routledge Curzon.
United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq. (2020). *Human rights violations and abuses in the context of demonstrations in Iraq October 2019 to April 2020*, August. https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Countries/IQ/Demonstrations-Iraq-UNAMI-OHCHR-report.pdf
van den Toorn, C., Mathieu-Comtois, S., & Wilgenburg, W. (2016). *Sinjar after ISIS: Returning to disputed territory*, PAX, June. https://paxforpeace.nl/media/download/pax-iraq-sinjar-web.pdf
van Wilgenburg, W., & Fumerton, M. (2015). Kurdistan's political armies: The challenge of unifying the Peshmerga forces. *Civil-Military Relations in Arab States*, December 16. http://carnegieendowment.org/files/ACMR_WilgenburgFumerton_Kurdistan_English_final.pdf
Yeşiltaş, M., & Kardaş, T. (Eds.). (2018). *Non-state armed actors in the Middle East: Geopolitics, ideology, and strategy*. Palgrave Macmillan.
Zaman, A. (2016). *From tribe to nation: Iraqi Kurdistan on the cusp of statehood* (Middle East Program Occasional Paper Series). Fall. https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/from_tribe_to_nation_final.pdf
Zorri, D. M. (2016). Understanding the Sunni awakening with complexity theory. *Digest of Middle East Studies, 24*(1), 132–154. https://doi.org/10.1111/dome.12077

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

Chapter 4
The Role of Emerging Local Think Tanks During Conflict: A Case Study of Syrian Diaspora Think Tanks

Dina Ramadan

Abstract This chapter critically examines the role and influence of Syrian diaspora think tanks amidst the ongoing conflict, emphasizing the concepts of legitimacy and sovereignty in the context of non-state actors. The study explores the emergence and evolving impact of these institutions, which have risen in response to the Syrian Uprising of 2011. In a political landscape that traditionally associates legitimacy with state recognition, these think tanks have instead established credibility through expertise, transnational networks, and moral authority. This chapter highlights the structural challenges these think tanks face, including limited funding, restricted access to reliable data, and political fragmentation, while striving to offer relevant policy insights. Prior to the Uprising, Syria's tightly controlled environment stifled independent research institutions. However, the ongoing conflict has provided the impetus for the rise of diaspora-based think tanks, which now play a crucial role in shaping policy debates. The analysis examines their complex relationships with key stakeholders and their contributions to public discourse, proposing strategies to enhance their sustainability and influence. By exploring how these think tanks navigate the shifting boundaries of sovereignty and legitimacy, this study underscores their critical role in shaping domestic policy and conflict trajectories. Despite the challenges, Syrian diaspora think tanks are carving out significant spaces for themselves, facilitating connections among diverse stakeholders and driving informed policy discussions grounded in localized expertise.

Keywords Think tanks · Democratic transitions · Syria · Conflict · Policy

D. Ramadan (✉)
AlSalam Institute for Women's Studies (SWS), Istanbul, Istanbul, Turkey

© The Author(s) 2026

M. Elayah (ed.), *Governance without Government in the MENA Region*, Nonprofit and Civil Society Studies,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-03953-8_4

4.1 Introduction and Conceptual Framework

Think tanks are crucial actors in democratic transitions, driving awareness, fostering debate, and advising policymakers. Their expertise catalyzes civil society by transforming academic research into accessible, actionable information for better policymaking (McGann & Whelan, 2020; Abelson, 2019). However, their role in conflict settings, particularly in post-conflict governance, remains underexplored. To remain effective in such volatile environments, think tanks must adapt to new technologies, rethink traditional business models, and navigate complex political landscapes (Barros & Taylor, 2020). In conflict-affected nations like Syria, diaspora-based think tanks have emerged as key influencers in policy discourse, strategically positioned outside state control.

Before the 2011 Uprising, Syria lacked independent think tanks, owing to strict government control over public discourse. The uprising and ensuing conflict heightened the need for research institutions to address emerging challenges (Khalaf, 2021). Consequently, numerous Syrian think tanks were established to provide informed discussion and foster strategic thinking in the post-uprising era (Gürpinar & Aydin, 2022). In contrast to their counterparts within Syria, diaspora-based think tanks operate beyond state-imposed limitations, allowing them to engage in sensitive political analysis and policy advocacy (Arestakes et al., 2021). This freedom positions them uniquely to bridge divides between opposing factions and facilitate transitional processes.

Beyond their functional roles, these think tanks challenge traditional concepts of legitimacy and sovereignty. Legitimacy is often associated with state recognition; however, diaspora think tanks derive their legitimacy from expertise, moral authority, and transnational networks (Beetham, 1991; Keck & Sikkink, 1998). Suchman (1995) asserts that legitimacy is not inherent but constructed through engagement with global stakeholders. For Syrian diaspora think tanks, legitimacy is built on their capacity to influence governance through research and policy recommendations that gain traction with policymakers, media, and international bodies.

At the same time, these think tanks operate in a political space that redefines sovereignty. In conventional terms, sovereignty is tightly linked to territorial control, yet in conflict settings, it has become increasingly deterritorialized (Agnew, 2005; Sassen, 2006). Syrian diaspora think tanks exemplify this shift by exerting discursive sovereignty, shaping governance debates and political trajectories without direct territorial control (Falk, 1995; Krasner, 1999). This evolving form of sovereignty reflects broader global governance trends, where non-state actors are shaping policy well beyond national borders.

Despite their growing influence, Syrian diaspora think tanks face significant structural challenges. These include limited funding, a shortage of skilled personnel, and difficulties in institutionalizing their efforts. Furthermore, data collection is hindered by the fragmented nature of the conflict, with access to reliable information constrained by armed groups and regime forces. Their relationships with key stakeholders, including military groups and official bodies, also impact their ability to influence policy effectively.

This chapter explores the role of Syrian diaspora think tanks in exile, focusing on how they navigate the complexities of legitimacy and sovereignty while contributing to policy discourse. It examines their strategies for disseminating knowledge, engaging with decision-makers, and proposing indigenous policy alternatives in crisis contexts. By examining these institutions' approaches to advocacy and public policy recommendations, this study offers insights into how non-state actors contribute to post-conflict governance, influencing political change beyond the traditional state framework.

4.2 Methodology and Research Limitations

This study adopts an interpretive qualitative approach, using semi-structured interviews with representatives from Syrian think tanks based in the diaspora. Interviews were conducted between October 28, 2021, and April 2, 2022, using a combination of in-person and online formats to accommodate geographical limitations and logistical challenges. Participants held leadership roles, including directors, heads of research, and research unit leads, offering a well-rounded view of institutional perspectives and operations. Each interview averaged around two hours, allowing for in-depth exploration of the think tanks' structures, goals, and political environments.

The research focuses exclusively on Syrian diaspora think tanks, intentionally excluding organizations located in opposition-controlled territories within Syria, those operating in regime-held areas, and research units affiliated with international think tanks covering broader MENA issues. These excluded entities are part of a separate planned study.

The term "think tank" used interchangeably with "research center" is based on the self-identification of interviewees, without normative assessment from the researcher. This approach acknowledges the fluid and diverse nature of these organizations, which range in output from media-style publications to policy papers and analytical studies. The lack of a standardized definition for "think tank" complicates categorization but reflects the dynamic and evolving nature of these institutions in exile.

In addition to the primary interviews, secondary sources were consulted to situate the study within the broader literature on think tanks and policy institutions. However, the available scholarship on emerging local think tanks during active conflict remains sparse, often limited to fragmented accounts and articles.

This research contributes to filling that gap by exploring how Syrian diaspora think tanks navigate political, legal, and institutional challenges during protracted conflict. It seeks to illuminate their evolving roles in policy advocacy and public discourse, ultimately contributing to a broader understanding of domestic think tanks' potential to support governance during crises.

4.3 Defining Syrian Diaspora Think Tanks: Legitimacy, Sovereignty, and Ambiguity

There has been much discussion about thin tank definition, or as Medvetz (2008) describe it as the “dilemma of definition”. Western-centric understandings emphasize policy engagement through research, analysis, and agenda-setting, typically framed by an expectation of independence from governmental influence (McGann, 2017a). Broader and more critical definitions account for the cultural and political environments in which these institutions operate, challenging the universality of Western models (Fenwick, 2006).

In Syria, the concept of a think tank is similarly ambiguous. Terms such as “think tank” and “research center” are used interchangeably by organizations whose activities range from producing in-depth policy analyses to publishing translated documents and short-form media outputs. This raises fundamental questions about institutional legitimacy: Who has the authority to define or validate a think tank in the absence of universally accepted standards or accrediting bodies? In conflict-affected settings, legitimacy is often constructed through perceived neutrality, quality of outputs, and transnational networks, rather than formal recognition (Stone, 2007).

This ambiguity is further compounded by the absence of a stable central authority in Syria. Without a sovereign state capable of recognizing or regulating research institutions, think tanks in exile function in a legal and political vacuum. This reflects a broader transformation in the relationship between expertise and sovereignty—where legitimacy and influence are negotiated outside traditional state structures (Agnew, 2005; Sassen, 2006). In this sense, Syrian think tanks represent a post-sovereign model of knowledge production, asserting authority without territorial grounding.

Hauck (2017) proposes evaluating think tanks through indicators such as ideological biases, communication strategies, and target audiences. While this study does not focus explicitly on participants’ political orientations, their outputs generally reflect critical views of the Syrian regime. These ideological positions inevitably shape their influence, especially given the dichotomy between centralized control in regime areas and the fragmented decision-making structures elsewhere.

An important question emerges: Can think tanks meaningfully influence policy in the absence of a unified governing body? Participants believe they can—by engaging with a wide array of actors, including civil society, international institutions, and grassroots movements. As Selee (2013) notes, think tanks increasingly operate in spheres beyond direct state influence, offering knowledge and strategies that shape public discourse and mobilize local responses.

For this study, Syrian think tanks are defined as organizations involved in research, analysis, translation, engagement, training, consultancy, and the production of reports, studies, and policy advice related to Syrian issues. They may be registered as for-profit, non-profit, or endowment entities. This inclusive definition reflects the flexibility needed to account for organizations operating in transitional and crisis environments (McGann & Shull, 2018), where the demand for timely, credible policy advice is high and conventional definitions fall short (Weaver, 2000).

By examining the functions and self-identifications of Syrian think tanks, this study not only clarifies definitional ambiguity but also contributes to broader debates about how legitimacy and sovereignty are reconfigured in exile and conflict.

4.3.1 Roles of the Syrian Think Tanks

Syrian think tanks in the diaspora operate in a context of ongoing conflict, fragmented governance, and widespread displacement. Their emergence has helped fill a critical gap in policy knowledge and public engagement left by the collapse of formal institutions within Syria McGann (2010). However, their quality and professionalism span a wide spectrum. While some have developed clear structures, rigorous methodologies, and growing international recognition, others remain informal or produce outputs that do not meet established research standards.

A central challenge for these organizations is legitimacy. In the absence of a unified national authority, these think tanks try to establish credibility in the eyes of both Syrians and the international community. This legitimacy may stem from research quality, independence, consistency, or engagement with civil society and local issues (Belloni, 2012; Selee, 2013). As one interviewee pointed out, "The legitimacy of these organizations is tied not just to the quality of their research but to their ability to build trust within the diaspora" (Interview 4, personal communication, November 01, 2021). Another participant echoed this sentiment, adding that "legitimacy comes from producing policy-relevant outputs that are widely recognized by both Syrians and the international community" (Interview 7, personal communication, November 12, 2021).

Closely tied to legitimacy is the issue of representational authority, who has the right to speak on behalf of Syria's future, and how is that right earned? This takes on new importance in settings where traditional sovereignty is eroded, and where institutions like diaspora think tanks take on roles typically associated with state bodies. Some scholars refer to this as "epistemic sovereignty," or the capacity to define, produce, and legitimize knowledge for the public good (Clunan & Trinkunas, 2010). A senior analyst from a policy-focused Syrian think tank reflected: "Our role was to speak when institutions could not. But we also had to be careful, we were not elected, we were researchers."

In terms of function, Syrian think tanks produce research, policy briefs, translations, and analysis addressing the country's political, economic, and social crises. Many focus on raising public awareness, influencing international actors, and sustaining interest in the Syrian issue. Their contributions include conflict documentation, transitional justice initiatives, and capacity-building programs for Syrian youth. They also work to preserve historical memory and provide platforms for debate and civic participation, which are essential in rebuilding civic trust.

These think tanks operate across four interconnected arenas: academia, politics, media, and business (Medvetz, 2012). Their influence depends on how well they navigate these fields. Academic partnerships help establish intellectual credibility, media appearances extend their reach, and political or donor relationships affect their access to resources. Yet these relationships can also create pressures, potentially threatening objectivity or independence.

Major challenges persist. Many think tanks face unstable funding, staff shortages, and difficulties accessing reliable data due to security conditions inside Syria. Moreover, political fragmentation and lack of institutional frameworks limit the application of their policy recommendations. Their legal status also varies, with some registered as NGOs, others as commercial entities, and few formally recognized as research institutions. These administrative differences create further disparities in capacity and influence.

Despite these obstacles, many Syrian think tanks continue to shape political discourse, influence public opinion, and advocate for democratic transition. However, realizing their full potential requires greater institutional development, transparent practices, and deeper engagement with diverse Syrian constituencies. These steps are crucial not only for credibility but also for enhancing their role in shaping Syria's political and civic future.

4.3.2 Legal Framework

Syrian think tanks in the diaspora operate under varying legal classifications, ranging from commercial companies to non-profit organizations (NGOs), as no dedicated legal framework exists for registering a think tank as a research institution. The challenges associated with NGO registration have frequently led organizations to opt for commercial business status, allowing for smoother establishment and operational flexibility. However, this choice raises broader questions about institutional legitimacy, as think tanks registered as businesses may face skepticism regarding their independence and commitment to public interest research (Abelson, 2019).

Despite being based in different jurisdictions, all think tanks studied reported operating under the general legal framework of their host country, with no additional restrictions imposed on them as Syrians. Importantly, they emphasized an absence of direct censorship, external political commitments, or restrictions on their research themes. Yet, while no formal limitations exist, the concept of sovereignty in exile becomes relevant when examining how these organizations navigate self-censorship.

While legally independent, many think tanks acknowledge practicing self-censorship on topics related to their host country, approaching sensitive issues with caution. This dynamic illustrates how de facto sovereignty constraints can shape intellectual production, even in democratic environments (Krasner, 1999; Agnew, 2005). Interestingly, this extends beyond self-imposed limitations, as think tanks registered in one country often criticize those in others for their reluctance to address politically sensitive issues in their respective host states. Such tensions reveal an underlying struggle over who defines legitimate discourse in exile, reinforcing the notion that sovereignty is not merely about state control but about the power to define permissible debate (Falk, 1995).

By operating outside Syria yet engaging in critical policy discourse, these think tanks also challenge traditional understandings of sovereignty. Their ability to influence governance debates and shape narratives about Syria's future demonstrates a non-territorial form of authority, where expertise and transnational networks compensate for the lack of physical jurisdiction (Sassen, 2006). However, this influence is not without its limitations. Several interviewees highlighted that the operational autonomy of Syrian diaspora think tanks is constrained by dependencies on host-country policies, funding limitations, and the broader geopolitical dynamics at play (Interview 9, personal communication, November 15, 2021).

4.4 Legitimacy, Influence, and Structural Constraints

4.4.1 Funding Sources and Autonomy

Securing funding remains one of the most significant challenges faced by think tanks globally, but the obstacles are particularly pronounced for Syrian think tanks, which are situated in a highly complex socio-political and geopolitical context. Unlike their international counterparts, which often have access to well-established funding sources such as governmental grants, institutional endowments, or contracts (McLevey, 2014), Syrian think tanks operate in a constrained environment, burdened by limited resources, political volatility, and an unstable institutional framework. This funding scarcity raises critical concerns not only about the sustainability of these think tanks but also about their ability to preserve their autonomy and credibility.

The financial pressures faced by Syrian think tanks underscore larger questions surrounding the role of these institutions within a fragmented political landscape. In this environment, securing funding is not merely a logistical challenge but also a question of legitimacy and sovereignty. For many of these organizations, particularly those operating from exile, the act of accepting funding whether from governmental bodies, international NGOs, or private donors, entails navigating complex political dynamics. This can be particularly problematic when donors possess specific political agendas that may influence the think tank's research focus and outcomes (Drezner, 2015). The challenge becomes how to maintain intellectual independence and align with national priorities, without being drawn into external agendas that could compromise their credibility (McGann, 2017a).

Typically, Syrian think tanks receive funding from three primary sources: governmental, institutional, and personal. Each of these funding streams carries its own set of challenges and risks. Governmental funding, while often substantial, frequently comes with strings attached. These administrative requirements, such as the necessity for registration and specific staffing criteria, can be seen as mechanisms of control, undermining the think tank's autonomy. This challenge is particularly acute given the politically sensitive environment in Syria, where both domestic and international actors seek to influence the direction of research outputs (McGann & Whelan, 2020). For instance, think tanks operating under the purview of foreign governments or international organizations may find their research tainted by the ideological preferences of these donors, which in turn affects their legitimacy.

Institutional funding also presents difficulties, particularly in the exile context. The bureaucratic compliance required by funding organizations, coupled with the lack of infrastructure in exile, creates an additional layer of complexity. These requirements stifle innovation and limit the flexibility that Syrian think tanks need to address the rapidly changing socio-political landscape (Drezner, 2015). While more flexible, personal funding carries its own risks. The variability of individual donors, combined with their potentially shifting priorities, creates an unpredictable financial environment for think tanks. Furthermore, donors who are not directly connected to Syria may impose ideological constraints on the research agenda, potentially limiting the think tanks' ability to address issues that are locally relevant but politically sensitive (Krastev, 2001).

Some Syrian think tanks reject external funding altogether, perceiving it as a threat to their independence and legitimacy. One participant, a head of a Syrian think tank, supports this approach, emphasizing that distancing themselves from foreign governmental funding allows think tanks to operate without undue political interference. In the absence of traditional funding sources, many think tanks have turned to alternative strategies, including volunteer work, personal contributions, and collaborations with local authorities and NGOs (Interview 21, personal communication, April 02, 2022). These strategies, while innovative, are not without challenges. Reliance on local cooperation and volunteerism may restrict the think tanks' ability to scale up operations or broaden their impact (İçduygu & Şimşek, 2016a, 2016b).

One potential avenue for Syrian think tanks is to build partnerships with NGOs, which often require studies on local issues. These partnerships can offer the dual benefit of providing necessary funding while also securing independence, as the research is often oriented toward non-political objectives. However, such partnerships also have limitations, as they depend on external priorities that may not align with the think tank's own long-term goals. Additionally, securing funding from Syrian individuals has emerged as a promising alternative, as it offers greater autonomy in terms of research direction. Yet, the sustainability of this model remains uncertain, particularly as the ongoing conflict and humanitarian crisis deplete local resources, further limiting the pool of potential donors (McGann, 2017b).

The financial challenges faced by Syrian think tanks are not merely a matter of securing resources but are deeply tied to the broader questions of sovereignty, autonomy, and legitimacy. In the absence of stable funding, these institutions risk becoming politically compromised or irrelevant. Their ability to remain independent, free from external influence, depends largely on the development of a diverse and sustainable funding strategy. Syrian think tanks must seek to minimize reliance on any single source of funding, while aligning their efforts with donors who share their mission and values. Developing such strategies is vital not only for the operational sustainability of think tanks but also for their continued ability to contribute meaningfully to policy discussions in Syria and the broader Middle East.

4.4.2 Transparency and Accountability

The issue of transparency and autonomy is one of the most contentious challenges for think tanks, particularly in politically unstable and transitional settings. In these environments, think tanks are often vulnerable to external pressures that compromise their impartiality and independence. This concern is exacerbated in the case of Syrian think tanks, which must navigate an environment characterized by political polarization, security risks, and a lack of regulatory frameworks governing their operations (McGann, 2017b).

Globally, think tanks are expected to disclose their funding sources to maintain transparency and safeguard their credibility. This practice is intended to demonstrate their impartiality and to protect the integrity of their research. However, for Syrian think tanks, disclosing funding sources presents significant risks. The disclosure of funding sources in an environment as politically charged as Syria can expose think tanks to increased competition for the same pool of donors, potentially jeopardizing their financial stability (Peetz, 2017). More importantly, publicizing funding sources can subject these institutions to political manipulation or coercion, undermining their ability to operate independently and impartially. According to one participant, while transparency is critical for accountability, it must be part of a larger, national system that promotes democratic accountability within all public institutions (Interview 2, personal communication, October 30, 2021). In the absence of such a system, think tanks may be reluctant to disclose their funding sources for fear of political repercussions (McGann, 2021).

One participant describes Syrian think tanks' funding sources as “black boxes.” This secrecy is a strategic response to the volatile political environment, where disclosing such information could expose think tanks to various risks, including political pressure or threats (Interview 6, personal communication, November 11, 2021). The “black box” mentality reflects a broader challenge faced by Syrian think tanks: how to maintain transparency and independence while avoiding external manipulation and maintaining operational security.

The relationship between funding and research agenda is a central issue for think tanks, especially in the context of Syria. The adage “funding comes with agendas” often rings true, as donors frequently expect think tanks to reflect their values and priorities (McGann, 2007). While think tanks generally strive to balance donor interests with their own research agendas, the challenge is more pronounced in politically sensitive contexts like Syria. Here, the funding sources’ political interests may not align with the think tank's goals, complicating their ability to produce independent and relevant research. Syrian think tanks, therefore, face a delicate balancing act; they must manage the expectations of their funders while striving to remain independent and true to their mission.

In the Syrian context, the question of funding is not just about securing financial resources; it also touches on deeper issues of legitimacy, autonomy, and sovereignty. Think tanks operating within Syria or in exile must navigate a complex landscape, where political considerations and financial constraints intersect. To preserve their credibility and independence, Syrian think tanks must develop transparent funding strategies that minimize political interference while ensuring financial sustainability. In this regard, the establishment of a supportive legal and institutional framework is crucial. Such a framework would provide the protections necessary for think tanks to operate without fear of retribution or political manipulation, thereby ensuring that their research continues to serve the broader goals of peace, governance, and national reconstruction in Syria.

4.4.3 Human Resource Capacity and Academic Expertise

The challenges faced by Syrian think tanks in terms of human resources and logistical operations reflect broader systemic issues that touch on the legacies of authoritarian governance, the impacts of conflict, and the political fragmentation of Syrian society. One of the most pressing concerns is the historical lack of expertise and academic competence, a direct result of the repressive nature of the pre-2011 political regime. As Buckner (2013) observes, the absence of a vibrant political culture, compounded by the Syrian government's control over policy-making, stifled the development of independent think tanks. Policies were largely imposed without public debate, leaving a significant gap in institutional knowledge and policy-making experience. This context has created both a lack of qualified professionals and an intellectual environment that remains deeply affected by the politics of control, limiting the potential of these institutions to flourish.

The Syrian education system, particularly at the university level, has historically been more focused on indoctrination than on producing critical thinkers and independent researchers (Kabbani & Salloum, 2010). The educational infrastructure, particularly prior to the uprising, was designed to reinforce loyalty to the state rather than encourage intellectual exploration or policy research. Consequently, this historical legacy has contributed to a significant gap between media reporting, opinion pieces, and rigorous academic research (Buckner, 2013). Many aspiring researchers and policy analysts, especially among the youth, are now seeking opportunities abroad to fill this gap. This shift represents a potentially transformative opportunity for Syrian think tanks, but it also presents a logistical challenge. The dispersion of qualified individuals globally, particularly in diaspora communities, complicates the process of recruiting skilled researchers who could contribute to Syria's post-conflict reconstruction (Culbertson & Constant, 2015).

Despite a growing interest in political, social, and research fields, Syrian think tanks still face significant hurdles in recruiting highly trained personnel. As some participants argue, the forced migration due to conflict has allowed many young Syrians to pursue higher education at reputable universities worldwide, which holds the potential for long-term benefits (Interview 10, personal communication, December 07, 2021). However, the physical separation of these individuals, often residing in countries with different languages and academic environments, poses a considerable challenge in harnessing their skills effectively for Syria's needs. The task of integrating these diaspora-based experts into think tank operations highlights a key dilemma of sovereignty and legitimacy for Syrian institutions operating in exile.

Furthermore, the issue of specialization and representation remains central. Many current researchers in Syrian think tanks have entered the field by necessity, driven by the circumstances of the conflict rather than a formal academic path. This lack of specialized training contributes to the struggle for think tanks to produce high-caliber research that can influence policy both locally and internationally. The underrepresentation of women in research roles, with most women occupying administrative positions, further exacerbates the issue. The difficulty in attracting female researchers, particularly those who balance family, education, and professional obligations, reflects broader societal challenges in Syria and the diaspora as expressed by one of the interviewees (Interview 6, personal communication, November 11, 2021).

To address these human resource challenges, Syrian think tanks have adopted a variety of strategies. These include leveraging economies of scale, offering in-house training on key research methodologies, and engaging university students for long-term capacity-building. Such training programs, while useful, are slow processes, competing with the immediate needs of a population that demands practical, actionable research. Moreover, recruiting qualified individuals within Syria, where wages are low and the educational system has been disrupted by the conflict, poses significant obstacles. Even when think tanks are able to attract qualified personnel, ensuring their ongoing professional development is a critical concern. Many think tanks, in response, rely on senior academics or international consultants to ensure the quality of their output. However, balancing academic rigor with simplicity in communication remains a challenge in a context where accessibility is key for both local and international audiences (McGann, 2017a).

4.4.4 Linguistic Limitations and Epistemic Exclusion

Language proficiency presents an intricate challenge for Syrian think tanks, particularly as they navigate the multilingual nature of the Syrian diaspora and the geopolitical complexities of their operations. Arabic remains the primary language for most Syrian think tanks, shaping the output of their research, publications, and training materials. However, some participants argue that this linguistic limitation becomes problematic as the younger generation of Syrians, particularly those raised in exile, face diminishing proficiency in (Interview 17, personal communication, March 13, 2022). Studies have shown that this demographic increasingly adopts the language of their new countries, leading to a growing disconnect with Syrian issues and the broader Arab-speaking world (Culbertson & Constant, 2015).

For Syrian think tanks, this demographic shift poses a dilemma: how can these institutions continue to engage with a new generation of Syrians whose language skills and political interests are aligned with their new countries rather than their country of origin? This issue compounds the difficulties of recruiting junior researchers who have been educated in non-Arabic-speaking countries and are less likely to possess proficiency in the Arabic language. Additionally, even as Arabic remains dominant within these institutions, the global prominence of English as the lingua franca for academic and policy discourse creates a dual-language barrier. Researchers who are proficient in Arabic but not in English may find themselves unable to access the most recent international research, limiting their capacity to contribute to cutting-edge policy debates (Gürsoy & Ertaşoğlu, 2019).

To mitigate this barrier, some think tanks rely heavily on electronic translation tools or outsource professional translation services. These methods, while functional, consume valuable time and resources that could otherwise be allocated to research and analysis. Moreover, the growing importance of Turkish as a geopolitical language in the context of Syria’s relationship with its neighbor adds another layer of complexity for think tanks operating from Turkey. Many Syrian researchers based in Turkey struggle with Turkish language proficiency, limiting their ability to engage with Turkish decision-makers or communicate effectively with Turkish audiences. Some participants argue that as Turkey plays a pivotal role in shaping Syria's future, overcoming this linguistic barrier is essential for Syrian think tanks aiming to influence Turkish policy on Syrian matters (Interview 6, personal communication, November 11, 2021). The challenges presented by language barriers demand a strategic approach to language training within Syrian think tanks. Providing researchers with opportunities to develop proficiency in English, Turkish, and other relevant languages is essential for ensuring their relevance and reach in the broader international policy community. Additionally, producing bilingual or multilingual publications could help expand the think tank’s audience, facilitating greater engagement with both Syrian and international stakeholders. Collaboration with international academic institutions or think tanks could further enhance access to language resources and foster cross-cultural exchanges that enrich research outputs.

4.4.5 Data Access and Knowledge Production Challenges

Collecting reliable information has always been a critical component of research and policy analysis. However, according to some participants, this task is fraught with challenges, particularly in opposition-controlled areas or regions under regime control (Interview 4, personal communication, November 01, 2021). Security concerns, travel restrictions, and bureaucratic obstacles significantly hinder data collection efforts, especially when think tanks attempt to engage directly with local populations in politically sensitive areas (Gürsoy & Ertaşoğlu, 2019).

Even when researchers design surveys or conduct interviews, issues related to anonymity and the threat of surveillance often deter individuals from participating. Fear of reprisals from either government forces or radical groups makes many Syrians hesitant to share information, further complicating the data collection process. As a result, Syrian think tanks often face gaps in the quality and depth of their research, which directly affects the validity of their policy recommendations.

To navigate these barriers, many think tanks rely on local collaborators and field offices, particularly in opposition-controlled territories, to gather data. These partners often play an intermediary role, mitigating some of the risks associated with direct engagement. Virtual interviews have also become a common practice for collecting information, particularly from individuals who have fled Syria and are now based in neighboring countries or further afield. While these strategies provide some level of success, they cannot replace the richness of in-person interactions, which offer more nuanced insights into the local political and social contexts (Interview 10, personal communication, December 07, 2021).

Given the constraints on direct engagement, outsourcing functions like data collection and training workshops to trusted local or international partners has become an appealing solution for many Syrian think tanks. However, these approaches come with their own set of challenges, including the risk of incomplete or biased data, as well as the loss of direct control over the research process. Nevertheless, they provide a necessary workaround in a highly restricted operational environment, ensuring that Syrian think tanks can continue to function despite significant logistical hurdles (Interview 12, personal communication, January 13, 2022).

4.5 Networks and Stakeholder Engagement

4.5.1 Target Audience and the Politics of Influence

Syrian think tanks in the diaspora predominantly target a wide spectrum of Syrian constituencies, including ordinary citizens, political figures, informal actors, NGOs, local councils, influential opposition members, and claimed decision-makers. While some initiatives extend to regime-affiliated publics, such efforts remain cautious and intermittent. Despite this broad framing, several think tanks have explicitly noted a strategic pivot toward the general public, especially youth, rather than direct engagement with so-called decision-makers. This reorientation reflects both a pragmatic response to the limited political traction they hold in formal governance spaces and a broader effort to rebuild epistemic legitimacy in a post-authoritarian context (Abdelrahman, 2021).

The shift toward public engagement, as argued by participants, reveals an acute awareness of the fragile legitimacy Syrian think tanks contend with, both in terms of institutional credibility and the broader societal value placed on independent knowledge production (Interview 13, personal communication, January 19, 2022). Decades of Ba'athist authoritarian rule and security-state control left Syria with no tradition of independent policy research, weakening societal receptivity to think tanks as vehicles of influence (Khalaf, 2021). In response, many diaspora-based institutions have sought to reconstitute legitimacy from below, cultivating a new generation that recognizes the importance of evidence-based policymaking and critical debate (Brinkerhoff, 2007). This bottom-up strategy emphasizes long-term legitimacy building, investing in the public sphere as a site of future authority rather than relying on elite access in a fragmented and delegitimized political landscape.

This dynamic also intersects with the reconfiguration of sovereignty. Syrian think tanks operate in exile, outside the territorial jurisdiction of the Syrian state, and therefore outside the bounds of its sovereign control. Yet by engaging Syrian publics, producing knowledge, and shaping discourse on governance and transition, these institutions exercise a form of discursive and epistemic sovereignty (Agnew, 2005; Sassen, 2006). They make claims not only to knowledge but to representational authority to speak for Syrian society and about its future despite lacking territorial grounding. This non-territorial assertion of sovereignty challenges Westphalian models, foregrounding knowledge production as a form of political power during crisis (Falk, 1995).

While some Western-based Syrian think tanks enjoy limited access to international stakeholders, most face significant barriers in influencing foreign policy agendas. These obstacles stem from several interrelated factors. First, international actors tend to rely on established think tanks for policy input, creating institutional path dependencies that marginalize newer or local organizations (Fraussen & Halpin, 2017a 2017b). Second, the epistemic legitimacy of Syrian think tanks remains underdeveloped in global policy circuits, due to perceptions of bias, lack of methodological rigor, or limited track record (Stone, 2007). Third, linguistic limitations constrain outreach, most research is produced in Arabic, with few systematic efforts at translation into English or Turkish, key languages for global and regional influence (İçduygu & Şimşek, 2016a, 2016b).

Therefore, some participants adopt indirect influence strategies, targeting intermediaries such as international NGOs, media platforms, and transnational policy advocates who possess greater access to formal decision-makers (Interview 12, personal communication, January 13, 2022). These actors function as legitimacy brokers, amplifying the policy positions of Syrian organizations within international arenas. This layered approach reflects a strategic adaptation power asymmetry, allowing think tanks to project influence without institutional sovereignty, while navigating a complex terrain of recognition, voice, and relevance (Zürn, 2018).

4.5.2 Relationships with Local and International Decision Makers

The relationship between Syrian think tanks and decision-makers is fraught with ambiguity, institutional fragmentation, and competing claims to authority. In the absence of a cohesive national political framework, the conventional channels of engagement between research institutions and policy authorities are severely disrupted. This disruption is not only a matter of access but also reflects a deeper structural problem rooted in the erosion of state sovereignty and the contested legitimacy of actors who claim decision-making power.

On one hand, the regime-controlled areas in Syria present a façade of centralized sovereignty. However, this centralization is largely authoritarian, and decision-making processes are opaque and exclusionary. On the other hand, in opposition-controlled or fragmented territories, the multiplicity of actors, ranging from local councils and armed groups to civil society organizations, creates a diffused sovereignty where no single actor holds the recognized legitimacy to make binding decisions (Agnew, 2005; Krastev, 2001a, 2001b). This diffusion of authority leaves Syrian think tanks without clear or reliable counterparts for policy engagement.

Globally, limited access to decision-makers is a recurring challenge for think tanks (McGann, 2017b), but in Syria, this limitation is compounded by a crisis of political legitimacy. Many individuals and groups that claim to be decision-makers operate without formal mandates, democratic legitimacy, or consistent constituencies. This absence of institutionalized sovereignty means that even if think tanks were to develop sound policy recommendations, there is no reliable mechanism through which these could be adopted, debated, or implemented (Zürn, 2018).

This structural vacuum produces epistemic dissonance, while think tanks strive to offer evidence-based insights, they lack assurance that their outputs can reach actors with both the authority and the will to act. This condition fosters what some interviewees referred to as a state of disorientation, in which think tanks are unsure of their audiences' priorities or the very contours of policy power. Moreover, this disconnect impedes their capacity to establish legitimacy themselves, since legitimacy in the policy research field is often derived from the perception of proximity to influence or impact (Fraussen & Halpin, 2017a, 2017b).

From the perspective of local actors, the culture of evidence-based policy is weak or underdeveloped. Syrian decision-makers, whether formal or informal, frequently perceive think tanks as either irrelevant or foreign-driven. This suspicion is exacerbated by historical distrust of civil society and the perception that Syrian think tanks are more responsive to donor agendas than local realities (Interview 11, personal communication, January 06, 2022). The result is a vicious cycle: think tanks struggle to establish credibility, while local authorities remain reluctant to engage with them meaningfully.

Internationally, Syrian think tanks are further marginalized. Despite their superior contextual understanding, they are often bypassed in favor of established foreign institutions that already hold epistemic authority in global policy circles. This reflects broader hierarchies in the global knowledge economy, where legitimacy and visibility are unequally distributed (Sassen, 2006). Linguistic and institutional barriers also compound this challenge, limiting the reach of Syrian think tanks to international stakeholders.

In response, some Syrian think tanks have adopted pragmatic strategies to navigate this fractured environment. Rather than attempting direct engagement with formal power-holders, they focus on influencing intermediary bodies such as NGOs, media organizations, diaspora actors, and individual experts, who possess access to decision-making spaces. By aligning with these intermediaries, think tanks attempt to embed their insights within broader policy narratives and advocacy efforts (Interview 6, personal communication, November 11, 2021). Others invest in long-term trust-building with stakeholders, recognizing that relationships, rather than output alone, may be the currency of influence in transitional and conflict-affected contexts.

Despite these efforts, the fundamental problem remains; without a sovereign and legitimate political entity that values evidence-based research, the policy relevance of think tanks will remain conditional. Their continued marginalization raises critical questions about how legitimacy is constructed in post-conflict societies and about the role of research institutions when sovereignty itself is fragmented and contested.

4.5.3 Relationships Among Syrian Diaspora Think Tanks: Fragmentation and Cooperation

The relationships among Syrian think tanks are marked by a paradox of shared goals and mutual distrust, reflecting broader patterns of fragmentation that characterize the post-uprising Syrian polity. Despite a widespread recognition of the need for coordinated efforts to address the complex challenges facing Syrian society, actual collaboration remains limited, sporadic, and largely informal. The absence of institutional mechanisms for coordination reinforces redundancies in research agendas and contributes to a diluted policy impact.

This fragmentation is not merely a logistical failure, but some participants argue that it is deeply rooted in the ideological and political heterogeneity that defines the Syrian think tank landscape (Interview 8, personal communication, November 14, 2021). Competing narratives of legitimacy, whether grounded in revolutionary ideals, religious identity, or liberal-democratic visions, complicate the formation of common policy platforms or research agendas. In a context where state sovereignty is fractured and rival authorities claim political representation, the very idea of collaboration is burdened by contestations over who speaks for whom and in whose interest (Agnew, 2005; Krastev, 2001).

The result is a competitive environment in which think tanks operate as epistemic silos rather than as members of a broader policy community. This dynamic not only undermines the efficiency of knowledge production but also limits the potential of Syrian think tanks to act as collective agents capable of influencing fragmented governance structures. Some have attempted to circumvent this problem through thematic specialization, a strategy that allows institutions to differentiate themselves and develop niche expertise. Specialization offers a pragmatic response to resource scarcity and aligns with broader recommendations in think tank literature, which emphasize the importance of focused, high-quality outputs over generalized commentary (Pautz, 2011).

However, specialization alone cannot resolve the structural limitations posed by donor-driven research agendas and externally determined funding cycles. As noted by several stakeholders, funding priorities often distort research trajectories, leading to oversaturation in certain areas while leaving others, particularly those related to socioeconomic recovery and political reconciliation underexplored. This distortion reinforces a form of external epistemic sovereignty, whereby research priorities are shaped more by the strategic interests of international funders than by local needs (Zürn, 2018). The over-reliance on external funding also threatens the autonomy and perceived legitimacy of Syrian think tanks, raising concerns about co-optation and agenda setting.

Despite these tensions, modest examples of cooperation exist. Joint declarations, co-hosted workshops, and limited knowledge exchange forums suggest a latent capacity for more robust collaboration (Interview 5, personal communication, November 10, 2021).Yet, these efforts remain ad hoc and insufficiently institutionalized. The development of a formal consortium or network, with shared principles and protocols, is argued to potentially consolidate these initiatives and foster a more coherent think tank ecosystem (Interview 12, personal communication, January 13, 2022). However, such an initiative would require not only logistical coordination but also a redefinition of legitimacy grounded in mutual recognition, rather than political alignment.

4.5.4 Collaborations with Regional and International Think Tanks

Engagement between Syrian think tanks and their regional or international counterparts is similarly shaped by asymmetries of power and access, often reflecting broader global hierarchies in knowledge production. While collaboration with international institutions has the potential to enhance credibility and visibility, these relationships tend to be extractive rather than reciprocal. Syrian think tanks are frequently engaged as providers of local knowledge rather than as equal partners in agenda-setting or policy analysis. This reinforces an epistemic hierarchy in which Syrian institutions remain peripheral to global policy debates (Sassen, 2006).

This marginalization is not merely symbolic; it has material consequences. The limited integration of Syrian perspectives into international policy dialogues impairs the responsiveness and effectiveness of external interventions. Moreover, it constrains the ability of Syrian think tanks to build legitimacy within both local and global arenas. While foreign think tanks often dominate discussions about Syria, the knowledge and policy recommendations produced by Syrian actors rarely receive the same level of institutional endorsement or dissemination.

Mistrust also plays a significant role. Historical experiences with politically instrumentalized aid have generated suspicion among Syrian researchers regarding the motivations of foreign institutions. To some participants, these concerns are not unfounded, as collaborations often come with implicit or explicit expectations that align with donor priorities rather than local needs (Interview 11, personal communication, February 03, 2022). As a result, some Syrian think tanks perceive partnerships as a threat to their sovereignty both in terms of research independence and political neutrality.

Language and technical capacity further hinder cross-border collaboration. While Syrian think tanks frequently translate foreign reports into Arabic contributing to the localization of knowledge, few reciprocal efforts exist to elevate Arabic-language outputs to international forums. This imbalance exacerbates existing inequities, making it more difficult for Syrian voices to achieve policy relevance outside of Arabic-speaking or donor-centric platforms (Interview 9, personal communication, November 15, 2021).

To counter these challenges, more intentional efforts are needed to foster equitable partnerships. This includes building capacity for multilingual dissemination, developing platforms for Syrian-led policy debate, and establishing joint authorship models that recognize Syrian analysts as peers rather than subcontractors. Without such reforms, Syrian think tanks risk being permanently relegated to the margins of both local governance and international policymaking.

4.5.5 Interaction with Media

Media competition represents a significant challenge for think tanks globally, with their effectiveness often contingent on producing outputs that are “in the right form, in the right hands, at the right time” (McGann, 2021). However, this notion underscores a critical tension between the media’s immediacy-driven agenda and think tanks' more deliberative, research-driven approach. The media's focus on quick, attention-grabbing stories inevitably leads to a marginalization of the nuanced, comprehensive analyses that think tanks strive to produce. In the case of Syrian think tanks, this tension is further compounded by the politically charged environment in which they operate, where issues of legitimacy and sovereignty often influence both media coverage and think tank outputs (McGann, 2017b).

Syrian think tanks, however, do not view the media as an adversary but rather as a necessary partner in navigating the complex landscape of information dissemination. This partnership, however, must be critically examined through the lens of Syria’s political context. Think tanks in the Syrian diaspora face the challenge of having their legitimacy questioned by both local and international actors due to their tenuous connection to a unified Syrian political structure (Krastev, 2001). The lack of a cohesive political system means that these think tanks often find themselves caught between competing allegiances, raising doubts about their ability to offer independent, unbiased perspectives.

While Syrian think tanks position themselves as sources of knowledge and awareness, seeking to counter misinformation, their outputs are shaped by the broader political discourse in which they operate. This dynamic complicates their role in promoting sovereignty and self-determination, as their research often carries the burden of political affiliation, whether explicit or implicit. For instance, think tanks that align with opposition factions may find themselves subject to the political pressures of those factions, which can undermine their ability to maintain a neutral stance (İçduygu & Şimşek, 2016a, 2016b). Moreover, their findings may not always resonate with the broader Syrian populace, many of whom remain disillusioned by the political divisions that have long plagued the country.

One participant argues that think tanks address questions that the media often cannot, particularly delving into the causes behind news events (Interview 13, personal communication, January 19, 2022). While media outlets tend to emphasize the 'what' of events, think tanks aim to explain the 'why,' offering insights that are critical for long-term policy decisions (Grömping & Halpin, 2021). This distinction is especially important in the context of the Syrian conflict, where media narratives can be shaped by political agendas, sometimes distorting the underlying realities of the situation. Think tanks, by contrast, seek to provide more comprehensive analyses that address these complex issues, yet they are frequently marginalized by both media and political elites, who prefer more immediate and less complicated narratives.

The collaboration between Syrian think tanks and media institutions, while theoretically beneficial, reveals the precarious position these think tanks occupy within the broader political and media ecosystems. While media outlets provide think tanks with a platform for their research, they also expose them to the same criticisms and ideological biases that dominate mainstream media narratives. This relationship complicates the ability of think tanks to maintain their independence and legitimacy, especially as they are often perceived as subordinate to the media's commercial imperatives (Fraussen & Halpin, 2017a, 2017b).

Additionally, while Syrian think tanks contribute to filling the gap in media coverage by providing in-depth analyses and context, the lack of a standardized, independent evaluation of their impact undermines their ability to assert themselves as legitimate actors in the political process. The difficulty in measuring their influence whether in terms of policy change, public opinion, or direct engagement with decision-makers further reinforces their marginalization, both within Syria and in the international community (McGann & Whelan, 2020). This lack of a clear, recognizable impact challenges their claims to sovereignty in the realm of policy influence, particularly in a context where foreign stakeholders often dominate the discourse.

The relationship between Syrian think tanks and media is fraught with complexities that stem from both external political pressures and internal legitimacy struggles. While think tanks view media as an essential partner in disseminating their findings, this partnership is complicated by the political and ideological divides that characterize the Syrian landscape (Interview 7, personal communication, November 12, 2021). The symbiotic relationship between the two institutions, while offering opportunities for public education and policy influence, is ultimately constrained by the broader geopolitical dynamics that shape both their existence and their perceived legitimacy. In the long term, think tanks must navigate these challenges carefully, fostering independent, robust relationships with media outlets that do not compromise their autonomy or their ability to provide unbiased, evidence-based analyses.

4.5.6 Measuring Impact: Between Legitimacy Claims and Sovereignty Constraints

The outputs of Syrian think tanks in the diaspora encompass a diverse range of activities and products, including policy papers, analytical reports, opinion pieces, translations, training workshops, and media engagement strategies. These outputs are designed to inform public debate, enhance civil society capacity, and offer alternatives to dominant political discourses. Yet, the ability of these think tanks to measure and assert their impact is entangled with questions of legitimacy and authority, particularly within the fragmented and contested Syrian political landscape.

Traditional metrics for measuring policy impact—such as citations in official documents, media coverage, or the adoption of recommendations—presume a stable sovereign framework where state institutions hold authority and think tanks operate within recognizable channels of influence. In the case of Syria, however, where the sovereignty of the state is fractured and governance is divided among competing actors, such conventional models of policy influence become difficult to apply (Agnew, 2005; Krastev, 2001). Consequently, Syrian think tanks must navigate an ambiguous terrain in which their outputs may not translate into direct policy adoption but rather contribute to discursive sovereignty—the ability to shape norms, identities, and debates in lieu of direct access to state power (Sassen, 2006).

Furthermore, the legitimacy of Syrian think tanks is constantly negotiated across multiple fronts. Internally, they must demonstrate value to local publics, opposition actors, and civil society stakeholders, many of whom remain skeptical of external influence or elite-driven knowledge production (Brinkerhoff, 2007). Externally, they must position themselves as credible voices in international policy circuits that often prioritize institutional longevity, methodological rigor, and language accessibility (Stone, 2007). As a result, the impact of Syrian think tanks is not only a function of their outputs, but also of the symbolic legitimacy they can accrue through consistent production, visibility, and alignment with recognized norms of policy relevance (Zürn, 2018).

Efforts to evaluate this impact range from rudimentary metrics—such as the number of reports produced or trainings delivered—to more nuanced strategies, including website analytics, social media engagement, feedback from experts, and citations by global think tanks. The adoption of these mixed methods reflects a growing awareness of the need to construct multi-dimensional narratives of influence, especially in contexts where policy uptake is not a viable measure of success (Fraussen & Halpin, 2017a, 2017b).

Nonetheless, a critical limitation remains; without access to sovereign political structures that can implement recommendations, the transformative capacity of Syrian think tanks is inherently constrained. As one of the participants notes, knowledge alone cannot substitute for political authority (Interview 21, personal communication, April 02, 2022). In the absence of coherent political leverage, think tank outputs risk being perceived as detached intellectual exercises rather than actionable interventions (Krastev, 2001). This gap between knowledge production and policy implementation underscores the precarious position of Syrian think tanks.

Ultimately, for these think tanks to move beyond symbolic legitimacy toward operational legitimacy, greater emphasis must be placed on coalition-building, narrative shaping, and international advocacy. These strategies offer alternative routes for influence that bypass traditional sovereignty structures, highlighting the adaptive potential of diaspora think tanks in conflict settings.

4.6 Conclusion and Recommendations

Syrian think tanks are vital actors in shaping policy discourse, especially in contexts marked by conflict and institutional fragmentation. While these institutions have carved out a meaningful presence, they continue to grapple with structural and operational challenges. These include limited financial sustainability, fragmented collaboration, scarce qualified personnel, and constrained access to both local data and decision-making circles. At the same time, they face broader questions of legitimacy and sovereignty, as they strive to influence the future of Syria while operating largely outside its borders. To move from marginal influence to meaningful participation in Syria's post-conflict reconstruction and policy formulation, Syrian think tanks must engage in strategic transformation. This chapter recommends the following six directions to strengthen their role and ensure long-term effectiveness:

1. Strengthen Collaborative Networks and Focused Specialization

   Think tanks should build structured collaborations with one another, both within the diaspora and across remaining in-country initiatives, to consolidate efforts, share knowledge, and avoid duplication. At the same time, they must pursue thematic specialization in selected policy domains. Specialization allows for deeper knowledge accumulation and can help attract targeted donor support, while collaboration enhances their collective credibility and coherence in addressing national priorities.

2. Expand Research Focus to Include Long-Term, Policy-Oriented Areas

   Beyond political analysis and humanitarian response, Syrian think tanks must integrate research agendas that reflect Syria's long-term reconstruction needs, such as infrastructure, public health, environmental sustainability, and labor markets. By anticipating future needs and producing policy-relevant research, they can offer more practical contributions and build intellectual authority in underexplored but critical sectors.

3. Enhance Communication and Strategic Engagement with Decision-Makers

   A more systematic approach to policy engagement is needed. Think tanks should develop tailored communication strategies for different audiences, local actors, international donors, and multilateral institutions, ensuring their work is both accessible and policy-relevant. Greater participation in global forums and regional coalitions can also amplify their voice, increasing their visibility and influence in shaping discourse on Syria.

4. Invest in Human Capital Development and Female Inclusion

   To ensure institutional resilience, think tanks must invest in capacity-building through ongoing training in research methods, policy writing, and foreign languages. Encouraging greater female participation in both research and leadership roles is also essential, not only for equity but for broadening the analytical perspectives that inform their work. Building a diverse and competent workforce will enhance institutional credibility and expand their reach.

5. Develop Sustainable Funding Models and Counter Misinformation

   Think tanks should adopt diverse and sustainable funding strategies that reduce overreliance on short-term project grants. This could include partnerships with diaspora communities, public fundraising campaigns, or endowment-building efforts. Simultaneously, they have a critical role to play in countering misinformation by producing fact-based, accessible content in cooperation with independent media and digital platforms, helping shape a more informed public debate around Syria.

6. Leverage the Opportunities of Operating Outside State Control

   The current context, though marked by crisis, offers Syrian think tanks an unprecedented opportunity to operate without state censorship. This independence should be used to encourage dialogue across political divides, test bold policy ideas, and challenge dominant narratives. By engaging constructively with divergent political actors and international partners, they can position themselves as credible, nonpartisan contributors to Syria's future.

Ultimately, this study affirms that Syrian think tanks have the potential to become long-term drivers of political and social recovery, if they adopt coherent strategies that align their internal capacities with the demands of a shifting local and international policy environment.

References

Abdelrahman, M. (2021). *Authoritarianism and civil society in the Arab world: Repression, resistance and protest*. Zed Books.
Abelson, D. E. (2019). From generation to generation: Reflections on the evolution of think tanks. *International Review of Public Policy, 1*(1:2), 238-249.
Agnew, J. (2005). Sovereignty regimes: Territoriality and state authority in contemporary world politics. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers, 95*(2), 437–461.
Belloni, R. (2012). Hybrid peace governance: Its emergence and significance. *Global Governance, 18*(1), 21–38.
Brinkerhoff, J. M. (2007). Diaspora entrepreneurs and transnationalism: Changing the global landscape of development. *Middle East Institute, 61*(1), 30–39.
Buckner, E. (2013). The Syrian education system and its implications for policy research. *Arab Studies Quarterly, 35*(1), 45–60.
Clunan, A. L., & Trinkunas, H. A. (2010). *Ungoverned spaces: Alternatives to state authority in an era of softened sovereignty*. Stanford University Press.
Culbertson, S., & Constant, L. (2015). Language and identity in the Syrian diaspora. *Middle Eastern Studies, 51*(3), 402–417.
Drezner, D. W. (2015). *Theories of international politics and zombies*. Princeton University Press.
Falk, R. (1995). *On humane governance: Toward a new global politics*. Pennsylvania State University Press.
Fenwick, T. B. (2006). How to conceptualize the work of think tanks: A critical analysis of policy influence. *Canadian Journal of Development Studies, 27*(1), 135–152.
Fraussen, B., & Halpin, D. (2017a). The role of think tanks in policy advice: A comparative study. *Public Policy and Administration, 32*(4), 105–122.
Fraussen, B., & Halpin, D. (2017b). Think tanks and strategic policy-making: Policy engagement and influence across countries. *Policy Studies Journal, 45*(1), 42–63.
Grömping, M., & Halpin, D. (2021). Think tanks and the media: Interactions, influence, and legitimacy. *International Review of Social Research, 15*(1), 20–38.
Gürsoy, Y., & Ertaşoğlu, D. (2019). Turkey and the Syrian conflict: The role of language in shaping foreign policy. *Middle East Policy, 26*(4), 123–138.
Hauck, V. (2017). *Think tanks: Strengthening knowledge and evidence for development policies*. ECDPM Discussion Paper.
İçduygu, A., & Şimşek, D. (2016a). Syrian refugees in Turkey: Towards integration policies. *Turkish Policy Quarterly, 15*(3), 59–69.
İçduygu, A., & Şimşek, D. (2016b). The politics of migration in the Middle East: Syrian refugees in Turkey. *Middle Eastern Studies, 52*(2), 216–232.
Kabbani, N., & Salloum, R. (2010). Academic freedom and political repression in Syria. *Arab Studies Journal, 23*(2), 88–102.
Khalaf, R. (2021). Civil society in Syria: An examination of post-2011 civil society actors. *Syria Studies, 13*(1), 1–29.
Krastev, I. (2001a). The transformation of the political landscape: Eastern European think tanks and the challenge of legitimacy. *East European Politics and Societies, 15*(3), 540–565.
Krastev, I. (2001b). Think tanks: Making and faking influence. In D. Stone (Ed.), *Think tank traditions: Policy research and the politics of ideas* (pp. 131–143). Manchester University Press.
McGann, J. G. (2007). *The think tank and the political environment*. Brookings Institution Press.
McGann, J. G. (2010). *Global think tanks, policy networks, and governance*. Routledge.
McGann, J. G. (2017a). *Think tanks, politics and public policy*. University of Pennsylvania.
McGann, J. G. (2017b). *Think tanks, foreign policy and the emerging power policy networks*. Routledge.
McGann, J. G. (2021). The think tank industry and the future of policy research. *Journal of Policy Analysis, 45*(2), 101–115.

McGann, J. G., & Shull, S. (2018). *Global trends and transitions in think tanks and policy advice*. Brookings Institution.
McGann, J. G., & Whelan, R. (2020). Think tanks and the politics of expertise in times of crisis. *Global Governance Review, 26*(1), 3–19.
Medvetz, T. (2008). *Think tanks as an emergent field*. Social Science Research Council Working Paper.
Medvetz, T. (2012). *Think tanks in America*. University of Chicago Press.
Pautz, H. (2011). *Think tanks, social democracy and social policy*. Palgrave Macmillan.
Peetz, T. (2017). Transparency in think tank funding: An international perspective. *Global Policy, 8*(4), 445–457.
Sassen, S. (2006). *Territory, authority, rights: From medieval to global assemblages*. Princeton University Press.
Selee, A. D. (2013). *What should think tanks do? A strategic guide to policy impact*. Stanford University Press.
Stone, D. (2007). Recycling bins, garbage cans or think tanks? Three myths regarding policy analysis institutes. *Public Administration, 85*(2), 259–278.
Weaver, R. K. (2000). Think tanks in the US: Academics, advisors and advocates. *Brookings Review, 18*(2), 18–23.
Zürn, M. (2018). *A theory of global governance: Authority, legitimacy, and contestation*. Oxford University Press.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

Chapter 5
Community Empowerment for Development in Fragile Contexts: Examining Community-Based Initiatives in Sudan

Moosa Elayah, Husam Mohammed, Abubakr Ahmed, and Hamid E. Ali

Abstract This chapter examines the critical role of community-based initiatives (CBIs) in addressing service delivery gaps in Sudan, a nation grappling with conflict and fragility. Drawing on qualitative data from interviews with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community organizations, the study explores the challenges CBIs face, their strategies for overcoming these obstacles, and their impact on service provision. It emphasizes the need for legal recognition, capacity building, and sustainable funding models to enhance the effectiveness and longevity of CBIs in conflict-affected regions. Amidst the complex challenges besetting Sudan's public services during periods of fragility and conflict, innovative pathways to progress have been carved out through collaborative endeavors between governmental bodies and non-state actors. This study delves into the critical role of community-based initiatives in mitigating service delivery deficiencies in such challenging environments. This research analyzes primary data gleaned from 20 semi-structured interviews, encompassing a network of approximately 20 NGOs. This analysis illuminates the vital contributions of these informal entities in supplementing public services in developing countries, with a particular focus on Sudan during its times of conflict and fragility. This paper sparks a conversation about the unique

M. Elayah (✉)
Public Administration Doha Institute for Graduate Studies, Doha, Qatar
e-mail: moosa.elayah@dohainstitute.edu.qa

H. Mohammed
Global Public Policy at Fudan University, Shanghai, China

University of Khartoum, Khartoum, Sudan

A. Ahmed
Doha for Graduate Studies, Public Administration & NGOs, Doha, Qatar
e-mail: aah005@dohainstitute.edu.qa

H. E. Ali
Doha for Graduate Studies, School of Economics, Administration and Public Policy, Doha, Qatar
e-mail: hamid.ali@dohainstitute.edu.qa

© The Author(s) 2026

M. Elayah (ed.), *Governance without Government in the MENA Region*, Nonprofit and Civil Society Studies,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-03953-8_5

community-based initiatives in Sudan, particularly in response to adverse conditions. It establishes itself as a foundational cornerstone and guiding framework for future research in related fields, offering insights into a transformative path forward amidst challenges and wars.

Keywords Sudan · Community empowerment · Development · Fragile contexts · War

5.1 Introduction

Fragility, as a concept in evaluating countries' performance, is inherently multifaceted, encompassing a broad spectrum of dimensions (Atashbar, 2023). This multidimensional approach, as developed by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), incorporates six key aspects: economic, environmental, political, security, societal, and human. According to the OECD framework (2022), fragility is characterized by a combination of exposure to risks and a lack of adequate capacity within the state, system, and/or communities to manage, absorb, or mitigate these risks effectively. Sudan's long-standing conflicts and fragile governance structures have created significant service delivery gaps. This chapter investigates how community-based initiatives (CBIs) emerge as vital actors in mitigating these gaps, focusing on their role in Sudan's humanitarian and development landscape. In 2022, Sudan's situation on the Fragile States Index (FSI) underscored its significant challenges amidst ongoing internal conflict. Ranking as the seventh nation on the FSI (Fragile States Index, 2022), Sudan's position is a stark indicator of its vulnerability across various aspects. The index serves as a poignant reminder of the complex web of risks Sudan faces and its concurrent limitations in addressing these challenges effectively. This analysis of Sudan's fragility not only sheds light on its current state but also underscores the critical need for comprehensive strategies to mitigate these multifaceted risks.

Access to quality services is a fundamental right that should be universally upheld. However, the scope and caliber of available services exhibit disparities among nations. Moreover, the responsible entity for service provision, as well as the method of delivery, can diverge in accordance with the administrative framework of each nation. In the context of developed countries, the evolution of service provision has traversed several stages, each emerging as a response to the pursuit of service excellence (Alam et al., 2020). In this trajectory, there has been a discernible shift from initial phases toward the most recent ones, marked by a gradual reduction in the public sector's role in service provision. This reduction has paved the way for augmented engagement from alternative sectors such as the private sector, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and community-driven initiatives. Contrastingly, in developing countries, the public sector continues to wield a dominant position in service delivery. Consequently, the quality of these services hinges predominantly upon the government's institutional capacity within these nations. The socio-economic landscape, political dynamics, and historical context further underscore the centrality of the public sector in this regard (Mansuri & Rao, 2003).

One method of service delivery is facilitated through what is referred to as community-based initiatives (CBIs). In developed countries, CBIs represent a contemporary facet of governance. In this context, the government's role in service provision is diminished, giving way to increased community involvement through initiatives that align with the specific priorities of the local population. Edelenbos et al. (2021) posit that governments in these contexts aim to reduce reliance on the public sector, promoting fiscal efficiency and budgetary savings, and CBIs serve as a viable avenue for achieving these goals. Conversely, in developing countries, CBIs serve a different purpose. They emerge as a means to address the vacuum left by governmental absence and to surmount challenges like state fragility, wars, corruption, and limited financial resources. These initiatives can act as a bridging mechanism to alleviate the gaps in service provision that arise due to these systemic shortcomings (Elayah et al., 2023).

In the context of Sudan, a nation beset by conflict, the government faces significant challenges in providing essential services to its citizens. According to Olawale et al. (2023), the government's constrained capacity severely impairs the quality and accessibility of these vital services in many regions of the country. This situation highlights the urgent need to accurately identify the most critical services for the community and develop effective methods for their provision while upholding acceptable quality standards.

In response to these challenges, grassroots initiatives have emerged as a key development, as noted by Oxford Analytica (2023). These community-led efforts have arisen from the necessity to mitigate the effects of the government's inadequacies in service delivery. Local communities, recognizing the gaps in public services, have taken proactive measures to fulfill these needs themselves, thereby playing an active role in improving their own welfare. These initiatives are emblematic of self-reliance and community empowerment, striving to fill the service void left by governmental constraints.

The academic research pertaining to community-led initiatives and their significance in furnishing services within conflicted nations, particularly in situations where governments struggle to fulfill citizen needs, remains considerably inadequate. This existing gap within the literature necessitates the emergence of studies that contribute to its reduction. This paper endeavors to address this gap by delving into the role of community-based initiatives in service provision, poverty reduction, and overall development within the context of conflicted countries. It places a particular emphasis on Sudan during war, where the deficiency in service quality is pervasive across numerous regions. The primary objective of this paper is to shed light on the pivotal role that community-led initiatives play in mitigating service shortfalls, alleviating poverty, and fostering comprehensive development. By examining the case of Sudan, the study seeks to provide insights into how these initiatives function in a challenging environment marked by inadequate government services. Furthermore, the paper aims to elucidate the challenges that community-led initiatives encounter. It delves into the dynamics of government engagement with these initiatives, exploring how official entities interact with community efforts to bridge service gaps. Furthermore, this chapter delves into the examination of legal frameworks that oversee and steer the operations of community-led initiatives. By exploring these various dimensions, the paper seeks to make a dual contribution: enriching scholarly discourse and informing practical approaches for improving service delivery. This is particularly pertinent in contexts where government capacities are constrained.

The chapter aims to unravel the complexities of these dynamics, offering insights that could inform policy formulation and program development. By conducting a thorough analysis of the legal, social, and operational facets of community-based initiatives, the research aspires to lay the groundwork for more effective and sustainable community-driven efforts. The ultimate goal is to enhance the provision of services and improve the overall quality of life in areas where governmental presence and effectiveness are limited.

In doing so, the paper positions itself as a valuable resource for policymakers, non-governmental organizations, and community leaders, providing a framework for developing strategies that reduce poverty and foster development. The findings are expected to guide the creation of more efficient, responsive, and community-focused services, driving positive change and development in regions facing governmental challenges.

This chapter employs qualitative methods, drawing from public data and in-depth interviews involving stakeholders like Sudanese government members, active NGO participants, representatives from various community-based initiatives (CBIs), and beneficiaries. Interviews delve into the legal framework, challenges faced, interactions with service providers, and efficacy of CBIs in addressing community needs, funding, and sustainability. This study evaluates the contributions, challenges, and potential of CBIs in Sudan, highlighting their interactions with the government and other stakeholders. It also examines the policy and legal frameworks needed to support CBIs in fragile contexts. The chapter is meticulously structured into five distinct sections to provide a thorough exploration of community-based initiatives' (CBIs) roles in service provision within Sudan. Section 5.2 begins with conceptional and theoretical framework on CBIs' roles in diverse contexts. Section 5.4 presents the methodology and data collection. Section 5.5 analyzes data and presents findings. Section 5.6 presents concluding remarks and recommendations.

5.2 Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

In this chapter, the terms community-based initiatives (CBIs), community-based organizations (CBOs), civil society organizations (CSOs), and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are used with specific meanings to clarify their distinctive characteristics and roles within fragile and conflict-affected contexts. CBIs refer to informal, locally initiated efforts to address community needs without necessarily possessing formal legal status, often arising spontaneously in response to gaps in public service delivery and reflecting a high degree of community ownership and participation (Haider, 2009). CBOs are typically more structured community groups that may register legally to operate and deliver services within a defined geographic area or thematic focus, and they often serve as intermediaries between grassroots actors and larger institutions. CSOs encompass a broad range of organized groups, including both CBOs and NGOs—that engage in civic, developmental, or advocacy activities independent of the state, playing an important role in fostering civic engagement and accountability. NGOs, meanwhile, are legally registered, nonprofit organizations that can operate nationally or internationally and are characterized by more formal governance systems, professional staff, and established funding structures that allow them to scale operations and sustain long-term programs (Haque, 2020). While CBIs can evolve over time into CBOs or NGOs as they grow, resources, and formalization, their primary distinction lies in their informal, community-driven nature and their capacity to rapidly mobilize local resources and networks in response to urgent needs (Elayah et al., 2023). This chapter focuses primarily on CBIs as the most grassroots form of community engagement in Sudan's fragile context, highlighting their unique contributions to filling service gaps, strengthening local resilience, and laying the groundwork for more structured forms of collective action. By situating CBIs within this broader ecosystem of civil society actors, the chapter aims to illustrate both their distinctive advantages and their interdependence with other organizational forms that share overlapping objectives in humanitarian and development work.

Defining Characteristics of CBIs Throughout the evolution of public administration, a series of significant advancements have been made to improve the quality of services provided by governments to their citizens. Historically, the trajectory of public service delivery has evolved from being an exclusive government responsibility to actively seeking collaboration with external partners (Hildreth et al., 2018). Initially, the private sector stepped in to fulfill this role, offering essential services to the public (Xiong et al., 2019). However, the search for partners dedicated to delivering public services without a profit motive led to the rise of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as a key player (Haque, 2020). Despite these developments, challenges persisted in effectively meeting the specific needs of local communities, underscoring the need for a fourth partner that is deeply connected and responsive to the actual priorities of society in terms of service provision. In response to this need, public administration has embraced what is often characterized as "new governance." This approach has introduced community-based initiatives (CBIs) as the fourth critical partner in the service delivery model (Tantoh et al., 2021). CBIs are uniquely positioned to understand and address the genuine service needs of local communities, marking a pivotal shift toward more community-centered approaches in public service delivery.

Community-based initiatives (CBIs) are defined variably across the literature, yet they commonly share certain key characteristics. Two primary features often distinguish CBIs from other entities in public administration: the active participation of community members and the independence of these initiatives in terms of control, decision-making, and leadership (Bovaird & Löffler, 2015). Celata et al. (2019) offer a notable definition, describing CBIs as collaborative efforts initiated and managed by groups sharing a common connection—be it interests, geography, lifestyle, culture, or practices. These groups self-organize and implement projects serving their local community, highlighting the principle of community self-participation, with a focus on delivering various services locally. Further adding to this perspective, Igalla et al. (2020) emphasize the features of independence and community engagement in their definition. According to them, CBI represents a form of community engagement where citizens proactively undertake the responsibility to initiate, identify, and implement innovative approaches for collective service delivery in their community. This process involves citizens taking charge of both the objectives and execution of their activities, underlining the independence of CBIs and active community involvement. Similarly, Edelenbos et al. (2021) define CBIs as self-sustaining and self-managed organizations where individuals collaborate to secure the necessary resources for executing their plans to provide public services or goods. This definition reinforces the notion of independence and self-reliance within CBIs, as well as the concept of collaborative effort among community members toward achieving shared goals. Collectively, these definitions highlight the prominent characteristics of CBIs, emphasizing their self-driven nature and the active participation of community members in addressing the needs of their local communities. These aspects are crucial in understanding the role and impact of CBIs in public service delivery and community development.

CBIs and Civil Society The concept of community-based initiatives (CBIs) and civil society indeed share some common elements, particularly in terms of individuals' actions and activities aimed at benefiting their communities (Edelenbos et al., 2021). Cooper (2018) references the European Union's definition of civil society, which broadly encompasses all individuals or groups that operate independently of government and engage in social interactions. This definition highlights the autonomy and collective engagement of various societal actors, including CBIs. Additionally, Haider (2009) introduces the concept of community-based organizations (CBOs) and their role within communities. She defines CBOs as entities that represent specific communities and provide services within particular sectors. Notably, CBOs possess in-depth knowledge about the needs of the local community and are well-equipped to address these needs effectively. This aligns with the core principles of CBIs, as both emphasize community participation and engagement. Furthermore, Haider highlights the collaboration between non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and local CBOs (McLeod, 2003). NGOs often partner with CBOs due to their familiarity with the unique needs and priorities of the communities they serve. This collaboration underscores the synergy between various civil society actors, including CBIs, NGOs, and CBOs, in working collectively to address community needs and provide tailored solutions. In essence, CBIs, civil society organizations, CBOs, and NGOs all share a common objective of engaging with and serving communities, albeit with different approaches and roles. They collectively contribute to enhancing the well-being and addressing the unique challenges of local communities through active social interaction and community-focused initiatives (Chatterji & Chaudhry, 2014).

Challenges and Opportunities for CBIs CBIs stand out from other forms of community engagement due to several defining characteristics. Among these, a pivotal feature is their active participation in service delivery, supported by government regulations, innovation, and control, with full government backing (Igalla et al., 2020). This focus on service provision differentiates CBIs from societal movements and activities that often delve into policy and politics (Nicholls, 2009). Edelenbos et al. (2021) further highlight these core CBI traits. These characteristics underscore the central role of local community members in managing and instigating CBIs, fostering community participation, and addressing genuine community needs. CBIs also grant their members the authority to make independent decisions and take charge of the entire implementation process. Additionally, CBIs actively seek partnerships with government institutions and NGOs to secure the necessary funds for their projects, reflecting their commitment to effective execution. Collectively, these characteristics emphasize that CBIs primarily aim to provide services rather than replace public sector institutions, aligning with the objectives of the evolving governance paradigm. Furthermore, CBIs typically operate with a nonprofit orientation, striving to establish sustainable funding sources to ensure financial stability and long-term impact (Edelenbos et al., 2021).

Community-based initiatives (CBIs) hold significance for both developed and developing nations. In developed countries, CBIs emerge as part of ongoing public administration improvements, representing a contemporary evolution in governance (Armstrong & Francis, 2004). These countries view CBIs as a means to reduce reliance on the public sector, fostering public sector fitness and budgetary efficiency. Conversely, in developing countries, CBIs serve to address government absence, state weaknesses, corruption, and financial constraints, bridging critical service gaps (Edelenbos et al., 2021). The literature consistently underscores the importance of community-based initiatives (CBIs) in accurately identifying and addressing the specific needs of the local community. If a CBI fails in this crucial aspect, it risks becoming ineffective and may even be more beneficial to discontinue its activities, as it would consume resources without delivering the intended outcomes. Armstrong and Francis (2004) emphasize the significance of CBIs precisely because of their capacity to tackle community issues and align with community priorities. They argue that this capability not only highlights the importance of community participation in decision-making but also fosters a favorable attitude from the government toward such participation. Conversely, when CBIs fall short in addressing the genuine needs of the community, it can deter community members from participating, leading to a negative impact on the overall effectiveness of the initiative. The ability of CBIs to accurately define and respond to local community needs is a central determinant of their success and their capacity to foster meaningful community engagement and participation (Mourato & Bussler, 2019).

Some of the features that make the CBI an important tool to provide services to community are its small organization structure, low operational and overall costs due to the voluntary participation and the use of local inputs (Elayah et al., 2023). Haider (2009) sees that these features produce effective and efficient outcomes, which are important and essential when it comes to the provision of services. Also, Dowst (2009) sees the significance of civil society organizations (CSOs), which include CBIs, in the fragile context to work with the international NGOs and funding institutions. For example, Dowst (2009) says that the World Bank encourages the international community to support CSOs to implement the desired engagement and institutions building, rather than supporting short term projects. And all these perspectives emphasize the validity of the CBIs to provide services in all contexts and in different countries regarding the level of development and the quality of the current services provided by other actors as a new future of the governance. In Haider's (2009) account, the World Bank draws a connection between community-based participation and the enhancement of governance. This shift toward new governance arises from the necessity for community involvement, as citizens possess firsthand knowledge of their local community's actual needs and the capacity for innovative problem-solving (Torfing et al., 2019). Armstrong and Francis (2004) corroborate this perspective, viewing community participation as a vital component of good governance due to citizens' adeptness at addressing their own issues.

Performance Indicators for CBIs in Conflict Zones In fragile and conflict-ridden settings, Dowst (2009) argues that community-based organizations, including CBIs, play a pivotal role in instilling key governance principles, with a particular emphasis on accountability, at the grassroots level. She posits that the introduction of these principles enriches the experiences of these organizations, which can, in turn, be shared with the public sector to enhance governance at the state level. de Weijer and Kilnes (2012) align with the notion of introducing accountability and assert that community-based organizations can foster this value through enabling local community participation, ultimately having a positive impact on governance from the bottom-up. Haider (2009) further underscores that CBIs have the capacity to rebuild the relationship between the state and the community, thereby strengthening governance. This governance, initially administrative in nature, can be extended to CBIs, disseminating governance values throughout the community and paving the way for political governance.

Dowst (2009) regarding challenges and considerations in fragile and conflicted states related to performance and governance of the CBIs. Dowst (2009) draws attention to the corrosive impact of mistrust within fragile state communities. Such mistrust can be a significant impediment to cooperation with civil society organizations (CSOs) involved in anti-corruption efforts. Rebuilding trust and fostering collaborative relationships between CSOs and the community is paramount to overcoming this challenge and gaining community support for anti-corruption initiatives. Building trust can help bridge the gap between anti-corruption efforts and the communities they aim to serve, ultimately contributing to improved governance. Whereas Haider (2009) underscores a significant challenge: the exclusion of leaders who may vehemently oppose the work of Corruption and Bribery Institutions (CBIs). These leaders may have vested interests in perpetuating corrupt practices, and their resistance can hinder the progress of CBIs in tackling corruption and promoting transparency. Overcoming this obstacle requires strategies that can navigate the influence of such resistant leaders while ensuring the effectiveness and integrity of CBIs. Another critical concern raised by Haider is the susceptibility of CBIs to be captured or influenced by political and traditional leaders. This capture can compromise the autonomy and impartiality of CBIs, as these leaders may seek to protect their own interests. Safeguarding the independence of CBIs and shielding them from undue influence is vital for their effectiveness in combating corruption and promoting good governance. Haider emphasizes the crucial role of information and training in the functioning of CBIs. Providing the necessary information to inform decision-making within these institutions is essential for making informed choices about anti-corruption initiatives. Simultaneously, investing in training programs for CBIs' members is essential to enhance their skills and capabilities, enabling them to effectively address the complex challenges associated with corruption. Haider's discussion on government involvement in CBIs reveals a dilemma. On one hand, excluding the government may reduce corruption and bureaucracy within these institutions. On the other hand, including the government can broaden the scope of CBIs and ensure their long-term sustainability. Striking a balance between these two options requires careful consideration of the specific context and the overarching goal of combating corruption while maintaining effective governance structures.

In conflicted countries, the performance of community-based initiatives (CBIs) is influenced by a multitude of factors, often evident through extensive literature review. Among the critical indicators of CBI performance, effectiveness stands out prominently (Sekulova et al., 2023). These influencing factors can be broadly categorized into four primary domains, with particular emphasis on the governmental and administrative aspects, given the unique challenges posed by war and conflict. A pivotal aspect in ensuring CBI effectiveness lies in their organizational capacity. This encompasses the synergy and skills of CBI members in addressing the real needs of their communities (de Clerck et al., 2023). Equally vital is the role of CBI leaders, as their ability to motivate and cultivate trust among volunteers directly impacts CBI effectiveness. In conflict-ridden regions, governmental and administrative factors assume a critical role in determining CBI effectiveness. These factors encompass the establishment of a robust legal framework, provision of technical training, administrative and consultancy services, citizen encouragement to participate in CBIs, and the imperative of maintaining CBIs as apolitical entities. Additionally, government-provided information and resources prove invaluable for informed decision-making and action (Tasa, 2021).

Financial resources are indispensable for the effectiveness of CBIs, especially in war-torn areas. CBIs rely on funding from a variety of sources, including the government, NGOs, the private sector, and various donors. The prudent utilization of these funds significantly influences the ability of CBIs to carry out their activities effectively amid the challenges of conflict (Martin, 2017). Social factors exert substantial influence on CBI effectiveness. The active engagement of the community and the diversity within society often contribute positively. Conversely, resistance and a lack of trust can hinder CBI effectiveness. Moreover, the overarching context of war and conflict introduces additional complexities, impacting both community engagement and social cohesion. It is imperative to acknowledge the profound impact of war and conflict on CBIs. Political factors, which have been somewhat overlooked in existing literature, can significantly affect CBI effectiveness in conflict zones. These factors include the instability of governance structures, policy shifts, and the broader geopolitical context, all of which can either facilitate or impede the work of CBIs (Berg & Seferis, 2015).

In light of these multifaceted challenges, this research will prioritize the examination of governmental and administrative factors, especially in developing countries grappling with the disruptive effects of war. Weak governmental institutions and unstable policies in conflict-affected regions pose formidable obstacles to CBI activities. Addressing these issues through comprehensive reforms is crucial to ensure that the valuable efforts of CBIs contribute meaningfully to sustainable development, even in the midst of conflict and turmoil.

5.3 Setting the Context: The Development in Sudan and the CBIs

Since gaining independence in 1956, Sudan has been continually beset by military coups, revolutions, and destructive conflicts. These upheavals have precipitated a dire need for humanitarian assistance, particularly in regions like Darfur, South Kordofan, and the Blue Nile. The nation has struggled with escalating humanitarian, economic, social, and security challenges, further weakened by fragile political and economic structures. Compounding these issues, the COVID-19 pandemic, ongoing violent conflicts in various regions, and natural disasters such as devastating floods have intensified human suffering and heightened the need for assistance. A diagnostic report on emergency preparedness and response capacities (EPR) in Sudan, conducted by World Bank consultants, highlighted the severity of the situation: approximately 29% of the Sudanese population urgently requires humanitarian aid, and an alarming seven million people are facing acute food insecurity as a result of the continued conflicts. These challenging circumstances are further exacerbated by significant economic difficulties, notably rampant inflation (EPR_Sudan, 2021). It is important to note that even prior to 2019, Sudan was grappling with long-standing issues, including a protracted war. The Department for International Development had categorized Sudan as a country with weak institutional capacity and limited governmental initiative to tackle these challenges. This assessment indicates that Sudanese government institutions have historically been ill-equipped to effectively manage the ongoing crises, especially the persistent conflict (Moreno & Torres, 2005).

The scarcity of vital public services such as education and healthcare significantly impact the living conditions of populations, particularly in developing countries like Sudan, which has long been burdened with the additional challenges of conflict. Hamilton and Svensson (2017) delve into the complex relationship between the quality of public services and poverty. They argue that in developing nations like

Sudan, the inadequacy of public services not only perpetuates poverty but also increases the likelihood of people descending into poverty, especially amidst ongoing armed conflicts. Additionally, when considering the substandard state of public services in Sudan, it is imperative to factor in the prolonged war's impact. Hermansons and Ahmad (2017) shed light on a critical consequence of this scenario: the stark inequality in public service delivery. Conflict tends to aggravate these disparities, as certain areas, particularly those affected by conflict, face greater challenges in providing services due to security concerns and the misallocation of resources. Such inequalities exacerbate the divide in accessing essential services, disproportionately disadvantaging certain population segments, notably those in conflict-affected regions. This reality further intensifies the humanitarian crisis in Sudan, underscoring the urgent need for comprehensive solutions to bridge these service gaps.

The present state of inadequate public services in Sudan has rendered the government incapable of addressing the challenge of sustainable service provision, particularly in emergency situations, especially in remote areas. This challenge is further compounded by the ongoing war situation in the country. Moreno and Torres (2005) emphasize that for Sudan's government to effectively provide public services, it must be open to forging partnerships with various actors. The World Bank consultants extensively discuss this issue in the emergency preparedness and response (EPR) report. They identify multiple stakeholders, including the government, international organizations, and non-governmental entities, all of whom play active roles in responding to emergencies, including those arising from the conflict. Among these non-governmental actors are community volunteers. The consultants confirm that the Sudanese government lacks a structured framework for community participation and engagement, despite the pivotal role played by local community volunteers in responding to emergencies, particularly in areas inaccessible to the government due to the conflict (EPR_Sudan, 2021). The war situation not only complicates the government's ability to provide services but also underscores the vital need for collaboration with these community actors to ensure a more effective response to the multifaceted challenges facing Sudan.

Amidst the backdrop of Sudan's complex and multifaceted challenges, including the persistent state of war, the role of community-based initiatives (CBIs) has emerged as critical. Albahari and Schultz (2017) underscore the indispensable need for CBIs, particularly in the context of emergencies and disasters. These initiatives offer a rapid response that often becomes imperative due to the delayed intervention of the government and foreign non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in conflict-ridden regions. The protracted war situation in Sudan has not only strained the government's capacity but has also frequently hindered the timely delivery of services to affected populations. Hassan and Ibrahim (2019) delve into the significance of CBIs within Sudan's complex service provision landscape. They highlight the intricate and bureaucratic procedures associated with public sector service delivery. In this challenging environment, CBIs, alongside formal micro-financing institutions (MFIs), play a pivotal role by providing an alternative source of funding. Their research demonstrates that CBIs are better equipped to address the actual financial needs of individuals, offering flexibility and simplicity in their procedures, advantages often lacking in formal MFIs. However, the effectiveness of CBIs in Sudan faces significant obstacles, many of which are exacerbated by the war situation. Albahari and Schultz (2017) point out the legal barriers that CBIs encounter when attempting to collaborate with the government. These initiatives are often compelled to either register as NGOs or dissolve themselves due to these constraints. The war, with its instability and government resource allocation challenges, further complicates the operational environment for CBIs.

This study focuses on reviewing existing literature concerning community-based initiatives (CBIs) in Sudan. Its primary aim is to investigate the extent to which this literature emphasizes the critical role of engaging with governmental and administrative factors to enhance the effectiveness of CBIs in conflict-affected regions. Additionally, the study aims to assess whether the literature recognizes the distinctive challenges and opportunities brought about by war. It also seeks to determine whether policy changes and administrative reforms are regarded as essential measures for empowering CBIs to respond effectively to the complex humanitarian challenges confronting Sudanese communities during periods of turmoil.

5.4 Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach, focusing predominantly on primary data sources. The primary data were collected through a series of 20 in-depth, semi-structured interviews. These interviews encompassed a network of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), consisting of approximately 20 organizations. The participants represented a diverse range of entities including NGOs, community-based initiatives (CBIs), non-governmental associations, and a broader non-governmental network of multiple NGOs, as detailed in Table 5.1. It is noteworthy that many of the NGOs involved in the study initially functioned as CBIs before transitioning to official NGO status under governmental regulations for humanitarian work. The interviews were predominantly conducted remotely via Google Meet, except for one interview which was held face-to-face. The preference for remote interviews was shaped by practical considerations, which consequently influenced the sample size. Despite its relative limitation, the sample was considered adequate to effectively capture the key challenges and dynamics faced by CBIs and NGOs in Sudan. The demographic composition of the interviewees included 36% females and 64% males. This diverse group of participants represented various geographic regions across Sudan, covering seven different states. These individuals provided insights into a broad spectrum of services offered by their respective organizations, thereby enriching the study with a wide range of perspectives and experiences.

The interviews were conducted between January and April 2023, spanning a period of several months to gather comprehensive insights. The interview instrument comprised a set of questions designed to delve deeply into various aspects of the entities being studied. The questions revolved around the history of the specific

Table 5.1 Key interviewees

No.	Category	Role	Location	Gender	Platform
1	NGO	Education project manager	Khartoum state	Female	Google meet
2	CBI	Media team leader	White Nile state	Male	Google meet
3	NGO	General manager	Khartoum state	Male	Google meet
4	CBI	General manager	North Darfur state	Male	In-person
5	Non-governmental association	Finance manager	Kassala state	Female	Google meet
6	CBI	Founder	Khartoum state	Female	Google meet
7	CBI	General manager	Gazira state	Male	Google meet
8	NGO	Finance manager	Khartoum state	Male	Google meet
9	NGO	General coordinator	Nile River state	Male	Google meet
10	Governmental organization	Media manager	Blue Nile state	Female	Google meet
11	Non-governmental network (*including 20 NGOS)*	General manager	Khartoum state	Male	Google meet
12	NGO	Expert in the volunteering work and education field	Khartoum state/ Doha	Female	In person
13	Governmental organization	Researcher	Doha, Qatar	Male	In person
14	Non-governmental institute	General supervisor	Darfur state	Male	Google meet
15	NGO	Founder	Khartoum state	Female	Google meet
16	NGO	Researcher	Khartoum state	Male	Google meet
17	Governmental organization	Founder	Doha, Qatar	Female	In person
18	Governmental organization	Political consultant	Doha, Qatar	Male	In person
19	NGO	Admin coordinator	Darfur state	Male	Google meet
20	NGO	Founder	Khartoum state	Female	Google meet

Source: the researchers

NGO, the services it offers, and the motivations behind transitioning from a community-based initiative (CBI) to an officially registered NGO. Additionally, the interview instrument explored the nature of partnerships established by these organizations, both with local and central governments and with other NGOs and community initiatives. It aimed to understand the dynamics of these partnerships and the factors influencing them. Furthermore, the instrument probed into the financial resources and funding sources of these entities, as well as the challenges and obstacles they encounter in securing financial support. The semi-structured nature of the interview questions facilitated the collection of rich and detailed data. This approach allowed for a more exploratory and nuanced exploration of the subjects, enabling the emergence of new questions and insights during the interviews themselves. The collected data from these interviews underwent thorough analysis. The results obtained from this analysis were instrumental in providing a comprehensive portrayal of the role played by CBIs and NGOs in the provision of public services within the complex context of Sudan. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by these organizations as they navigate the intricate landscape of humanitarian work in Sudan.

In terms of data analysis, the study employed rigorous qualitative analysis techniques. However, it's important to acknowledge that data analysis is subject to interpretation and alternative interpretations of the findings may exist. Regarding validity, the study implemented strategies to enhance trustworthiness. Member checking, where participants review transcripts or findings, was used to bolster credibility and confirmability. Furthermore, triangulation, involving the use of multiple data sources and research methods, was employed to strengthen the validity of the study's results.

This study is subject to several limitations. Firstly, constraints related to the study's timeframe and the inability to conduct in-person interviews in Sudan have impacted the sample size and the depth of data collection. Face-to-face interviews were not feasible due to these restrictions, potentially limiting the richness of participant interactions and insights. Furthermore, the study encountered challenges associated with internet connectivity and the unstable electrical power supply in Sudan. These issues resulted in several delays in conducting scheduled interviews, affecting the efficiency of data collection. Additionally, the recent armed conflict that emerged in April has posed a significant impediment to the research process. It has hindered the possibility of interviewing additional participants and gathering more diverse perspectives, as the ongoing conflict disrupted communication and access to certain areas. Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights within the constraints of its context and timeframe, shedding light on the challenges and opportunities faced by CBIs and NGOs in Sudan.

5.5 Discussion and Results

In the analysis and discussion section, we delve into the key factors and challenges surrounding the role of community-based initiatives (CBIs) in Sudan, with a particular focus on the exclusion of leaders resistant to CBIs, the risk of capturing CBIs by political and traditional leaders, the importance of information and training, government involvement, mistrust within the community and among peers, and the financial and administrative capacities of these initiatives.

The exclusion of leaders resistant to community-based initiatives (CBIs) indeed presents a substantial obstacle in their mission to serve communities effectively. This issue often arises when leaders perceive CBIs as potential challengers to their established authority and influence within the community.[1] Such resistance can manifest in various forms, from withholding resources and support to actively obstructing CBI activities. Several participants in the study emphasized the significance of this challenge. It's worth noting that this issue is not unique to Sudan; it has been observed in various contexts where CBIs operate. The skepticism of traditional leaders and local authorities toward CBIs can be attributed to concerns over the redistribution of power and influence.[2] These leaders may view CBIs as competition for the loyalty and trust of community members, fearing a shift in allegiance away from traditional structures. The literature on CBIs and community development often addresses the dynamics of power and resistance. It highlights the importance of understanding and navigating the intricate relationships between CBIs and established community leadership. Researchers have emphasized the need to demonstrate that CBIs can complement existing leadership structures rather than replace them.[3] By framing CBIs as partners rather than rivals, it becomes possible to assuage concerns about power struggles. Engaging in open dialogue with resistant leaders is crucial. Advocacy efforts should focus on building understanding and trust. Literature often showcases successful cases where CBIs have effectively communicated their objectives and willingness to collaborate. CBIs can invest in leadership capacity building within the community (Lo, 2015). By providing opportunities for traditional leaders to engage with CBIs in a productive manner, these leaders can better appreciate the value of such initiatives. Acknowledging and respecting the existing traditional systems of governance can be a strategic move. CBIs can seek ways to align their goals with the values and norms upheld by these systems. One interviewee shared, "Some traditional leaders are skeptical of CBIs as they see them as competition for influence. This can limit our access to community resources and support.[4]"

CBIs can be at risk of being co-opted or manipulated by political and traditional leaders for their own agendas. These risks dilute the grassroots, community-driven

[1] Personal communication (Interview)—CIB.

[2] Personal communication (Interview)—CIB.

[3] Personal communication (Interview)—NGO.

[4] Personal communication (Interview)—NGO.

nature of CBIs. Participants raised concerns about political and traditional leaders co-opting CBIs. A representative from a CBI-turned-NGO remarked, "We've seen cases where political leaders try to control CBIs for their own agendas. We must remain vigilant and maintain our independence.[5]" Vigilance and safeguards, such as clear governance structures and transparency, are necessary to ensure that CBIs remain independent and true to their community-oriented missions. The risk of political and traditional leaders co-opting CBIs for their own agendas can compromise the grassroots, community-driven essence of these initiatives. Participants expressed legitimate concerns about such co-optation, highlighting the importance of vigilance and safeguarding CBIs' independence. To mitigate this risk, maintaining transparent governance structures and unwavering commitment to their community-oriented missions becomes imperative.[6]

Access to accurate information and comprehensive training is crucial for CBIs to operate effectively. Many CBIs may start as grassroots initiatives with limited knowledge of best practices and procedures. The importance of training was a recurring theme among participants. A respondent emphasized, "CBIs often start with good intentions but lack the necessary skills. Training is crucial to ensure they can plan and execute projects effectively.[7]" Providing targeted training on project management, community engagement, and advocacy can empower CBIs to enhance their impact and navigate complex challenges more effectively. Training is a linchpin for the effectiveness of community-based initiatives (CBIs). Starting with noble intentions, CBIs often lack essential skills (Vidal, 2017). Tailored training in project management, community engagement, and advocacy empowers them to deliver impact and navigate challenges effectively.

While recognizing the need for government support, some participants expressed concerns. One interviewee stated, "Government involvement can bring resources but also bureaucracy. Striking the right balance is crucial.[8]" Government involvement in supporting and collaborating with CBIs is essential for their sustainability and effectiveness. However, it can also introduce administrative complexities and potential political influence. Careful negotiation and the establishment of clear roles and responsibilities between CBIs and the government can help strike a balance that benefits the community without compromising independence. Government support is undeniably valuable for the sustainability and effectiveness of community-based initiatives (CBIs). However, it is not without its potential pitfalls. Participants recognized that while government involvement can bring essential resources, it can also introduce bureaucratic challenges and even political influence. Striking the right balance between cooperation and independence requires thoughtful negotiation and the delineation of clear roles and responsibilities for both CBIs and the government. This balance is crucial to ensure that CBIs can continue serving their

[5] Personal communication (Interview)—CIB.

[6] Personal communication (Interview)—CIBs and NGOs.

[7] Personal communication (Interview)—GO.

[8] Personal communication (Interview)—CIB.

communities effectively without compromising their autonomy (Mansuri & Rao, 2003).

Mistrust within communities and among CBI members emerged as significant challenges. A participant shared, "Building trust takes time. In some cases, community members are skeptical about CBIs' intentions, and internal conflicts can also arise."[9] Mistrust, both within the community and among peers involved in CBIs, can impede progress. Addressing internal and external mistrust requires open communication, transparency, and the establishment of clear objectives and roles. Building trust over time is essential for CBIs to gain community support and collaborate effectively. Trust, as a cornerstone for community-based initiatives (CBIs), necessitates persistent efforts to overcome internal and external mistrust. This multifaceted challenge calls for open communication, transparent actions, and clearly defined roles (Kumar & Nayak, 2018). Building trust gradually, both within the community and among CBI members, is an ongoing process essential for securing community support and ensuring effective collaboration.

Participants highlighted resource constraints. A representative from a CBI emphasized, "Limited financial and administrative capacities can hold us back. We need more support in terms of funding and capacity building."[10] CBIs often operate with limited financial and administrative resources. Strengthening their capacities in these areas is critical for long-term sustainability. This may involve access to grants, training in financial management, and administrative support to navigate bureaucratic processes effectively. All interviewees unanimously affirmed that the NGOs they represent originated as community initiatives (Tsasis, 2008). However, the necessity for official recognition from both the government and private sector donors compelled them to undergo the process of formal registration as NGOs. Notably, there exists no legal framework for the recognition of community-based initiatives (CBIs), with only NGOs being legally registerable entities. This legal status is pivotal as it enables NGOs to establish bank accounts, maintain financial records, and attract funding from private enterprises seeking to fulfill their social responsibility obligations.

The interviewees presented a unanimous assessment of the challenging state of public services in Sudan. A significant portion of the rural population lacks access to government-provided services, and even for those who do have access, the quality-of-service delivery is subpar. The services provided by CBIs and NGOs in Sudan encompass a wide spectrum, including healthcare and awareness campaigns, education initiatives, orphan support programs, water supply projects, and food provision efforts. Partnerships with other organizations exhibit a degree of variability, primarily contingent on personal relationships and the government's budgetary allocation for CBIs. Government support may manifest in the form of financial contributions or the provision of materials and logistical assistance to aid the endeavors of CBIs and NGOs.

[9] Personal communication (Interview)—GO.

[10] Personal communication (Interview)—NGO.

With regard to cooperation with other NGOs, the interviewees emphasized the centrality of trust and reputation. Working with NGOs of questionable repute or where doubts linger regarding the utilization of funds in service provision is deemed unacceptable. Miscoordination and a lack of collaboration among organizations were also highlighted, resulting in multiple organizations catering to the same beneficiaries. This underscores the importance of partnerships with other NGOs. Interestingly, one interviewee pointed out the existence of a legal framework for NGO partnerships through a network structure, which can comprise a minimum of ten NGOs and be officially registered with the government's humanitarian authority. In terms of financial resources, all interviewees concurred that the primary source of funding for NGOs is individual donations, both from within and outside Sudan. The amount secured from this source varies based on the service preferences of individuals, their financial capacity, and conditions. Consequently, funding remains somewhat unstable. The second source of funding is private sector companies, contingent on the reputation of the NGOs, personal relationships, and outreach capabilities. These companies are open to providing funds as part of their social responsibility initiatives but seek reciprocal marketing benefits, typically favoring larger and more renowned NGOs.

Despite acknowledging the importance of CBIs, interviewees noted the absence of a legal framework and government recognition, making it challenging for CBIs to sustain their services. Registering as an NGO presents its own set of requirements, including the establishment of a headquarters and constitution, which many community initiatives struggle to meet due to resource constraints. Regarding the government's role in assisting CBIs and NGOs, interviewees stressed that it should extend beyond formal registration. Government involvement should encompass coordinating stakeholders and service providers, prioritizing areas with the greatest service needs, and facilitating data collection and analysis. The government is seen as responsible for data collection and dissemination, serving as the foundation for informed decision-making and targeted service delivery. The interviews highlighted that no single NGO possesses an independent source of funding or self-sustaining revenue generation mechanisms. This reliance on external donors can introduce biases in decision-making processes within organizations, with funding agendas often influenced by the preferences and priorities of donors, whether they are individuals or private sector entities seeking to enhance their public image. Also, CBIs in Sudan face multifaceted challenges that encompass leadership dynamics, government involvement, trust-building, and resource limitations. Addressing these challenges requires a holistic approach that combines community engagement, capacity building, and strategic partnerships to empower CBIs to fulfill their essential roles in addressing humanitarian challenges within the context of Sudan.

In developing countries facing the challenge of inadequate government-provided public services due to weak governance structures, the establishment of effective partnerships with non-state actors becomes increasingly crucial. Community-based initiatives (CBIs) stand out as dynamic non-state actors, with communities autonomously identifying and addressing their most urgent needs and challenges. While

CBIs have considerable potential to positively impact their communities, they often face unique challenges, especially in countries like Sudan.

One of the primary obstacles CBIs in Sudan encounter is the lack of a formal legal framework that provides them with official recognition and legitimacy. This absence of legal recognition poses significant difficulties, as it hinders their ability to gain government acknowledgment and secure essential funding from various sources. The findings from this study highlight the critical necessity for legal recognition of CBIs in Sudan. Such recognition would not only validate their invaluable contributions but also enable them to access the resources needed to serve their communities more effectively. Furthermore, official recognition of CBIs would signify an acknowledgment of their crucial role in filling the gaps in public service provision that are prevalent in Sudan. To amplify the impact of CBIs in Sudan and similar contexts, it is essential to establish legal frameworks that formally legitimize their activities. By doing so, governments can effectively leverage the capabilities of CBIs as collaborative partners in meeting societal needs and promoting the overall well-being of their citizenry.

In Sudan, the government plays a crucial and multifaceted role in improving public service delivery. For substantial progress, several key actions are essential. Firstly, legalizing the activities of community-based initiatives (CBIs) is paramount. This step not only legitimizes their vital efforts but also empowers them to access necessary resources and support, enabling them to serve their communities more effectively.

Moreover, the government should spearhead efforts to facilitate coordination among the various actors in the public service sector. Promoting collaboration between governmental bodies, NGOs, and CBIs can lead to a more holistic and efficient approach to service provision. A significant contribution that the government can make in this regard is providing necessary data for need assessments. Utilizing data-driven strategies is fundamental for allocating resources appropriately and prioritizing services effectively. By offering accurate and current data, the government equips both state and non-state organizations to address the population's most urgent needs.

Without active government engagement in these areas, the work of NGOs and CBIs in Sudan could be significantly hindered. Challenges such as the lack of legal recognition, disjointed coordination, and insufficient data impede their ability to improve public services and elevate community well-being. Concurrently, it is imperative for CBIs and NGOs in Sudan to seek diverse and stable funding sources. While donations from both domestic and international contributors are crucial, overreliance on external funding can sometimes skew these organizations' focus, aligning more with donor agendas than with pressing community needs.

To maintain independence and effectively address local needs, CBIs and NGOs should diversify their funding, explore self-sustaining models, and cultivate partnerships with local stakeholders. This multifaceted strategy can help these organizations maintain autonomy and prioritize the true needs and goals of the communities they serve, fostering more effective and enduring change.

5.5.1 Reflections on Ethics, Legitimacy, and the Current Sudanese Context

The eruption of full-scale war in Sudan in April 2023 between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces has significantly deepened the country's fragmentation and institutional collapse. The violence has devastated major cities, displaced millions, and left large parts of the country outside the reach of any functioning state authority. In this context, community-based initiatives (CBIs) have emerged not merely as humanitarian responders but as de facto governance mechanisms. Across various regions, CBIs are maintaining basic public functions—healthcare, education, food distribution, and local dispute resolution—in the complete absence of the state. While their contributions are vital, the moral and political implications of this shift are profound. The growing reliance on CBIs risks normalizing the state's abdication of responsibility. What begins as a response to emergency conditions may harden into a systemic expectation that local communities, with minimal resources and no formal authority, will provide for themselves indefinitely. Such a trajectory threatens to further erode the social contract between state and society and legitimizes a model of governance in which public services are treated as optional rather than obligatory.

The current wars have exacerbated this danger by fostering a new political economy of fragmented power. In many areas, CBIs must now negotiate with local militias, political factions, or informal authorities just to operate. These actors may tolerate, co-opt, or manipulate CBIs as part of their own strategies for legitimacy and control. The neutrality and independence of CBIs are increasingly precarious. Without legal recognition or systemic safeguards, their position remains vulnerable celebrated in rhetoric but unsupported in practice. This reality must be examined through the broader theoretical framework of legitimacy and governance discussed in the earlier chapters of this volume. According to that framework, legitimate governance—especially in fragile contexts—rests on three pillars: rightful occupancy, basic justice, and collective self-determination. In the case of Sudan, CBIs fulfill the functions of basic justice by providing essential services and ensuring immediate survival. They also represent collective self-determination, as they are embedded in their communities and often formed in response to local needs and agency. However, their claim to rightful occupancy remains weak. Lacking formal status, state integration, and legal protection, they cannot establish durable authority or stability in the long term. This dynamic poses a serious risk. If CBIs are relied upon indefinitely without efforts to reconstruct inclusive and accountable public institutions, Sudan's governance structure may evolve into a dual system—where elites and formal institutions govern on paper, while everyday life is managed by informal, unsupported actors in practice. Such a system is neither sustainable nor equitable. It allows state actors and international donors alike to evade responsibility under the guise of supporting "community resilience," while failing to address the structural causes of collapse.

In this light, the ethical responsibility of all actors—local, national, and international—is clear. CBIs must be supported, not simply as temporary delivery mechanisms but as partners in a broader strategy of institutional renewal. This requires legal frameworks that recognize their existence, funding channels that do not distort their missions, protection from co-optation, and inclusion in national planning processes. At the same time, any strategy to empower CBIs must be coupled with serious pressure on national elites to re-engage with the responsibilities of statehood and governance reform. Otherwise, there is a risk that CBIs will be caught in a cycle of exhaustion and dependency, expected to do more and more with less and less. Sudan's war has revealed both the extraordinary strength of grassroots action and the catastrophic weakness of formal institutions. The challenge now is to ensure that CBIs are not isolated as substitutes for state functions but elevated as core actors in rebuilding a more just, inclusive, and durable system of governance. Only by reconciling local initiative with national responsibility can Sudan avoid repeating the patterns of fragmentation and neglect that have defined its past—and continue to shape its present.

5.5.2 Advantages, Limitations, and Enabling Conditions of CBIs in Fragile Contexts

The analysis of community-based initiatives (CBIs) in Sudan highlights several important advantages, limitations, and factors that enable or constrain their effectiveness in fragile and conflict-affected environments. Among their key advantages, CBIs possess strong local legitimacy and trust, which allows them to engage directly with communities, mobilize volunteers, and respond quickly to urgent needs. Their embeddedness within the social fabric means that they often understand cultural norms, community expectations, and local power dynamics more deeply than external actors. This position enables them to design and deliver interventions that are more contextually appropriate and accepted by beneficiaries (Sekulova et al., 2023). CBIs also benefit from a high degree of flexibility and adaptability, as they can operate informally and adjust their activities in response to rapidly shifting conditions, evolving risks, or sudden humanitarian crises, without the bureaucratic constraints that frequently affect larger organizations or international agencies.

Additionally, CBIs can fill critical gaps left by the public sector and formal NGOs, particularly in conflict-affected, insecure, or remote areas where government services are either absent or severely degraded. In such settings, CBIs frequently act as first responders, providing essential goods and services such as emergency food distribution, basic health care, education support, or protection mechanisms for vulnerable groups. Their capacity to leverage local networks, traditional leadership structures, and informal solidarity mechanisms enable them to deliver assistance in ways that are both efficient and trusted. Another advantage is their ability to foster community ownership and participation, which can contribute to longer-term resilience and strengthen social cohesion by empowering people to solve their own problems collectively (de Clerck et al., 2023). However, CBIs also face significant limitations that can undermine their sustainability, reach, and long-term impact. One of the most prominent challenges is the absence of legal recognition and formal status, which restricts their ability to secure funding from institutional donors, open organizational bank accounts, or formalize partnerships with government entities and larger NGOs. Without official status, CBIs are often excluded from national coordination platforms and may struggle to access technical support or participate in decision-making processes about humanitarian priorities. Resource constraints are also acute: most CBIs operate with limited and unpredictable financial resources, rely heavily on volunteer labor, and often lack the administrative, managerial, and technical capacities needed to sustain and scale up their activities over time. Moreover, their informal nature can expose them to risks such as weak financial accountability, limited monitoring and evaluation, and vulnerability to corruption or mismanagement.

Political interference and co-optation by local elites, armed groups, or traditional powerholders pose additional threats to the independence and credibility of CBIs. In contexts where political competition or conflict is intense, CBIs may be pressured to align with specific factions or provide preferential access to aid, which can undermine impartiality and community trust. These dynamics are compounded by the lack of regulatory frameworks or oversight mechanisms to protect CBIs from exploitation or capture. Another structural limitation is the difficulty CBIs face in transitioning from short-term, reactive responses to more systematic, development-oriented programming. The combination of limited funding horizons, weak organizational infrastructure, and an absence of technical expertise often forces CBIs to focus narrowly on immediate needs rather than building sustainable systems of service delivery (Tasa, 2021). Despite these challenges, CBIs remain indispensable actors in fragile contexts, precisely because of their ability to reach marginalized populations and maintain operations where formal institutions have collapsed. Their unique position enables them to fill gaps in service provision that neither NGOs nor government agencies can fully address, particularly in situations of acute crisis or institutional breakdown. They not only deliver material support but also play an important symbolic role by demonstrating collective agency and restoring a sense of dignity and solidarity within communities affected by violence or neglect (Martin, 2017).

To maximize their positive contributions and mitigate their limitations, several enabling conditions are essential. Supportive legal and policy frameworks that formally recognize CBIs and define their rights and obligations can help legitimize their activities and facilitate access to funding and institutional partnerships. Targeted capacity-building initiatives—such as training in project management, financial accountability, advocacy, and monitoring and evaluation—are critical for strengthening organizational skills and governance structures. Stable funding mechanisms, including small grants windows or pooled humanitarian funds, can reduce overreliance on unpredictable donations and enable CBIs to plan beyond the immediate term. Finally, safeguarding measures that protect CBIs' autonomy from undue external influence—whether political, economic, or social—are crucial for maintaining their credibility and effectiveness. When these conditions are in place, CBIs can play a transformative role in delivering essential services, strengthening social cohesion, and laying the foundations for longer-term development and peacebuilding in fragile and conflict-affected settings.

5.6 Conclusion

This study not only sheds light on the humanitarian landscape in Sudan but also offers critical insights into both formal and informal non-state organizations active in the sector. By filling notable gaps in the existing literature, it lays the groundwork for future scholarly investigations within this context. Given the persistent conflict in Sudan, a deeper exploration into how this prolonged strife influences the operations and effectiveness of community-based initiatives (CBIs) is essential. Key areas of focus include examining the multifaceted challenges faced by CBIs in delivering essential services amid conflict and the innovative tactics they implement to overcome these obstacles. Additionally, a thorough analysis of the Sudanese government's role is crucial. This involves assessing how government policies and actions either support or impede the functioning of CBIs within conflict zones. Understanding the intricacies of government involvement will provide a more complete picture of its impact on humanitarian efforts.

The study also aims to understand the adaptability of CBIs to the dynamic nature of conflict, highlighting their resilience and ability to modify their approaches to meet the evolving needs of impacted communities. Additionally, the potential of CBIs in contributing to conflict resolution and peacebuilding in Sudan warrants exploration, particularly their role in promoting dialogue and reconciliation among conflicting parties. Another critical aspect is the investigation of coordination mechanisms between CBIs, NGOs, and international organizations, particularly in delivering humanitarian aid during conflict. Identifying the challenges and opportunities for improved collaboration can lead to more effective interventions. As Sudan transitions from conflict response to post-conflict recovery and development, the role of CBIs in community rebuilding and fostering stability becomes increasingly significant. Examining their contributions to these processes will illuminate their enduring importance in the region. This research is pivotal as Sudan navigates the complexities of ongoing conflict and humanitarian crises. Understanding the evolving roles and dynamics of CBIs and NGOs can provide valuable insights, contributing to more effective strategies for meeting the needs of vulnerable populations in Sudan. Future research should explore the long-term impact of CBIs on community resilience and their role in post-conflict reconstruction.

References

Alam, M. Z., Hoque, M. R., Hu, W., & Barua, Z. (2020). Factors influencing the adoption of mHealth services in a developing country: A patient-centric study. *International Journal of Information Management, 50*, 128–143.

Albahari, A., & Schultz, C. (2017). A qualitative analysis of the spontaneous volunteer response to the 2013 Sudan floods: Changing the paradigm. *Prehospital and Disaster Medicine, 32*(3), 1–9. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049023X17000164

Armstrong, A., & Francis, R. (2004). The role of community governance in public sector programs and initiatives. In *Integrated governance: Linking up government, business & civil society*.

Atashbar, T. (2023). *How nations become fragile: An AI-augmented bird's-eye view (with a case study of South Sudan)*.

Berg, M., & Seferis, L. (2015). *Protection outcomes in cash based interventions: a literature review*. Danish Refugee Council, UNHCR, and ECHO.

Bovaird, T., & Löffler, E. (Eds.). (2015). *Public management and governance*. Routledge.

Celata, F., Dinnie, L., & Holsten, A. (2019). Sustainability transitions to low-carbon societies: Insights from European community-based initiatives. *Regional Environmental Change, 19*(4), 909–912. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10113-019-01488-6

Chatterji, A., & Chaudhry, L. N. (Eds.). (2014). *Contesting nation: Gendered violence in South Asia: Notes on the postcolonial present*. Zubaan.

Cooper, R. (2018). *What is civil society, its role and value in 2018?* 25.

Country Dashboard | Fragile States Index. (2022). https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/

de Clerck, V., Shaheen, R., Lawday, A., Nasery, T., Mehdizada, M., Di Dio, D., … & Naud, A. (2023). *Evaluation of UNHCR's Response to the L3 Emergency in Afghanistan 2021–2022*.

de Weijer, F., & Kilnes, U. (2012). *Strengthening civil society? Reflections on international engagement in fragile states*.

Dowst, M. (2009). *Working with civil society in fragile states*, 12.

Edelenbos, J., Molenveld, A., Mojanchevska, K., Ensenado, E., Ballinas, M. B.-P., Esteban, A., Ruijsink, S., Igalla, M., & Tsatsou, A. (2021). Community-based initiatives in the urban realm what conditions their performance? *Journal of Environmental Planning and Management, 64*(9), 1689–1712. https://doi.org/10.1080/09640568.2020.1837088

Elayah, M., Al-Sameai, N., Khodr, H., & Gamar, S. (2023). Community-based initiatives and public services delivery in a fragile context: The case of Yemen. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*. https://doi.org/10.1177/08997640221145182

Emergency Preparedness and Response Capacities in Sudan. (2021). World Bank Group.

Haider, H. (2009). *Community-based approaches to peacebuilding in conflict-affected and fragile contexts*.

Hamilton, A., & Svensson, J. (2017). The vicious circle of poverty, poor public service provision, and state legitimacy in Sudan. In *Data-driven decision making in fragile contexts*. World Bank Group.

Haque, M. S. (2020). A critique of the role of NGOs as partners in governance. *Asia Pacific Journal of Public Administration, 42*(1), 17–32.

Hassan, A., & Ibrahim, A. (2019). The role of community self-initiatives and development. *Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities, 5*(4), 432–440.

Hermansons, Z., & Ahmad, B. (2017). The effect of decentralization policies on inequalities of public service delivery in Sudan. In *Data-driven decision making in fragile contexts*. World Bank Group.

Hildreth, W. B., Miller, G., Rabin, J., & Miller, G. J. (Eds.). (2018). *Handbook of public administration* (Vol. 1).

Igalla, M., Edelenbos, J., & van Meerkerk, I. (2020). What explains the performance of community-based initiatives? Testing the impact of leadership, social capital, organizational capacity, and government support. *Public Management Review, 22*(4), 602–632. https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2019.1604796

Kumar, J., & Nayak, J. K. (2018). Brand community relationships transitioning into brand relationships: Mediating and moderating mechanisms. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services, 45*, 64–73.
Lo, Y. Y. (2015). A glimpse into the effectiveness of L2-content cross-curricular collaboration in content-based instruction programmes. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism, 18*(4), 443–462.
Mansuri, G., & Rao, V. (2003). Evaluating community-based and community-driven development: A critical review of the evidence. *Policy Research Working Paper, 3209*.
Martin, S. (2017). *Evaluating income generation, nutrition, and parenting programs on maternal and child health outcomes: A multi-program case study of a community-based organization in the Western cape , South Africa*. Rutgers The State University of New Jersey, Graduate School-Newark.
McLeod, D. (2003). *Community-based social services: Practical advice based upon lessons from outside the World Bank*. Social Protection Unit, The World Bank.
Moreno, M., & Torres. (2005). *Service delivery in a difficult environment: The child-friendly community initiative in Sudan*. Department for International Development.
Mourato, J. M., & Bussler, A. (2019). Community-based initiatives and the politicization gap in socio-ecological transitions: Lessons from Portugal. *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions, 33*, 268–281.
Nicholls, W. (2009). Place, networks, space: Theorising the geographies of social movements. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers, 34*(1), 78–93. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-5661.2009.00331.x
Olawale, Y., Ani, K. J., & Obah-Akpowoghaha, G. N. (2023). Introducing resource conflicts and governance in Africa. In *Resource conflict and environmental relations in Africa* (pp. 1–22). Springer Nature Singapore.
Oxford Analytica. (2023). *Sudan faces serious risks of a protracted civil war*. Emerald expert briefings, (oxan-db).
Sekulova, F., Anguelovski, I., & Argüelles, L. (2023). Redefining success in organizing towards degrowth. *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions, 48*, 100764.
States of Fragility 2022. (2022). OECD.
Tantoh, H. B., Simatele, D. M., Ebhuoma, E., Donkor, K., & McKay, T. J. (2021). Towards a pro-community-based water resource management system in Northwest Cameroon: Practical evidence and lessons of best practices. *GeoJournal, 86*, 943–961.
Tasa, L. N. B. (2021). *The impact of cash transfers on women's economic empowerment in an African context: A case study of south Sudanese women in Yumbe District Bidibidi refugee camp northern Uganda* (Master's thesis).
Torfing, J., Sørensen, E., & Røiseland, A. (2019). Transforming the public sector into an arena for co-creation: Barriers, drivers, benefits, and ways forward. *Administration & Society, 51*(5), 795–825. https://doi.org/10.1177/0095399716680057
Tsasis, P. (2008). The politics of governance: Government—Voluntary sector relationships. *Canadian Public Administration, 51*(2), 265–290.
Vidal, A. (2017). *Building community capacity*. Routledge.
Xiong, W., Chen, B., Wang, H., & Zhu, D. (2019). Governing public–private partnerships: A systematic review of case study literature. *Australian Journal of Public Administration, 78*(1), 95–112.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

Chapter 6
Humanitarian Aid Partnerships in Yemen's Conflict: Understanding the Relationship between the United Nations and Local Non-governmental Organizations in Humanitarian Endeavors

Moosa Elayah and Rawan Al-Mansori

Abstract This chapter explores the complex collaboration between the United Nations (UN) system and local non-governmental organizations (LNGOs) in delivering humanitarian aid amidst Yemen's protracted conflict. Using a qualitative research approach, the study examines the challenges of partnership, the dynamics of operational and cultural compatibility, and the role of LNGOs in mitigating Yemen's dire humanitarian crisis. The findings highlight the importance of cultural sensitivity, trust-building, and capacity strengthening to enhance collaboration and maximize aid delivery impact. It presents an exploratory study that delves into the intricate relationship between the United Nations (UN) system and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) within the context of humanitarian aid provision, with a focus on humanitarian food aid. The research endeavors to unearth the pivotal factors influencing this collaborative dynamic while also shedding light on the primary challenges that impede effective cooperation between these two essential entities. To obtain a holistic understanding of the organizational landscapes and dynamics, a qualitative research methodology is meticulously employed. The study draws its data from two key sources. Firstly, it entails an exhaustive examination of publicly accessible documents, encompassing international reports and official documents. Additionally, research activities and interviews with relevant stakeholders significantly enrich the dataset. Throughout the research process, content analysis stands as the primary method of data analysis, allowing for the elucidation of various

Note: Parts of this chapter has been published in the *Journal of International Development.*

M. Elayah (✉)
Public Administration Doha Institute for Graduate Studies, Doha, Qatar
e-mail: moosa.elayah@dohainstitute.edu.qa

R. Al-Mansori
Public Administration Department, Doha Institute for Graduate Studies, Doha, Qatar
e-mail: ral033@dohainstitute.edu.qa

© The Author(s) 2026

M. Elayah (ed.), *Governance without Government in the MENA Region*,
Nonprofit and Civil Society Studies,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-03953-8_6

theoretical dimensions grounded in relevant literature. The exploratory findings unveiled through this research underscore the pressing need for the UN system to diversify its approaches to social interaction within the realm of humanitarian food aid programs. Such diversified approaches should entail delivering initiatives that resonate with and hold intrinsic value for local communities. Furthermore, there is a vital call to actively strive for the satisfaction and involvement of local NGOs. These actions are imperative for bridging extant gaps in program effectiveness and, ultimately, for the realization of shared objectives among these pivotal organizations.

Keywords UN · LNGOs · Humanitarian food aid · Effectiveness · Yemen

6.1 Introduction

Yemen's humanitarian crisis underscores the critical need for collaborative efforts between international actors like the UN and local NGOs. This chapter investigates the strengths and challenges of such partnerships and their implications for effective humanitarian response. The severity of conflicts varies from one community to another, and conflict-affected countries are typically prioritized based on several key determinants. These determinants include human rights violations by the conflicting parties, large-scale displacement of civilians, widespread famine, the collapse of governments due to legislative voids, and economic inflation resulting from high unemployment rates (Natsios, 1995). Over the past three decades, the United States has played a prominent leadership role in the establishment and support of the largest global humanitarian response system, formerly known as the United Nations Population Fund (UNDF) (Cohen, 1999). In the late 1980s, US aid agencies allocated $297 million in financial and food assistance (FFA) with the aim of promoting food security and economic stability. Alongside the substantial efforts of non-governmental organizations, notably the International Red Cross (ICR), humanitarian aid grew to approximately 1.2 billion USD by 1993 (Natsios, 1995). In 1994, the United States hosted a global conference involving representatives from 180 nations to examine the nexus between population and development (Layachi, 2021). A key outcome of this summit was the recognition of the pivotal role economic growth plays in maintaining demographic stability within a country. In 1999, the United States made its first significant financial contribution to the Fund (Cohen, 1999). The complex humanitarian response system involves three main groups of actors: non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the United Nations (UN), and the International Red Cross (IRC) (Natsios, 1995).

This study evaluates the operational and cultural factors influencing the collaboration between the UN system and LNGOs. It also examines the role of LNGOs in addressing gaps in aid delivery. This chapter aims to illuminate the pivotal role of organizations within the humanitarian response landscape and assess their effectiveness in delivering humanitarian aid, particularly within the context of the collaborative relationship between the United Nations (UN) system and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the challenging war-torn conditions of Yemen. The evaluation is based on several critical factors, including the nature of local organizations' work, their institutional efficiency, their organizational culture, and the operational methodologies employed in humanitarian relief efforts. This study delves into how operational and organizational processes influence the formation and development of collaborative partnerships in humanitarian response systems. As part of its humanitarian assistance efforts, the United Nations system consistently provides essential services to the civilian population in conflict zones. This paper aims to address the following research questions: What factors contribute to both collaborative and conflicting dynamics in the partnership between the UN system and NGOs?

The chapter commences with an overview of humanitarian aid in conflict settings, the role of local non-governmental organizations, and the involvement of the UN system. Toward the end of this section, a framework is introduced to analyze the challenges encountered by the UN system throughout the course of the Yemeni conflict. The subsequent section delves into the specific role of the UN system in Yemen during the ongoing conflict. In the Sect. 6.3, the paper presents findings from 15 interviews conducted with representatives from Yemeni local NGOs and UN system staff, following a discussion of the research methodology. Lastly, the paper concludes with key insights and recommendations.

6.2 Humanitarian Aid During Conflict: Theoretical Insights

Humanitarian aid has evolved from the concept of "humanity" that emerged in 1755 as a response to the limitations of existing systems (Ryfman, 2007). It has transformed into a global humanitarian governance entity (Layachi, 2021). Throughout history, various religious traditions, including Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, have focused on enhancing human lives and preserving dignity through charitable activities, which became cultural norms (Stamnes, 2016). The nineteenth century witnessed the evolution of humanitarian aid through imperialism, postcolonialism, and liberalism, with involvement in movements like anti-slavery campaigns (Barnett, 2018). Humanitarian aid operates under principles of impartiality, neutrality, and independence, endorsed by the United Nations (UN) (Rysaback-Smith, 2015). This aid encompasses diverse services aimed at restoring normalcy and minimizing crisis impact through collaborative efforts guided by impartiality and neutrality principles. "Emergency Aid" provides immediate assistance to save lives in conflict scenarios (Turkeš et al., 2019). NATO defines humanitarian aid as a joint effort involving military resources to aid civilian relief (Huysmans, 2002). OCHA, the UN Agency for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, emphasizes defending human rights, political pressure, condemnation, and support to protect civilians and their basic rights in conflict zones (Van Hout & Wells, 2021). Despite global humanitarian needs of approximately 4.5 billion USD, persistent challenges arise due to ongoing conflicts, political disputes, and limitations in delivering aid at scale, as seen in the Syrian crisis (Mapp, 2014).

Humanitarian systems, although robust, face escalating challenges with the emergence of new conflicts that endanger the lives of millions. Moreover, the landscape of humanitarian assistance is shifting toward addressing protracted and complex wars, such as those in Sudan and Congo, as global trends evolve (Khaled, 2021). The scope of humanitarian aid has expanded due to these ongoing conflicts, and addressing the complex repercussions of conflicts and wars has become increasingly challenging (Harvey, 2015). Furthermore, the humanitarian network has grown significantly, characterized by a diverse and complex web of international, national, and local organizations working cohesively to achieve common objectives and to deal with the active big number of wars around the world (Elayah et al., 2023). War represents a form of political practice involving conflicts over resources, interests, and values within or beyond a state. A modern trend in warfare is an increase in human, environmental, and economic costs, a decrease in combatant numbers, and a rise in civilian casualties. Wars divert significant resources from civilian needs during military pursuits. In developing countries, civil conflicts driven by poverty and stagnation are common, often fueled by resource greed. Militaries hold a prominent societal position, and wars are often justified in pursuit of national glory. Conflict arises from competition among social groups, and formal declarations of war have become rarer. Wars result in massive destruction and suffering, even when described differently today. Their impact remains significant, with consequences that can be severe and long-lasting. Some view war as an epidemic, an avoidable mistake, or a punishable offense, while others see it as confusion. The concept of low-intensity war is seen by some as a misleading euphemism for death (Barash & Webel, 2021). Civil and internal wars deteriorate governance structures and the rule of law, often accompanied by growing corruption in government agencies.

The cost of war is exceedingly high, especially when it comes to procuring essential resources during times of conflict, such as humanitarian aid and supplies. The human and economic toll of war is significant, and it underscores the urgent need for diplomatic and peaceful resolutions to conflicts whenever possible. We must continue to work toward a world where dialogue and cooperation prevail over armed conflicts (Singh et al., 2021). At the same time, it is important to recognize the significant and effective role that non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play in mitigating the impact of war and conflict. NGOs often provide crucial humanitarian assistance, including food, shelter, medical care, and other essential services, to those affected by conflict. Their dedication and efforts make a meaningful difference in alleviating the suffering caused by war and contribute to building more resilient communities. In light of the ongoing conflicts and the absence of state institutions, NGOs are interfering greatly and working to provide many diverse public services that have been an integral part of the agendas of governments in many directions, such as the security field and various humanitarian aid, given the importance of the existing conflicts and their consequences.

In conflict-affected regions, effective humanitarian assistance often relies on collaborative efforts between United Nations agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and local and national organizations. The participation of these local and national entities plays a pivotal and irreplaceable role, especially during the implementation phases of relief programs (Arshad, 2023). The establishment of partnerships with these organizations is essential for the successful delivery of aid. Research highlights the significance of including local NGOs in the humanitarian response process, both during and after conflicts. However, this cooperation may unveil conflicts and disparities within the framework of their collaborative relationships (Leonardsson & Rudd, 2015). Constraints on collaboration between the UN system and NGOs often stem from the predominance of the latter in executive roles during projects, with limited interactive involvement in the planning and preparation stages (Alqatabry & Butcher, 2020). As such, Natsios (1995) identifies the absence of an organizational strategy governing interactions between partner organizations as one of the primary factors contributing to conflicts in collaborative humanitarian responses. This absence, combined with inherent incompatibilities, frequently presents challenges in defining common goals and measuring their achievement.

To enhance the effectiveness of humanitarian efforts, international NGOs are encouraged to prioritize the strengthening of community-based grassroots organizations and capacity building (Nesbit, 2003). Addressing these aspects is crucial when working on programs aimed at improving services based on well-defined objectives (Walle & v. d., 1990). Furthermore, NGOs should consider adjusting their role to provide support rather than direct assistance to civilians (Tandon, 1997). Building cooperative relationships and networks among international NGOs and other organizations is a widely advocated approach (Nesbit, 2003). International organizations are encouraged to actively engage in cooperative roles and provide funding to non-governmental organizations, as proposed by Suárez and Marshall (2014). This collaborative approach fosters a more effective and coordinated response to humanitarian challenges in conflict-affected regions.

Several theoretical models have been developed to guide all parties involved in participatory relationships, with approaches varying based on the assumptions made in the study of such relationships between UN organizations and LNGOS. In examining the nature of relationships between the United Nations (UN) system and local NGOs within the context of humanitarian assistance, we have chosen to adopt the participatory theoretical and analytical framework developed by Elayah (2021). This framework was selected for several reasons, including its contributions in assessing the impact of different types of relationships, determining the success and failure of humanitarian aid projects based on various factors, exploring innovative approaches to achieving project goals, and providing a robust foundation for generating recommendations within the humanitarian field. It offers clear answers to research questions by comprehensively addressing the context of local interactions among institutions, ideas, and individuals involved in translating international aid projects.

The incorporation of local knowledge during project implementation assumes paramount importance, serving as a proactive measure to mitigate potential conflicts stemming from issues such as mistrust, misunderstandings, and cultural disparities. It is imperative to acknowledge that foreign aid programs and projects operate as intricate networks involving various stakeholders, encompassing donors, mediators, recipients, local and international officials, and counterparts. Within this multifaceted web of relationships, different fundamental factors emerge (see Fig. 6.1) as critical determinants of the collaborative dynamics in the implementation of relief projects, including devotion, trust, cultural disparities, and mutual understanding. These factors have been collectively categorized in our study under two overarching themes: "Organizational Culture in Humanitarian Aid" and "Operational Factors in Humanitarian Aid." This classification allows for a comprehensive exploration of the interplay between these factors, shedding light on how organizational cultures within the humanitarian sector and various operational considerations impact the effectiveness of relief efforts. By dissecting these complexities, our research endeavors to contribute to a deeper understanding of the intricacies of humanitarian cooperation, offering valuable insights into how both UN entities and Local Non-Governmental Organizations can navigate these factors to foster more efficient and impactful humanitarian interventions (Wilke Corvin, 2006).

Cultural awareness in conflict-ridden countries is of paramount importance for non-governmental organizations operating in such contexts. Cultural aspects within a specific country may not align with those of other societies, whether due to inherent cultural differences or variations at the personal level, spanning professional, relational, educational, and social domains. Within the realm of humanitarian aid, organizational culture plays a pivotal role in shaping the dynamics of cooperation between the United Nations (UN) and local non-governmental organizations (LNGOs) (Larson & Foropon, 2018). The UN system, as a complex network of agencies and bodies, possesses its distinct organizational culture characterized by a

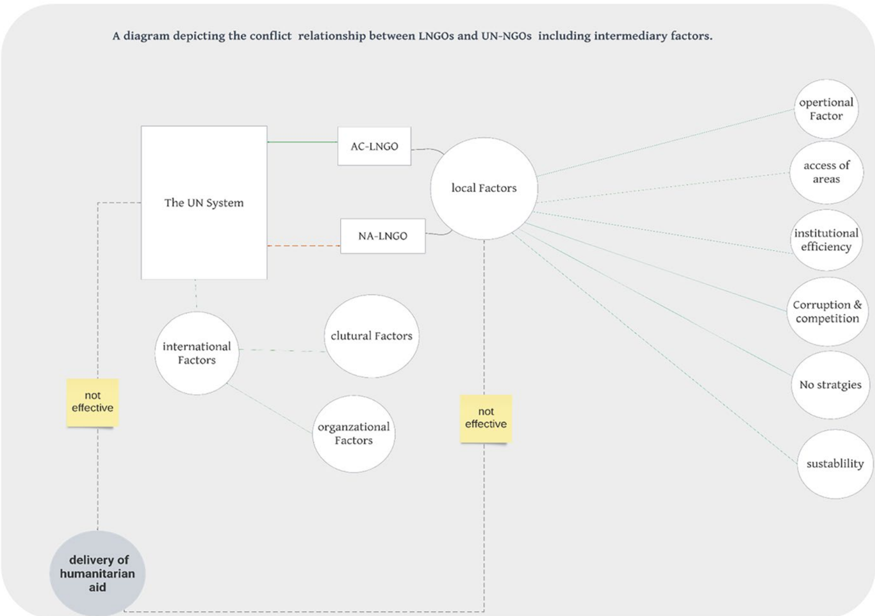

Fig. 6.1 Factors of the conflict relationship between LNGOs and UN-NGOs

commitment to multilateralism, international cooperation, and the promotion of universal humanitarian values. On the other hand, LNGOs often operate within a diverse cultural landscape influenced by local norms, values, and traditions (Bui et al., 2000). The interplay between these contrasting organizational cultures can either facilitate or hinder effective collaboration. The UN system's culture tends to prioritize standardized procedures, accountability, and adherence to international norms and regulations. While this approach ensures consistency and transparency, it can sometimes clash with the flexibility and adaptability required in fast-paced humanitarian crises. LNGOs, driven by their local context, may emphasize community-centered approaches, cultural sensitivity, and rapid response mechanisms. Balancing these cultural disparities is a delicate yet essential task in humanitarian cooperation (Walkup, 1997). The main assumption in this study is highlighting the need for cultural sensitivity and the cultivation of a shared culture of respect, adaptability, and trust between the UN and LNGOs to enhance collaboration in the humanitarian sector.

Operational factors emerge as a critical facet of cooperation between the UN and LNGOs in the realm of humanitarian aid. The data gleaned from our interviews reveal that operational factors encompass a multitude of challenges and opportunities. LNGOs operating in conflict zones often face a stark lack of essential resources, including funding, personnel, and infrastructure (Sandvik & Lohne, 2014). In contrast, the UN system, with its global reach, possesses greater access to resources but grapples with bureaucratic complexities and administrative hurdles. Moreover, the management of crises and resource utilization necessitates military and civil cooperation, further complicating the operational landscape (Richardson et al., 2016). The UN's commitment to collaborating with LNGOs stems from its recognition of the immense burden placed on these organizations, particularly in contexts of protracted crises. The pressing need for streamlined coordination mechanisms, resource-sharing, and strategic planning to optimize the use of available resources and expertise (Otto, 1996). In essence, the operational factors uncovered in our research underscore the intricate interplay between resource constraints, organizational capacities, and the operational environments in which humanitarian aid is delivered. Navigating these factors requires a multifaceted approach that combines the strengths of the UN system and LNGOs while addressing their respective challenges. These operational insights serve as a foundation for devising effective strategies to enhance humanitarian cooperation and crisis management, ultimately improving the lives of those in need during times of crisis (Nikbakhsh & Farahani, 2011).

To enhance the effectiveness of local and international NGO collaborations, the UN system is encouraged to grant international legal personality to NGOs. This formal relationship can be established under the United Nations Charter, fostering transparency and aiding in goal achievement through cooperative processes (Gordanić, 2021). Consequently, participatory operational strategies between the UN system and its allies are crucial in determining the potential establishment or dissolution of alliances based on goal accomplishment. Community participation is improved as the UN system collaborates with NGOs in providing services and engaging in consultations and decision-making processes. Organizational characteristics, policies, geographical scope, and objectives significantly influence an organization's ability to collaborate effectively within a harmonized system (Ritchie, 1995). One of the primary obstacles to humanitarian responses in Arab countries is the presence of local political ideologies rooted in religious, national, and partisan identities. These ideologies can lead to negative effects and operational challenges for international NGOs implementing projects. Local populations may exhibit reluctance to accept aid, as they perceive Western countries as having negative intentions and motives. Identity-based considerations play a pivotal role in the reception and response to aid.

Humanitarian response in conflict-affected states is closely intertwined with local NGOs, forming a network of connections between the conflict-affected community and international organizations. These organizations play a pivotal role in efficient responses by identifying needs, priorities, and access points (Barbelet, 2018; Dixon et al., 2016). However, the immediacy of humanitarian aid sometimes leads to challenges during the planning and coordination stages. Socialization also influences the extent of assistance and the community's response to aid. International actors often face a significant gap between the local reality in conflict-affected nations and Western perceptions conveyed by external organizations. Civil society acts as a central bridge between state and non-state actors, as well as local and international civil actors (Elayah & Verkoren, 2020).

Localization serves as a transformative tool that shifts organizations from single to hybrid models based on local perspectives. To represent NGOs' local identities in the humanitarian response, they must be categorized based on geographical locations, operational constraints, human resources, and capabilities. However, the localization phase in conflict countries still faces restrictions imposed by Western donor organizations (Brabant & Patel, n.d.). Focusing on specific aspects of the participatory process, such as what is or is not provided, can lead to complexities and conflicts among key stakeholders. Furthermore, integrating local skills and knowledge into the humanitarian aid process is crucial, as donor programs are likely to fail without adequate consideration of local knowledge within specific contexts (Elayah & Fenttiman, 2021).

6.3 Context Description in Yemen

Yemen, located in Western Asia, is an Arab nation grappling with prolonged armed conflicts and a multifaceted crisis. These conflicts have led to a significant erosion of governmental sovereignty, exacerbated by recent conflicts involving a Saudi-led coalition. The breakdown of state institutions has resulted in dire living conditions for many civilians. Historically, Yemen has experienced territorial disputes and internal divisions, dating back to the period before its unification in 1990 (Sharp & Brudnick, 2015). The Houthi rebel movement, active since 2004, has been a central actor in Yemen's conflicts. Their occupation of Yemen's capital, Sanaa, for 9 years marked a pivotal attempt to gain control. Saudi Arabia's intervention further destabilized governance structures, hindering the peaceful transfer of power initially sought in 2011 (Elayah et al., 2023). The situation escalated in 2014 when the Houthis seized the presidential palace, prompting President Hadi's relocation to Aden. The Saudi-led coalition launched a military operation to restore his rule (Murthy, 2018).

Yemen's humanitarian crisis has reached catastrophic proportions, with millions of its citizens teetering on the brink of survival. The United Nations has been thrust into a pivotal role as it grapples with one of the most severe and complex humanitarian emergencies in the world (Orkaby, 2017). At the heart of this crisis lies a food shortage of staggering proportions. Yemen is facing one of the worst food crises in its history, a dire situation that has been exacerbated by embargoes and restrictions on the flow of essential goods. Fuel and food prices have skyrocketed, making these basic necessities increasingly unaffordable for ordinary Yemeni citizens (Kurdi, 2021). The consequences of this dire food crisis are nothing short of devastating. Malnutrition rates, especially among children under the age of five, have soared to alarming levels. Stunting, which affects a child's physical and cognitive development, is pervasive, and many Yemeni children are chronically underweight. Infant and under-5 mortality rates have climbed to alarming levels, adding to the human tragedy unfolding in Yemen (Ahmed et al., 2019). The United Nations, in collaboration with critical humanitarian organizations such as UNICEF, the World Health Organization, and the World Food Program, has launched a Herculean effort to address the pressing needs of the Yemeni population (Sowers & Weinthal, 2021). These organizations work tirelessly to provide essential aid to those in need, overcoming the staggering complexity of challenges posed by the ongoing conflict. One of the key challenges facing humanitarian efforts in Yemen is the sporadic lifting of sieges and ensuring that aid reaches the most vulnerable populations in hard-to-reach areas (Elayah & Fenttiman, 2021). The conflict's fluid nature and the presence of multiple armed groups make the safe delivery of humanitarian assistance a constant challenge. The United Nations, with its extensive experience in humanitarian operations, has been at the forefront of coordinating and facilitating the delivery of aid. Its work extends beyond providing food and medical supplies; it also involves addressing broader issues related to the conflict's root causes and advocating for peace (Bandow, 2021). The organization recognizes the urgency of the situation and the imperative to provide life-saving assistance to those in need. The humanitarian response in Yemen serves as a stark reminder of the critical role that international organizations play in mitigating the impacts of protracted conflicts and advocating for peace in the face of seemingly insurmountable challenges (Dureab, 2020).

Yemen, classified as a low-income, food-deficit, and developing nation, ranked 154th out of 187 countries in the 2011 UNDP Human Development Index. Severe humanitarian crises have displaced millions and led to high rates of child malnutrition, stunting, and infant mortality. Notably, Yemen ranks first in the Global Gender Gap Index (BBC News, 2019). Critical concerns center on four governorates—Hajjah, Al Hudaydah, Saada, and Taiz—where over 65 percent of the population faces catastrophic food shortages, driven by fierce clashes and bombings. The

United Nations mediates a peace agreement between warring parties to alleviate civilian suffering (WFP, n.d.). Yemen is grappling with one of the most severe food crises in its history. More than 16 million people in Yemen are food-insecure, with five million at risk of famine. The ongoing conflict has forced approximately four million Yemenis to flee their homes, seeking safety and shelter in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps. Yemen reports one of the highest rates of child malnutrition globally, with an estimated 2.3 million children under the age of 5 suffering from acute malnutrition. Infant mortality in Yemen is alarmingly high, with an estimated 102 deaths per 1000 live births. Yemen's healthcare system is severely strained, with roughly half of its health facilities nonfunctional due to the conflict. This exacerbates the health crisis faced by the population. An estimated 20 million Yemenis lack access to clean water and sanitation services, increasing the risk of waterborne diseases. The conflict has disrupted education for millions of Yemeni children, with over two million children out of school. Yemen's economy has been severely impacted, with over 80% of the population relying on humanitarian aid to survive. These numbers underscore the depth of the humanitarian crisis in Yemen, emphasizing the urgent need for international assistance and efforts to alleviate the suffering of the Yemeni people (Jenkins, 2019).

The United Nations' role in responding to political developments has become a fundamental criterion for fostering democracy in the Arab world over the past two decades. Yemen, like other Arab nations, initially had high expectations of the United Nations during the Arab Spring in 2011. However, as the organization struggled to address conflicts effectively, optimism waned. The UN's experiences in Syria and Libya underscored its challenges in capitalizing on the Arab Spring for reform (Murthy, 2018). The United Nations' role in Yemen extends beyond mediation and humanitarian aid. It plays a crucial role in coordinating international efforts to address the crisis, facilitating dialogue between conflicting parties, and advocating for peace. Additionally, the UN has worked to address the root causes of the conflict, including political and economic issues. One of the UN's significant achievements in Yemen has been the establishment of the UN Verification and Inspection Mechanism (UNVIM), which ensures the timely and safe entry of commercial goods, including humanitarian aid, into Yemen's ports. This mechanism has been critical in addressing the humanitarian crisis by ensuring the flow of essential goods.

Despite the United Nations' unwavering commitment to addressing the humanitarian crisis in Yemen, several challenges persist in the effective delivery of humanitarian aid. One of the foremost challenges is the need to identify and collaborate with the right local partners who can facilitate the distribution of aid to those in need. This involves navigating complex local dynamics, building trust with local actors, and ensuring that aid reaches the intended beneficiaries. Moreover, security issues pose a significant obstacle to the smooth delivery of humanitarian assistance (Elayah & Ahmed, 2022). The volatile security situation in Yemen, marked by ongoing conflicts and violence, makes it challenging for humanitarian organizations to operate safely. Ensuring the security of aid workers and the protection of aid convoys is of paramount importance. The UN and its partners must constantly adapt and develop strategies to mitigate security risks and ensure that aid reaches vulnerable populations without interruption. These challenges underscore the complexity of humanitarian operations in conflict-affected regions like Yemen. While the UN remains dedicated to addressing these issues, the practicalities of delivering aid in such a challenging environment require continual adaptation and collaboration with local partners to navigate both logistical and security hurdles effectively. These challenges and complexities in the delivery of humanitarian aid, especially in the context of security and finding reliable local partners, constitute a focal point of our study (Elayah, 2022). We are committed to examining these issues in-depth to better understand the dynamics and obstacles surrounding humanitarian assistance in Yemen and the role of the UN and LNGOs. By shedding light on these challenges, our study aims to contribute valuable insights and recommendations to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of humanitarian efforts in the country (Elayah et al., 2020).

6.4 Research Methodology and Data Gathering

The research methodology employed in this study was qualitative in nature, involving data collection from various sources. Key actors were interviewed through organizational interviews, data were gathered from electronic documents and annual reports on humanitarian organization websites, and some information was obtained from the Internet. The research specifically focused on understanding the challenges faced by humanitarian organizations in providing aid in Yemen, with a particular emphasis on the collaborative relationship between local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the United Nations (UN) system. The interview process was a significant component of data collection, as it provides valuable insights. Interviews were conducted with a range of stakeholders, including experienced UN system members and local NGOs.

These interviews took place in various locations, both in-person and via Zoom, to ensure a diverse perspective. In-person interviews were conducted in several locations, including Jordan, Geneva, Brussels, Yemen, and New York. Virtual interviews, primarily conducted via Zoom, were also utilized due to logistical challenges. The interviews covered different aspects of the collaborative relationship framework and involved multiple sessions. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for subsequent analysis, with electronic recording being the primary method due to the remote nature of most interviews. The interview questions were categorized into four main areas exploring system-wide policies, program guidance, and tools within the UN system's participatory relationship. Delving into coordination efforts between UN agencies and local NGOs to promote equality in humanitarian assistance. Gathering insights into the effectiveness of local responses within the humanitarian aid delivery framework. Exploring questions related to funding strategies in the context of humanitarian aid. One of the primary challenges encountered during the research process was the inability to conduct face-to-face interviews with participants, necessitating the use of remote interview methods. Table 6.1 provides an overview of key actors within various humanitarian organizations involved in the Yemeni crisis, along with their positions and their respective numbers. The organizations include the World Food Programme (WFP), the United Nations (UN), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), All Yemen (local NGOs), and Relief International (INGOs).

In addition to conducting interviews, the research process included a comprehensive analysis of humanitarian assistance documents available on the official websites of local non-governmental organizations (NGOs). This multifaceted approach aimed to provide a well-rounded understanding of the collaborative relationship between local NGOs and the United Nations (UN) system in the context of humanitarian aid delivery in Yemen. To ensure a thorough examination of available data, various types of documents were collected from the official websites of local NGOs. These documents included but were not limited to annual reports, progress reports, and situation assessments published by local NGOs detailing their humanitarian activities and projects in Yemen. Official policy statements, position papers, and strategic documents outlining the approach and principles guiding local NGOs in their humanitarian efforts. Project proposals, project plans, and evaluations of specific initiatives undertaken by local NGOs in collaboration with the UN system. Research papers, articles, and publications related to the humanitarian situation in Yemen, often authored or co-authored by local NGOs.

The collected documents underwent a rigorous process of verification and validation. This involved cross-referencing the information contained within the documents with the insights and perspectives gathered during interviews with key stakeholders. It aimed to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the data obtained from both sources. The analysis of these documents was a vital component of the research methodology. It involved several key steps like the content of the documents was systematically reviewed to identify key themes, trends, challenges, and successes related to the collaborative relationship between local NGOs and the UN system. Document content was compared with interview data to identify alignment or disparities in perspectives and experiences among different stakeholders. Qualitative coding techniques were employed to categorize and organize data within the documents, facilitating the identification of recurring patterns and critical insights. The information derived from document analysis was contextualized within the broader framework of humanitarian aid delivery in Yemen, considering the local operational context and the influence of the collaborative relationship on aid outcomes.

To further enrich the research methodology, existing research, literature, and publications related to humanitarian aid in Yemen were utilized. This included referencing scholarly works, reports, books, and academic papers authored by experts in the field. By incorporating these external sources, the research aimed to provide a comprehensive overview of the collaborative dynamics between local NGOs and the UN system. The research methodology employed a triangulation approach,

Table 6.1 Key actors in humanitarian organizations

Overview of interview sample						
NO	Location	Area	Categories	Situation of interviews	Date of interviews	G. of interviewee
1	Sana'a	N	TP-CF	Zoom	17-1-2023	M
2	Sana'a	N	TP-CF	Google meet	28-12-2023	M
3	Taiz	N	TP-CF	Zoom	28-12-2023	M
4	Dahmer	N	AC-LNGOs	Zoom	9-1-2023	M
5	Sana'a	N	TP-CF	Google meet	29–12-2023	M
6	Sana'a/Marib	N/W	AC-LNGOs	Zoom	10-1-2023	M
7	Sana'a	N	UN-NGOs	Zoom	11-1-2023	F
8	Dahmer	N	AC-LNGOs	Zoom	11-1-2023	M
9	Hajjah	N	UN-NGOs	Google meet	12-1-2023	M
10	Sana'a	N	UN-NGOs	Zoom	15-1-2023	F
11	Sana'a	N	AC-LNGOs	Zoom	15-1-2023	M
12	Aden	S	UN-NGOs	Zoom	16-1-2023	F
13	Aden	S	UN-NGOs	Zoom	16-1-2023	M
14	Shabwa	S	AC-LNGOs	Zoom	16-1-2023	M
15	Sana'a	N	UN-NGOs	Google meet	19-1-2023	M
16	Marib	W	UN-NGOs	Zoom	23-12-2022	M
17	Taiz	N	NA-LNGOs	Zoom	23-12-2022	M
18	Shabwa	S	AC-LNGOs	Zoom	14-1-2023	M
19	Outside Yemen	–	UN-NGOs	Zoom	14-1-2023	M
20	Ibb	N	UN-NGOs	Zoom	13-1-2023	M
21	Sana'a	N	NA-LNGOs	Zoom	25–12-2022	F
22	Shabwa	S	AC-LNGOs	Zoom	25-1-2023	M
23	Sada'a	N	NA-LNGOs	Google meet	20-12-2022	F
24	Hodeidah	W	UN-NGOs	Zoom	13-1-2023	M
25	Dahmer	N	NA-LNGOs	Zoom	14-1-2023	F
26	Taiz	N	NA-LNGOs	Zoom	20-12-2022	F
27	Aden	S	NA-NGOs	Zoom	16-1-2023	M
28	Hajjah	N	AC-NGOs	Google meet	15-1-2023	M
29	Ibb	N	AC-NGOs	Zoom	11-1-2023	F
30	Shabwa	S	AC-LNGOs	Zoom	19-1-2023	M
31	Shabwa	S	AC-LNGOs	Zoom	22-1-2023	F
32	Shabwa	S	UN-LNGOs	Zoom	10-1-2023	M
33	Shabwa	S	NA-LNGOs	Zoom	25–12-2023	M
34	Aden	S	UN-NGOs	Zoom	12-1-2023	F
35	Sana'a	N	NA-LNGOs	Zoom	21-12-2022	M
36	Sana'a	N	UN-LNGOs	Zoom	22–12-2022	F
37	Sana'a	N	TP-CF	Zoom	25–12-2022	M

* non-active local NGOs (NA-LNGOs/n = 8) ***UN system organization (UN-NGOs/n = 13)
*****N = north; S = south; W = west of Yemen
** active local NGOs (AC-LNGOs/n = 11) ****consulting firms (TP-CF/n = 5)

Source: The Researchers

combining data obtained from interviews, document analysis, and existing literature to corroborate findings and enhance the validity and reliability of the research outcomes. Triangulation allowed for a more comprehensive and holistic understanding of the collaborative relationship under investigation. The research methodology was designed to encompass various data sources and analysis techniques, including the thorough examination of humanitarian assistance documents from local NGOs' official websites. This approach aimed to provide a robust and well-supported exploration of the collaborative relationship's nuances, challenges, and impacts in the context of humanitarian aid delivery in Yemen.

6.5 Analyses and Findings

In the analysis and findings section, we embark on a comprehensive exploration of the data we have gathered, peering into the intricacies of humanitarian collaboration between the United Nations (UN) and local non-governmental organizations (LNGOs). Our research offers valuable insights derived from the interviews conducted with UN system officials, shedding light on the multifaceted dynamics that underpin this cooperation. Furthermore, as we navigate through our findings, we'll also delve into the significant humanitarian landscape in Yemen, a context deeply impacted by prolonged conflict and crises. This backdrop serves as a crucial backdrop against which we evaluate the implications and applicability of our findings in a real-world humanitarian setting.

The resounding consensus among the interviewed officials, with a substantial 68% highlighting the fundamental nature of collaboration, underscores the depth of commitment shared by the United Nations (UN) and local non-governmental organizations (LNGOs) in their mission to alleviate humanitarian suffering in crisis-afflicted regions. This shared vision, which serves as the linchpin of their collective efforts, is a testament to the unwavering dedication of both parties to addressing the most pressing challenges faced by vulnerable populations. However, the path toward effective collaboration is strewn with obstacles, especially in the turbulent and resource-scarce landscapes of conflict zones. Local organizations, often operating at the forefront of relief efforts, grapple with severe resource limitations that can hinder their ability to provide vital assistance to those in need. These limitations underscore the critical need for comprehensive and coordinated approaches to crisis management that involve not only humanitarian organizations but also military and civilian actors. Efficient allocation of available resources, both material and human, becomes paramount in ensuring that aid reaches the most vulnerable populations in a timely and effective manner.

In response to these challenges, the UN system demonstrates unwavering commitment to working hand-in-hand with local organizations. This commitment is grounded in the recognition of the tremendous burden carried by LNGOs as they undertake a multitude of relief operations in highly demanding environments. It is a commitment to sharing not only the responsibilities but also the knowledge, expertise, and resources required to navigate the intricate web of challenges in crisis-affected regions. This collaborative spirit, while undeniably challenged by resource constraints, remains indispensable in confronting the dire humanitarian situation in Yemen and analogous contexts worldwide. The synergy between the UN and LNGOs, driven by their shared vision and complemented by a commitment to cooperation, represents a beacon of hope for communities grappling with the devastating consequences of prolonged conflict and crises. It is a testament to the resilience of the humanitarian spirit, demonstrating that even in the face of seemingly insurmountable challenges, humanity's collective dedication to alleviating suffering remains steadfast and enduring.

According to the consensus of approximately 75% of officials involved, the interplay of compatibility and complementarity significantly influences the nature of collaborative relationships between the United Nations (UN) and humanitarian aid organizations in Yemen. The personalities of donors also emerge as pivotal factors that can either facilitate or impede cooperation among these entities, underlining the importance of harmonious relationships. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that personal differences among stakeholders often lead to the withdrawal or cancellation of vital relief programs in the challenging humanitarian landscape of Yemen. These dynamics shed light on the intricate web of interactions and challenges that shape collaborative efforts in providing assistance to the Yemeni population. Personal differences among stakeholders can have tangible consequences, leading to program withdrawals or cancellations, which is a challenge specific to the Yemeni humanitarian landscape. In Yemen, tensions between stakeholders have occasionally reached a breaking point, resulting in the unfortunate abandonment of projects that were desperately needed." A firsthand account of the impact of personal differences. "Managing interpersonal conflicts and fostering a culture of collaboration is not just a preference but a necessity in Yemen's humanitarian context." A quote emphasizing the critical role of conflict resolution among the stakeholders. The interplay between compatibility, complementarity, donor personalities, and personal differences significantly shapes collaborative efforts between the UN and humanitarian aid organizations in Yemen. These dynamics are essential to understanding the challenges and opportunities that characterize the humanitarian landscape in the region.

The challenges highlighted by the LNGOs in Yemen in the context of humanitarian food assistance programs and their interactions with foreign backers and the United Nations (UN) system in Yemen. The LNOGs have identified a critical issue pertaining to communication challenges with foreign backers. This issue goes beyond mere language barriers; it includes difficulties in effectively conveying the needs and priorities of humanitarian initiatives. These communication problems can lead to delays in decision-making, funding allocation, and resource deployment. Furthermore, a lack of clear communication channels can hinder the understanding of why certain aid programs may be denied or delayed, leaving both local organizations and beneficiaries in uncertainty. The reliance on intermediary organizations to connect with the United Nations system presents a multifaceted challenge. It implies that local organizations may not have direct access to UN support, making the humanitarian assistance process more convoluted and bureaucratic. This dependence on intermediaries can slow down response times, create additional administrative burdens, and potentially introduce inefficiencies. Moreover, it may lead to a lack of transparency in decision-making processes.

The erosion of trust between local organizations and supporting bodies, including foreign backers and intermediaries, is a grave concern. Trust is the bedrock of effective collaboration in the humanitarian sector. When trust is compromised, it can hinder cooperation, diminish the willingness to engage in joint efforts, and, ultimately, impact the delivery of aid to vulnerable populations. Rebuilding trust becomes a critical priority to ensure the effective functioning of humanitarian programs. Another major challenge highlighted is the lack of funding, which severely hampers the NFDHR's ability to provide humanitarian aid. This shortage of financial resources can limit the scope and scale of assistance programs, leaving many in need without vital support. Furthermore, the presence of security issues, exacerbated by ongoing conflicts, adds another layer of complexity and risk to humanitarian operations, making it challenging to reach and assist affected communities safely. The revelation that the LNGOs are not the primary implementer in most of its projects underscores a notable gap in the involvement of local organizations in humanitarian initiatives. This situation raises questions about the degree of ownership and autonomy that local organizations have in designing and executing programs that directly address the needs of their communities. The challenges facing humanitarian food assistance programs in Yemen are multifaceted, encompassing communication hurdles, trust erosion, financial constraints, security concerns, and questions about the role of local organizations in the UN system's initiatives. Addressing these challenges is crucial to improving the efficiency and effectiveness of humanitarian efforts in the region.

Our analysis of the interviews indicates that a restricted number of humanitarian programs are being implemented, primarily due to limitations imposed by international donors. Donor restrictions, which may include budget constraints, specific project requirements, or geographical focus, can significantly impact the breadth and depth of humanitarian efforts. This limitation underscores the importance of flexibility and adaptability in response to the evolving needs on the ground. Conflicts in the participatory relationship between local organizations like the LNGOs and the United Nations system are a notable concern. It appears that these conflicts arise, at least in part, due to the LNGOs' ownership of only one food program with a restricted target audience. Such limitations can lead to competition for limited resources and a lack of inclusivity in addressing the diverse needs of affected populations. The findings emphasize the necessity for a more diversified humanitarian response strategy that caters to a broader range of needs and beneficiaries. Addressing the multifaceted challenges in Yemen's humanitarian landscape requires a comprehensive approach that goes beyond food assistance alone. This includes healthcare, education, shelter, and livelihood support, among other vital sectors. To mitigate conflicts and enhance collaboration, it is crucial for local organizations and the United Nations system to improve communication and coordination. This may involve regular consultations, clear delineation of roles and responsibilities, and fostering a spirit of cooperation among all stakeholders. Ensuring that the voices and perspectives of local organizations are heard and integrated into decision-making processes is essential. Advocacy efforts may be necessary to engage with international donors more effectively. Local organizations like the LNGOs can work toward building stronger relationships with donors, advocating for flexibility in project design and funding allocation, and demonstrating their capacity to respond to the unique challenges in Yemen. The analysis of international reports and insights from the LNGOs highlights the need for a more flexible, diversified, and inclusive humanitarian response in Yemen. Effective collaboration between local organizations and the United Nations system, along with improved donor relations, can contribute to a more comprehensive and impactful relief effort in the face of the complex humanitarian challenges in Yemen.

The prevailing situation within the humanitarian landscape in Yemen is characterized by several noteworthy dynamics, as evident from the analysis of terms and agreements between local organizations and the United Nations system, as well as the influence of donors and third parties. Here are some key takeaways. The majority of local organizations find themselves bound by the terms and agreements set forth by the United Nations system. While this alignment can facilitate collaboration and coordination, it may also imply that local organizations have limited autonomy in shaping the direction and priorities of their humanitarian initiatives. Striking a balance between adherence to UN guidelines and the ability to address local needs effectively is a critical challenge. Donors, as stakeholders in humanitarian efforts, often have specific interests and priorities that they wish to pursue through their funding. These interests may not always align perfectly with the broader public interest or the needs of the affected communities. This misalignment can lead to situations where humanitarian programs may not fully address societal gaps or may prioritize objectives that do not directly benefit the most vulnerable populations.

The role of third parties, such as intermediaries or implementing partners, is significant in shaping the progress and quality of relief programs. These entities can mediate between local organizations and donors, influence project design, and impact the overall effectiveness of humanitarian interventions. Ensuring that these third parties are aligned with the overarching humanitarian goals and principles is crucial. There is an identifiable opportunity to enhance humanitarian aid in Yemen by focusing on capacity building for workers in local organizations. By strengthening the skills, knowledge, and capabilities of these individuals, the quality of relief programs can be improved. This reflects a growing recognition of the importance of investing in human resources to enhance the impact and efficiency of humanitarian efforts. In supposition, while challenges exist in the current humanitarian landscape in Yemen, including issues related to donor interests and external influence, there is an avenue for improvement through capacity building and skill development among local organizations' workers. This approach can empower local actors to better navigate the complexities of humanitarian work, advocate for the public interest, and contribute to more effective and impactful relief programs in Yemen.

6.6 Conclusion and Comparative Perspectives and Ethical Reflections

The complex and often strained dynamics between the United Nations (UN) system and local non-governmental organizations (LNGOs) in Yemen do not represent an isolated anomaly but rather a recurring structural challenge within the broader humanitarian system globally. When we situate the Yemeni case in comparative perspective, patterns of marginalization, asymmetrical power relationships, and unfulfilled promises of localization emerge consistently across conflict-affected settings such as South Sudan, Syria, and Afghanistan. In South Sudan, for instance, LNGOs have been indispensable in reaching remote areas inaccessible to international agencies due to security or logistical constraints. Despite this central operational role, they have long been excluded from upstream decision-making processes, donor consultations, and strategic planning. The division of labor is stark: local actors deliver services on the ground under dangerous conditions, while international NGOs and UN agencies design programs, control the budget, and manage reporting structures (Barbelet, 2018). This model not only sidelines local perspectives but also limits the adaptability and effectiveness of humanitarian responses.

The situation in Syria further demonstrates how political sensitivities and risk aversion have led to a system dominated by international intermediaries, often bypassing capable and context-aware Syrian LNGOs. Here, UN agencies have developed parallel aid structures based on cross-border operations and subcontracting models that often weaken local ownership, undermine sustainability, and disconnect humanitarian efforts from long-term peacebuilding and community reconciliation goals (Dixon et al., 2016; Leonardsson & Rudd, 2015). In Afghanistan, the humanitarian sector has faced similar critiques. For decades, Afghan LNGOs have been active across sectors ranging from health to education and livelihoods. However, their relationship with UN agencies has remained largely transactional. While local organizations are engaged as service providers, they are rarely treated as intellectual contributors to policy debates or co-creators of humanitarian frameworks. Donor conditions, geopolitical priorities, and perceptions of "capacity gaps" have all contributed to the sidelining of Afghan NGOs, despite their deep roots in community structures and cultural fluency (Bui et al., 2000; Nesbit, 2003).

These cases illuminate a broader ethical dilemma embedded in the global humanitarian architecture. While global frameworks and policy discourse increasingly emphasize the importance of localization—as articulated in the Grand Bargain, the Charter for Change, and various UN reform agendas—the actual structure of humanitarian governance remains deeply hierarchical and externally driven. In theory, LNGOs are acknowledged as essential partners; in practice, they are often relegated to the margins, contracted to implement pre-designed projects without influence over objectives, indicators, or allocation of funds. In Yemen, these ethical and structural asymmetries are especially pronounced. As this chapter has shown, LNGOs are often treated as passive executors of programs developed by international actors with limited understanding of Yemen's sociopolitical and tribal complexities. The lack of involvement in initial assessments, program design, or even feedback loops illustrates a wider failure to institutionalize partnership equity. While LNGOs provide crucial access, legitimacy, and knowledge, they operate without adequate recognition, legal protection, or stable financing. The imbalance between risk exposure and strategic control is particularly problematic: local actors face the brunt of security threats, reputational risks, and operational disruptions, while international agencies retain authority over narratives, indicators of success, and donor reporting.

This model raises critical ethical concerns. It reinforces a form of governance where decisions about local futures are made elsewhere—replicating colonial patterns of power, even within frameworks that claim to promote equity and participation. It creates a humanitarian logic in which local organizations are accountable upward to donors but not empowered downward to their communities. This undermines both effectiveness and legitimacy, as community priorities are filtered through externally imposed frameworks that often miss critical local nuances or inadvertently exacerbate social tensions. Moreover, the issue is not solely one of operational imbalance but also of epistemic injustice—the systematic devaluation of local knowledge, experience, and problem-solving approaches. While Western consultants, advisors, and frameworks dominate the humanitarian discourse, LNGO staff who work daily within conflict-affected communities are rarely invited to co-author guidelines, present in international forums, or shape research agendas. This results in a humanitarian knowledge production system that privileges external perspectives while obscuring the insights of those who are closest to the ground.

To address these ethical and structural failures, a radical rethinking of partnership is required. As Elayah (2021) and others have argued, meaningful collaboration must be based not only on shared goals but on co-created governance, mutual accountability, and the redistribution of decision-making power. LNGOs must be seen not merely as vehicles of service delivery but as co-architects of humanitarian vision and practice. This entails reforms to funding modalities (e.g., direct funding, longer-term grants), inclusion in strategic planning platforms, shared responsibility in evaluation processes, and recognition of contextual knowledge as strategic capital. Yemen offers a unique opportunity—and a moral imperative—to implement such a shift. Given the country's extreme fragility, complex conflict landscape, and long-standing community-based coping mechanisms, any sustainable humanitarian or development solution must start with genuine local ownership. Current asymmetries in the UN–LNGO partnership not only limit the effectiveness of aid but risk reproducing dependency, disillusionment, and social fragmentation. By embracing a more equitable, inclusive, and respectful model of engagement, the international humanitarian system can move closer to its own stated ideals and avoid reinforcing the very vulnerabilities it seeks to address.

This study offers valuable insights into the complexities of humanitarian collaboration in Yemen. It highlights the importance of local empowerment, coordination, evidence-based approaches, and further research to enhance the effectiveness of humanitarian response efforts. By addressing these considerations, we can work toward a more impactful and harmonious humanitarian response in Yemen, ultimately benefiting the communities in need. This study has revealed the existence of a cooperative relationship among all parties involved, both local and international, in the humanitarian response efforts in Yemen. However, it is important to note that this collaboration primarily operates in a bottom-up fashion. Local organizations play a crucial role in assessing the needs on the ground, yet they often find themselves absent from the planning phase of various projects. This underscores the need for improved coordination within the participatory process between local organizations and the United Nations system. To enhance the effectiveness of humanitarian efforts, it is imperative to prioritize a participatory approach that begins with a thorough evaluation of local needs. This process should involve the active participation of local organizations and be guided by clear evidence and indicators. By aligning relief program implementation with these locally identified needs, conflicts can be reduced, and the participatory nature of the work can yield positive and tangible results within the community. However, this study does have its limitations. Firstly, communication with some key stakeholders proved challenging, resulting in a smaller sample size for interviews. Additionally, some individuals were reluctant to respond to specific questions, impacting the depth of insights obtained. Secondly, there is a notable scarcity of prior research on this topic, highlighting the need for further exploration and the development of new research inquiries related to the dynamics of humanitarian collaboration in Yemen.

One of the central themes that emerged from our study is the importance of elevating the role and involvement of local organizations in humanitarian efforts. A key step toward this goal is ensuring that local organizations are not merely implementers of relief programs but are actively engaged in the decision-making and planning processes. This approach acknowledges their deep knowledge of local contexts and their ability to identify and prioritize the most pressing needs within their communities. The urgent need for increased coordination between local organizations and the United Nations system should not be underestimated. Effective collaboration can lead to more efficient use of resources, reduced duplication of efforts, and enhanced overall impact. Establishing clear communication channels, streamlining decision-making processes, and fostering a spirit of cooperation are essential steps in achieving this goal. Our findings underscore the importance of evidence-based humanitarian response. Rather than relying solely on external priorities or assumptions, it is imperative to base relief program implementation on a solid foundation of locally assessed needs and well-defined indicators. This approach not only reduces conflicts but also ensures that humanitarian assistance is targeted, efficient, and tailored to the specific challenges faced by communities in Yemen.

There is a compelling need for more research focused on the local context in Yemen and a deeper understanding of the drivers that influence partnership relations with the United Nations system. Examining the relationship between local organizations and the UN system and conducting comprehensive analyses of the local contexts that shape humanitarian aid outcomes in Yemen should be a priority. While this paper has laid the foundation by identifying challenges, opportunities, and potential impacts, it should serve as a catalyst for further studies on the intricate relationship between local organizations and the international system of nations in the humanitarian domain. The limited existing research on the dynamics of humanitarian collaboration in Yemen highlights a critical gap in our understanding. Future research endeavors should focus on exploring the intricacies of local knowledge, drivers of partnership relations, and the contextual factors that significantly influence humanitarian outcomes. These studies can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the Yemeni humanitarian landscape. Advocacy efforts aimed at promoting more inclusive and equitable partnerships are essential. Local organizations should actively engage with international donors and the United Nations system to ensure that their voices are heard, their perspectives are considered, and their contributions are valued. This can lead to partnerships that are built on mutual respect and a shared commitment to addressing the needs of the most vulnerable populations.

Collaborative efforts between the UN and LNGOs in Yemen are vital but face challenges such as trust deficits, resource constraints, and cultural misalignments. Further research should explore innovative models for international-local partnerships in conflict settings to address emerging challenges in humanitarian aid delivery.

References

Ahmed, K., Bukhari, M. A. S., Altaf, M. D., Lugala, P. C., Popal, G. R., Abouzeid, A., & Lamunu, M. (2019). Development and implementation of electronic disease early warning systems for optimal disease surveillance and response during humanitarian crisis and Ebola outbreak in Yemen, Somalia, Liberia and Pakistan. *Online Journal of Public Health Informatics, 11*(2), e11.

Alqatabry, A., & Butcher, C. (2020). Localisation of humanitarian action in Yemen: Opportunities and challenges. Humanitarian Practice Network (HPN).

Arshad, M. U. (2023). President Joe Biden's policy shift: A transformative impact on resolving the Yemen conflict. *Contemporary Issues in Social Sciences and Management Practices (CISSMP), 2*, 67–80.

Bandow, D. (2021). *Humanitarian crisis ravages Yemen: Yet biden administration continues to service Saudi war machine*.

Barash, D. P., & Webel, C. P. (2021). Peace and conflict studies (4th ed.). Sage Publications.

Barbelet, V. (2018). As local as possible, as international as necessary: understanding capacity and complementarity in humanitarian action. ODI, London.

Barnett, M. (2018). Empire of humanity: A history of humanitarianism. Cornell University Press. This one make it 2018.

BBC News. (2019, February 18). *Yemen country profile*. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14704852

Brabant, K. V., & Patel, S. (n.d.). *Understanding the localisation debate*. 19.

Bui, T., Cho, S., Sankaran, S., & Sovereign, M. (2000). A framework for designing a global information network for multinational humanitarian assistance/disaster relief. *Information Systems Frontiers, 1*, 427–442.

Cohen, S. A. (1999). The United States and the United Nations population fund: A rocky relationship. *The Guttmacher Report on Public Policy, 2*(1), 1–2.

Dixon, S., Romera Moreno, E., Sadozai, A., & Haj Asaad, A. (2016). Localisation of humanitarian response in the Syrian crisis. *Confluences Méditerranée, 99*(4), 109.

Dureab, F. (2020). *The usefulness of the electronic disease early warning system (eDEWS) in the humanitarian crisis of Yemen*. (Doctoral dissertation).

Elayah, M. (2021). Participatory developmental approach and the implementation of international aid policies: Yemen as a case study. *Development in Practice, 0*(0), 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1080/09614524.2021.1937571

Elayah, M. (2022). *The War in Yemen and the Role of NGOs in Relieving the Displaced People in Ghassan Kahlout (ed.) Forced Migration in Arab Countries: Problems and Issues, (Doha / Beirut: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies). P. 75*.

Elayah, M., & Ahmed, N. (2022). Humanitarian aid in Yemen: A crisis of sovereignty and inevitable harm. In *Reconciliation, heritage and social inclusion in the Middle East and North Africa* (pp. 173–191). Springer International Publishing.

Elayah, M., Al-Sameai, N., Khodr, H., & Gamar, S. (2023). Community-based initiatives and public services delivery in a fragile context: The case of Yemen. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly, 53*(1), 08997640221145182.

Elayah, M., & Fenttiman, M. (2021). Humanitarian aid and war economies: The case of Yemen. *The Economics of Peace and Security Journal, 16*(1), 52.

Elayah, M., van Kempen, L., & Schulpen, L. (2020). Adding to the controversy? Civil society's evaluation of the national conference dialogue in Yemen. *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding, 14*(3), 431–458.

Elayah, M., & Verkoren, W. (2020). Civil society during war: The case of Yemen. *Peacebuilding, 8*(4), 476–498. https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2019.1686797

Gordanić, J. (2021). NGOs and the UN security council: Between informal reality and possibilities of formal interaction. *The Review of International Affairs, LXXII, 72*(1182), 47–65.

Harvey, P. (2015, March 19). *The state of the humanitarian system-assessing performance and progress*. ALNAP pilot study. ODI: Think Change. https://odi.org/en/publications/the-state-of-the-humanitarian-system-assessing-performance-and-progress-alnap-pilot-study/.

Huysmans, J. (2002). Shape-shifting NATO: Humanitarian action and the Kosovo refugee crisis. *Review of International Studies, 28*(3), 599–618.

Jenkins, M. (2019). Yemen: The worst humanitarian crisis in the world, ignored. MUNDI, Middle East/North Africa Research Paper. Retrieved from https://mundi.example.org/yemen-jenkins2019.pdf

Khaled, A. F. M. (2021). Do no harm in refugee humanitarian aid: The case of the Rohingya humanitarian response. *Journal of International Humanitarian Action, 6*(1), 1–13.

Kurdi, S. (2021). The nutritional benefits of cash transfers in humanitarian crises: Evidence from Yemen. *World Development, 148*, 105664.

Larson, P. D., & Foropon, C. (2018). Process improvement in humanitarian operations: An organisational theory perspective. *International Journal of Production Research, 56*(21), 6828–6841.

Layachi, O. B. (2021). The role of international humanitarian intervention in containing the repercussions of Covid-19 during non-international armed conflicts: Libya, Yemen, and Syria. *PalArch's Journal of Vertebrate Palaeontology, 18*(1), 1–38.

Leonardsson, H., & Rudd, G. (2015). The 'local turn' in peacebuilding: A literature review of effective and emancipatory local peacebuilding. *Third World Quarterly, 36*(5), 825–839.

Mapp, S. C. (2014). *Human rights and social justice in a global perspective: An introduction to international social work*. Oxford University Press.

Murthy, C. S. R. (2018). United Nations and the Arab spring: Role in Libya, Syria, and Yemen. *Contemporary Review of the Middle East, 5*(2), 116–136. https://doi.org/10.1177/2347798918762198

Natsios, A. S. (1995). NGOs and the UN system in complex humanitarian emergencies: Conflict or cooperation? *Third World Quarterly, 16*(3), 405–420. https://doi.org/10.1080/01436599550035979

Nesbit, B. (2003, May). The role of NGOs in conflict resolution in Africa: An institutional analysis. In *Proceedings of the Institutional Analysis and Development Mini-conference, Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis*. Indiana University.

Nikbakhsh, E., & Farahani, R. Z. (2011). *Humanitarian logistics planning in disaster relief operations* (p. 291). Concepts and models.

Orkaby, A. (2017). Yemen's humanitarian nightmare: The real roots of the conflict. *Foreign Affairs, 96*(6), 93–101.

Otto, D. (1996). Nongovernmental organizations in the United Nations system: The emerging role of international civil society. *Hum. Rts. Q., 18*, 107.

Richardson, D. A., De Leeuw, S., & Dullaert, W. (2016). Factors affecting global inventory prepositioning locations in humanitarian operations—A Delphi study. *Journal of Business Logistics, 37*(1), 59–74.

Ritchie, J. (1995). This one change it with this one Elayah, M., & Ahmed, N. (2022). Humanitarian aid in Yemen: A crisis of sovereignty and inevitable harm. In Reconciliation, heritage and social inclusion in the Middle East and North Africa (pp. 173–191). Cham: Springer International Publishing.

Ryfman, P. (2007). Non-governmental organizations: An indispensable player of humanitarian aid humanitarian actors. *International Review of the Red Cross, 89*(865), 21–46.

Rysaback-Smith, H. (2015). History and principles of humanitarian action. *Turkish Journal of Emergency Medicine, 15*, 5–7.

Sandvik, K. B., & Lohne, K. (2014). The rise of the humanitarian drone: Giving content to an emerging concept. *Millennium, 43*(1), 145–164.

Sharp, J. M., & Brudnick, I. A. (2015). *Yemen: Civil war and regional intervention*. Centre for Humanitarian Change. (n.d.). Role of Local Organisations. Retrieved October 23, 2022, from https://whatworks.co.ke/what-works/role-of-local-organisations

Singh, N. S., Ataullahjan, A., Ndiaye, K., Das, J. K., Wise, P. H., Altare, C., et al. (2021). Delivering health interventions to women, children, and adolescents in conflict settings: What have we learned from ten country case studies? *The Lancet, 397*(10273), 533–542.

Sowers, J., & Weinthal, E. (2021). Humanitarian challenges and the targeting of civilian infrastructure in the Yemen war. *International Affairs, 97*(1), 157–177.

Stamnes, E. (2016). *Rethinking the humanitarian-development nexus*. Policy briefs for the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs.

Suárez, D., & Marshall, J. H. (2014). Capacity in the NGO sector: Results from a national survey in Cambodia. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations, 25*, 176–200.

Tandon, R. (1997). Organizational development and NGOs: An overview. *Institutional Development, 1*, 3–19.

Turkeš, R., Cuervo, D. P., & Sörensen, K. (2019). Pre-positioning of emergency supplies: Does putting a price on human life help to save lives? *Annals of Operations Research, 283*(1–2), 865–895.

Van Hout, M. C., & Wells, J. S. G. (2021). The right to health, public health, and COVID-19: A discourse on the importance of the enforcement of humanitarian and human rights law in conflict settings for the future management of zoonotic pandemic diseases. *Public Health, 192*, 3–7.

Walkup, M. (1997). Policy dysfunction in humanitarian organizations: The role of coping strategies, institutions, and organizational culture. *Journal of Refugee Studies, 10*(1), 37–60.

Walle, N., & v. d. (1990). *Innovations in African governance: Some thoughts on empowering the countryside, African governance in the 1990s*. The Carter Center of Emory University.

Wilke Corvin, J. A. (2006). *The role of organizational culture in the delivery of humanitarian assistance and inter-organizational collaboration*. University of South Florida.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

Chapter 7
Syrian Refugee Governance at the Intersection of Non-state and State Actors: Lessons for Third Sector Engagement in Contested Spaces of the MENA

David Mednicoff

Abstract This chapter examines the intersection of non-state and state actors in the governance of Syrian refugees, using Jordan as a case study. It explores the role of Third Sector organizations in bridging governance gaps amidst the region's state-centric and often authoritarian regimes. The chapter analyzes the opportunities presented by initiatives such as the Jordan Compact and the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) and evaluates the challenges of integrating Third Sector innovations into governance frameworks dominated by state priorities. The findings highlight the balance between resilience-focused models and the constraints of state-centric governance, offering lessons for enhancing Third Sector engagement in the MENA region. It explores the challenges and opportunities presented by the Syrian refugee crisis, focusing on governance issues in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). As the crisis unfolded, civil society organizations, particularly Third Sector groups, played a crucial role in filling governance gaps left by weakened state institutions. The prolonged nature of the crisis, coupled with the absence of effective regional institutions, underscored the necessity for diverse nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to step in and provide aid to the millions of displaced Syrians. However, the chapter also highlights the limitations faced by Third Sector groups in a global order increasingly leaning toward authoritarianism. Autocratic governments in the MENA region and beyond prioritize claims of territorial and population control, challenging the effectiveness of alternative governance models. Despite the challenges posed by a state-centric global system, the chapter evaluates the potential and pitfalls of Third Sector engagements in addressing the Syrian refugee crisis, with a specific focus on the case of Jordan.

D. Mednicoff (✉)
Department of Judaic and Near Eastern Studies, and School of Public Policy, University of Massachusetts-Amherst, Amherst, MA, USA
e-mail: mednic@umass.edu

© The Author(s) 2026

M. Elayah (ed.), *Governance without Government in the MENA Region*,
Nonprofit and Civil Society Studies,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-03953-8_7

Keywords Syrian refugee · Non-state and state actors · Third sector engagement · Conflict · MENA

7.1 Introduction

One of the animating themes for this edited volume is the possibility that a significant administrative role for Third Sector groups, which fills in gaps left by state bureaucracies, might foster fresh norms for participatory governance. In some ways, recent policy responses to the longstanding, if recently abated, Syrian refugee crisis indeed embodies such hopes for prospects for Third Sector involvement and norm diffusion in governance. For one thing, the crisis itself unfolded in zones in the interstices of, and sometimes without, strong state institutions, leaving a range of Middle Eastern and external civil society organizations to fill the governance gap. Second, the duration of the crisis, well over a decade, has required a sustained record of engagement for Third Sector organizations. Third, the dearth of effective regional institutions in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) accentuates further the need for diverse NGO's to step in. And, indeed, a wide range of local and foreign non-government actors answered the call to provide aid and empowerment for the millions of Syrians in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey who are still unwilling or unable to return to Syria (e.g., 3RP, 2023a).

Yet, the Syrian refugee crisis also points to the real limits that Third Sector groups face in a nation-centric, increasingly authoritarian-leaning global order. Autocratic governments in the MENA and elsewhere survive by propagating an image of territorial and population control, focused on claims of effectiveness and unified governance. Moreover, human rights and other anti-authoritarian NGO's in recent years have been unable to hold back declines in civil and political rights in a wide variety of countries globally. For example, Freedom House has noted that 2023 is the 17th straight year of democratic decline (Freedom House, 2023, 3). This chapter suggests that the state-centric nature of global institutions and norms, together with the increasing authoritarian skew of world politics, yield difficult, but not impossible, prospects for alternative governance models to thrive, when they occur or are needed on the ground.

I proceed in this chapter to summarize the governance challenges brought on by Syria's civil war and refugee crisis and consider generally the nature and influence of Third Sector engagements that have emerged to address the crisis, with specific reference to the case of Jordan. Finally, I evaluate the potential and problems for these arrangements as models of alternative governance from that of centralized nation-states. The Syrian refugee crisis has exposed critical governance gaps in the MENA region. This chapter explores how Third Sector organizations navigate these gaps, balancing their resilience-driven models with the limitations of state-dominated governance frameworks. This study evaluates the contributions of non-state actors in addressing refugee needs and their ability to foster participatory governance in contested spaces. Using Jordan as a primary case study, it examines the effectiveness of hybrid governance structures like the Jordan Compact and 3RP.

Chapter Structure

- Section 7.2 explores the governance challenges posed by the Syrian refugee crisis.
- Section 7.3 discusses the role of the Jordan Compact and the 3RP in shaping refugee governance.
- Section 7.4 analyzes the successes and limitations of Third Sector engagement.
- Section 7.5 provides policy recommendations and lessons for broader Third Sector engagement.

7.2 The Syrian Refugee Crisis and its Challenges for Governance

Syrian ruler Bashar al-Assad's determination to hold onto power, as the 2011 Arab uprisings spread to his country and threatened his rule, led to a bloody civil war and regionalization of the conflict that created the world's most serious humanitarian crisis since World War II. Even today, over 5.3 million Syrians hold refugee status, feel unsafe to return to their country of origin, and have lived stateless for many years in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt.[1]

The scope, and perhaps non-European origin, of the Syrian refugee crisis quickly accentuated the limitations of the global refugee regime. Despite the dangers of sea crossings in unsafe boats, the relative accessibility of Europe from Syria triggered mass movements of refugees, seeking political asylum in European Union countries. This, in turn, accelerated a trend already in place for wealthy countries to race to the bottom in allowing refugee resettlement within their borders. (e.g., Culcasi, 2023, 2) It is therefore by the design of European governments and their populations that Syrian refugees have been concentrated in Turkey and Arab countries that do not allow citizenship or other permanent legal settlement for these millions of stateless individuals (e.g., Betts & Collier, 2017).

The deliberate nature of Western governments' efforts to deter Syrian refugees from making asylum claims (e.g., Jaramillo, 2018) reflects increasing anti-immigrant and broader right-wing nationalism in long-standing democracies. At the same time, many individuals and organizations throughout the world were moved, at least temporarily, by the plight of Syrian refugees, a feeling that became particularly potent with the 2015 popularization of a moving photo of Aylan Kurdi, a refugee child who drowned trying to reach Greece from Turkey (Betts & Collier, 2017, 173). The visibility and scale of the Syrian refugee situation led to diverse efforts to help, often through the Third Sector.

[1] See UNHCR data (downloaded March 2023) at https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria#_ga=2.183591846.1265981495.1680028066-620377366.1680028066

As the Syrian refugee crisis regularized into an ongoing unstable equilibrium of over five million stateless people, and millions more internally displaced, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) worked with individual host governments and Third Sector groups to pioneer and implement innovative partnerships to address specific refugee needs. The two most notable of these are the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) and the Jordan Compact. As a broad scheme meant to advocate for, coordinate, and monitor services to refugees and other residents in all of Syria's neighboring Arab states, the 3RP overlaps some with the Jordan Compact, a multilateral agreement premised specifically around providing a major multinational influx of funds to finance, develop, and facilitate jobs and opportunities for Syrian refugees in Jordan and Jordanians themselves.

The Jordan Compact and the 3RP have in common four significant features. First, they recognize that addressing the multiple issues connected to the Syrian refugee situation requires the buy-in and agency of many diverse actors, thereby engaging Third Sector organizations in central capacities. Second, they utilize the resources of UNHCR (and the related United Nations Development Program (UNDP) to coordinate, publicize, and monitor the diverse initiatives under the broad umbrella of Syrian refugee relief. Third, they take seriously concerns that refugee hosting nations and citizens themselves require sustained help to continue to support Syrians within their borders. Fourth, 3RP and the Jordan Compact aim specifically to provide training and empowerment to Syrian refugees so that they can progress beyond being seen as predominantly victims and aid recipients.

In addition, management of the ongoing Syrian refugee issue is an extended experiment in limited state governance with significant third sector involvement. This is the result of the asylum policy of the main host countries for Syrians in the Middle East. Jordan and Lebanon are not signatories to the 1951 and 1967 refugee treaties, meaning that they do not adjudicate refugee status, nor do they allow for permanent residency or citizenship for refugees. Turkey, though a signatory to the refugee treaties, specifically excludes refugees from the Middle East as eligible for political asylum in the country. Egypt is somewhat different; it accords Syrian refugees registered with UNHCR official rights to resettle in Egypt but makes it harder for non-Egyptian residents to find legal employment.[2] Thus, in all four of these societies, governments have allowed Syrian refugees to live within their territorial jurisdiction but without allowing them full social and political rights or a path to citizenship.

Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey chose not to allow for formal political asylum within their borders[3] because they did not wish to assume the same level of jurisdic-

[2] For details on Egypt's status as a country that has signed the treaties, but lacks domestic adjudication mechanisms to determine refugee status, see UNHCR's periodic publications on Egypt at https://www.unhcr.org/eg/resources/unhcr-egypt-documents

[3] Or, in Turkey's case, chose not to allow non-European refugees to be eligible for refugee status.

tion and responsibility for refugees in societies that are already populous and pluralist. Yet, all three countries, as well as Egypt, which allows permanent residency with restrictions for refugees, hosted the vast majority of the millions of Syrians who fled their country starting in 2011. This set up a situation in which Syria's neighbors supervise very large numbers of noncitizens, despite being reluctant to integrate them fully into their societies.

Life for Syrian refugees in neighboring Middle Eastern states has taken two basic forms. The vast majority (95%) of refugees live in major cities, alongside citizens but with limited rights and opportunities. The remaining smaller subset of Syrian refugees (5%), live in UNHCR-administered refugee camps, in which their daily needs are provided but their mobility out of the camp is limited. In both situations, Third Sector groups provide critical help and aid in governing refugees' access to many aspects of their lives. Government liaisons and UNHCR bureaucrats may be the nerve system of Syrian refugee regulation in the Middle East. Yet local and transnational NGO workers are the life's blood of daily refugee help, personal advocacy, service provision, education, and vocational training.

Thus, governance arrangements of Syrian refugees in neighboring states cannot be described as instances of purely Third Sector governance in areas with little to no state institutional presence. At the same time, it is likely difficult to conduct detailed analysis of areas in the MENA in which state governmental involvement is altogether missing. What makes areas of the MENA with large Syrian refugee populations interesting in terms of Third Sector governance is that refugees and the areas in which they concentrate are zones of liminal or limited state administration, because refugees are not actually citizens. Thus, it is possible to look at the influence and achievements of Third Sector groups in areas in which there is better documentation than in war-torn zones or other places where governance is absent.

Indeed, in order to build on the significant extent of useful pre-existing analysis of refugee governance mechanisms from the Syrian crisis (e.g., Betts & Collier, 2017; Gatter, 2023; Parekh, 2020), I focus on the Jordanian case, because it is comparatively well-studied and covered by both recent hybrid Third Sector-government regimes. The record of Jordan and other hosting countries underscores that the need for Third Sector engagement created by limited state institutional jurisdiction and capacity with respect to refugees has created openings for both innovative and more democratic governance ideas. Significant private enterprise connections with refugee aid and governance are not unique to the Syrian context. It has been relevant in the similar situation of weak political institutions of Uganda (e.g., Malik et al., 2018), as well as the more highly structured case of the United States (e.g., Tent, 2024). However, the ongoing centrality of national government in today's global system, as well as the Middle East's weak regional institutions, constrains the impact of these ideas with respect to Syrian refugees and refugees more generally.

7.3 Refugee Policy Governance and Third Sector Engagement: Jordan as an Example

It is easy to understand that lower-middle-income countries[4] like Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey have not chosen to formalize in international law their open-ness to influxes of refugees, especially given that the governments of each country may see their pre-existing population diversity as destabilizing. The formation of Jordan at the same time that the state of Israel's creation forced hundreds of thousands of Palestinians to join the new Arab country, creating a permanent sense of divided and unequal national belonging for many of these Jordanian Palestinians (e.g., Culcasi, 2023, 39–47). Lebanon's religious segmentalism and the gridlocked government it fostered are a well-known, and expanding, political challenge (e.g., Farha, 2019). The Turkish government has long opposed Kurdish ethnic self-identification among Kurdish people within its borders. Moreover, all of these countries are part of a broader regional context of long-standing centralized governments that fear broad popular political participation, especially of unenfranchised minority populations.

Given Syria's neighbors' governments' economic and political concerns, it is striking that they have willingly hosted millions of refugees from Syria, unlike, for the most part, wealthier, less densely populated Western countries. Part of this good will may stem from shared regional identity, altruism, or values; part likely came from a sense that the Syrian refugee crisis would not last as long as it has. At the same time, the open-ness of Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey to Syrian refugees, as the crisis has endured, is also grounded in these countries' interest in the international social capital and substantial economic support generated and necessitated by their hosting of refugees. This level of international involvement means that a wide range of groups, including from the Third Sector, work together to regulate and help Syrian refugees.

The two basic locations for Syrian refugees lead to somewhat different constellations of refugee governance. The comparatively small proportion of Syrians in refugee camps is subject to the direct jurisdiction of the UNHCR, with the collaboration of administrators and police from the host country, where there is capacity for this. Because refugees in the camps are under the direct control and surveillance of their benefactors, it is easy for outside NGO's and individuals to work with and publicize the lives of these Syrians.

Yet, the vast majority of refugees prefer to live under less regimentation. These Syrians live in major cities and use their UNCHR refugee status to receive aid to help with housing and food. Because of the limits governments put on refugee employment in many economic sectors and given high unemployment rates more generally in host countries, Syrian refugees balance the increased personal freedom they enjoy living on their own with greater challenges making ends meet.

---

[4] Both Jordan and Lebanon have GDP's per capita of about $4100/year while Turkey's is $9600/year. See, for example: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?locations=TR&most_recent_value_desc=false

The numbers and extended duration of Syrian refugees in neighboring Middle Eastern host states magnified the challenges of a situation in which governments had limited capacity and interest in administering to their guests. As a result, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey worked closely with the UNHCR and a range of linked NGO's to manage refugee status adjudication, benefit distribution, and other key aspects of governance for Syrians in their borders. As the Syrian refugee crisis lengthened, and European countries closed themselves off to asylum claims, Middle Eastern host countries and global advocates realized that vastly increased multilateral coordination and funding were essential to ensuring even the most basic survival of Syrians still outside of their country of origin.

The Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) and Jordan Compact both emerged as a result of an awareness of global refugee advocates that the gulf between available resources to help Syrian and other displaced people and their needs was increasingly wide; new energy and methods were necessary to try to bridge it. At the end of 204, the 3RP emerged as a set of yearly strategies based on a broad framework to help advance the needs of Syrian refugees situated in Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, and Egypt (see generally, 3RP, 2022). The plan brings together over 200 NGO's under an explicitly regional rubric meant to link refugee needs to progress in broader development goals in each society. In this way, the 3RP envisions refugees as contributors to social growth, rather than mere victims, and connects their status to the advancement of the countries in which they find themselves.

Also in 2015, an initiative of Jordanian and European Third Sector think-tank and other academic actors worked on an approach to the mushrooming refugee presence in Jordan that recognized the importance of funding and integrating displaced Syrians into the local and global labor markets (e.g., Barbelet et al., 2018). This became the Jordan Compact, which was brokered by the President of the World Bank and the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom in February 2016 (e.g., Ben Kridis, 2021). The Compact brought together Western and Middle Eastern governments and funders to direct significant financial and other resources toward improving Jordan's overall economy and refugees' economic resources, particularly in terms of creating jobs for both refugees and Jordanians.

The specific aims of the Jordan Compact have been to:

- Bring together international humanitarian and development actors under host country leadership.
- Combine humanitarian and development funding through multi-year grants and concessional loans, with pledges of $700 million in grants annually for three years and concessional loans of $1.9 billion.
- Link payment of grants and loans to specific targets.
- One of these targets was for Jordan is to issue 200,000 work permits for Syrian refugees in specified sectors.
- Facilitate the European Union relaxation of trade regulations to stimulate exports from 18 designated economic zones and industrial areas in Jordan, in return for employment quotas for Syrian refugees in these businesses.

- Help Jordan institute reforms to improve the business and investment environment and formalize Syrian businesses.
- Require Jordan to provide school places to all Syrian children and some vocational training opportunities (adapted from Barbelet et al., 2018, Box 1, 2).

The Jordan Compact is the leading model of the idea that a multiparty agreement for significant global coordination can be used to improve the educational and economic opportunities of refugees in the countries they find themselves concentrated (e.g., Huang & Gough, 2019). The Compact's actual economic success is debatable (e.g., Empociello, 2021), particularly in light of the added strain on the global economy of the COVID pandemic, and the drying up of resources for Syrian refugees in the wake of the more recent Ukrainian crisis. Nonetheless, the Jordan Compact stands as a of a multilateral, multisector effort at economic burden-sharing during a refugee crisis (e.g., Ben Kridis, 2021).

While the Jordan Compact was a one-time agreement that provided a large influx of multinational funding tied to specific purposes, the 3RP has applied to all Middle Eastern countries with significant Syrian refugee populations, is administered broadly under the auspices of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees and the United Nations Development Project, and continues. Each year or so, the responsible UN agencies and every host country government put together detailed reports explaining policy goals, documenting policy successes and failures, and making the case for ongoing donations from the world community. In Jordan's specific case, the 3RP is an ongoing regional coordination effort that has overlapped in its goals with the Jordan Compact.

The 3RP aims to provide a central platform both to coordinate a wide range of responses to helping refugees in their broader host communities, as well as to publicize data and accountability in ways that might help global refugee funding (e.g., 3RP, 2022). The UNDP and UNHCR produce a yearly regional report, with bodies within each state party in the region issuing a national report that discusses their engagement and progress with 3RP goals. Thus, the 3RP initiative both maintains general regional conformity alongside individual national accountability and adaptation.

Taking Jordan as an example, the Jordanian Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation produced a 3-year plan and report for the 3RP covering 2020–2 that attempts to achieve a variety of goals. The report is responsive to the framework of the 3RP regional strategy and uses specific language and data to demonstrate this. Because the 3RP is the central conduit for fund-raising and fund distribution, the Jordanian national report is clear in advocating for needed donations by showing how financial shortfalls constrain how the country can meet 3RP goals (e.g., Jordanian Response Plan 2020, 32). Finally, the Jordanian national report asserts Jordanian government control and coordination of relief efforts for Syrian refugees (e.g., Jordanian Response Plan, 2020, 15–22).

It is logical for the Jordanian government to further a narrative of its control of the myriad threads of refugee governance is, given the reality of the complexity of the Syrian refugee issue and the diffusion of refugees across varied urban spaces and refugee camps. While Jordan has a natural interest both in streamlining aid to Syrian refugees and supervising them, the reality is that the number of, and multifaceted policy challenges presented by, refugees require extensive and constant nongovernmental organization engagement. It is difficult for the Jordanian state to have accurate knowledge of where and which refugees live in Amman and other cities. The small proportion of Syrian refugees resident in the large camps of Za'atari and Azraq are strictly monitored by Jordanian security but subject to rules and the heavy involvement of non-state organizations that render these camps distinct from the country more generally (Culcasi, 2023, 135).

Indeed, the transnational natures of the 3RP and Jordan Compact and the complexity of the goals of each initiative have incorporated by necessity the input of a wide variety of organizations, most of these from the Third Sector. This is particularly the case because United Nations institutions like UNHCR and UNDP, although not technically of the Third Sector themselves, utilize the input of numerous NGO's to inform their policy and to build UN legitimacy for action that may challenge powerful individual national governments. In other words, because of the UN's relatively weak hard power enforcement capacity, Third Sector organizations are central to helping it develop soft power based on diverse civil society consensus or support.

Thus, the basic structure of refugee governance in Jordan and elsewhere, with the local government and UNHCR in charge, should not obscure the central engagement of Third Sector groups. Jordan's 2020–2 3RP report itself makes this clear in a diagram around overall 3RP responsibilities in which the government coordinates efforts among its own ministry of planning, UN agencies, the donor community, and NGO's (17). Engagement with the NGO and donor pillars sustaining 3RP is significant both in terms of shaping the norms of the specific refugee regime for Syrians and in furnishing many of the administrators who implement this regime. This means that we can look at the key ideas behind the 3RP and the Jordan Compact as reflections of the priorities of governance values that are important in Third Sector developmental organizations.

This is why an emphasis on refugee empowerment and aid to hosting countries that prioritizes both refugees' and local citizens' well-being and resilience suggests aspects of Third Sector blueprints for governance. "Resilience" came into vogue in global developmental circles in the past decade and has been advanced by NGO's, such as the Global Resilience Partnership, as shorthand for creating capacity within countries to address and prevent major disruptive challenges, such as the Syrian refugee issue. "Resilience" appears six times in the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations Sustainable Development, 2015); its potential to conceptualize proactive approaches to global challenges (e.g., Brown, 2015) has made it popular among NGO's and international agencies.

7.4 Possible Benefits for Syrian Refugees of Third Sector Engagement in Governance

Resilience is an example of a developmental term largely disseminated from Third Sector groups that embeds concepts with traces of democratic flavor like autonomy and social empowerment. The 3RP and Jordan Compact more generally advance ideals of refugee/citizen mutual benefit and autonomy that amount to different governance models from what is typically found in Arab states. This is in part because models like the 3RP aim to make refugees develop or recapture their autonomy and skills in ways that may make them more outspoken or competitive in the labor market than desired by host governments. Particularly in the aftermath of 2011, Arab governments generally have doubled down on efforts to repress political participation using changing strategies (Bank et al., 2022).

This means that Arab refugee host governments with relatively limited popular support like Jordan and Lebanon face a delicate political calculus. Welcoming fellow Middle Eastern Syrians initially looked good to host populations and enhanced welcoming states' stature globally, since Western European states were eager for a solution to the Syrian crisis that took pressure off of them to admit refugees. Over time, however, the cost and potential job market competition posed by refugees decreased support among citizens of host countries, including Jordan (Petillo, 2023). For this reason, the efforts of 3RP to address local citizens' needs and of the Jordan Compact to provide significant development aid to one host country became important.

The determination of host governments not to extend citizenship or administer a full range of benefits to refugees means that Third Sector groups step in to provide critical services, whether in camps or large cities. The praise heaped upon the Jordan Compact stems from the agreement's provision of substantial and specific funding earmarked toward holistic socioeconomic help and planning across a wide range of spheres that brought together NGO's, donors, and governments, especially with respect to labor market entry (e.g., Parekh, 2020, 184, or Khallaf, 2019). Both the Compact and the broader regional 3RP plan have leveraged connections to diverse NGO's and donors attracted through the UNHCR and other organizations to encourage the Jordanian and other host governments to open up labor markets to refugees, as well as providing vocational guidance and training. For refugees living in camps, NGO's are also a significant source for jobs (e.g., Tiltnes et al., 2019).

The influence of Third Sector organizations in the liminal governance regime of refugees of Syria's neighbors means that these ideas drawn from the humanitarian and agency-empowering discourses of development studies seep into reports and official strategies. The multiple levels of accountability to donors and interactions with NGO's ensure that host governments have learned to deploy the terms championed in Third Sector circles, including the 3RP's guiding principles of accountability, leaving no one behind and resilience for all (3RP, 2023b, 14–6).

For example, the Jordan 2020–2 3RP report is laced with copious mentions of the words "resilience" and "social cohesion" (3RP, 2020, 15, 20). In addition to resilience and holistic approaches to local employment markets, another recent example of this is social cohesion. Social cohesion, as discussed in a 3RP guidance note, includes efforts both to help integrate refugees into the broader social fabric of their host countries and to encourage third sector and other intervening agents from "doing no harm" to the communities in which they engage (e.g., UNDP, 2022).

Goals like integrating refugee populations into broad society, avoiding intergroup conflict, and respecting communal social cohesion are not necessarily pursued by national governments, whatever their regime form. This is because governments sometimes try to meet their central goal about holding onto power through socially divisive politics. The recent broad global impetus toward a race to the bottom in terms of welcoming refugees also stems from and plays into policymaking that is divisive, rather than integrative. The more humane and holistic goals for refugee populations that global Third Sector groups articulate and have some latitude to try to implement and propel a different political praxis from what states generally foster.

Policy regimes in Middle Eastern countries hosting large numbers of Syrian refugees with agendas around empowerment and inclusion have achieved some success. In Jordan, for example, individual refugees have received the training and support they needed to help them start viable local or internet businesses (Hanna, 2022). The Jordan Compact has provided enough material aid to the Jordanian government and some Jordanian citizens to also facilitate opening some sectors of the national labor market to refugees (e.g., 3RP, 2023b, 42). The presence of so many NGO's and robust transnational administration and reporting mechanisms helps encourage that policies meant to alleviate refugee and host country citizen concerns are addressed in a sustained and consistent manner. Moreover, the emphasis on norms such as resilience and cohesion defuses an idea of refugees' connection to host country society that entwines both political equality rights and economic employment rights based in the United Nations human rights discourse. This is a contrast from the emphasis of autocratic states on social rights at the expense of political rights (e.g., Bjarnegård & Zetterberg, 2022).

The influence of Third Sector organizations in refugee governance is important in an additional way. The combination of high-level transnational structures and dedicated on-the-ground NGO and other workers means that the Syrian refugee situation continues to receive at least some global attention. Particularly considering the devastation of the global COVID pandemic and the greater empathy Western Europeans have had for the more recent Ukrainian refugee crisis, any attention to the Syrian crisis is welcome.

The ongoing spotlight on Syrian refugees so long after the start of the crisis stands in contrast to ongoing humanitarian disasters of oppressed ethnic groups in places in which national governments exercise greater overall and managerial control, such as the Uighur in China or the Rohingya in Myanmar. In short, notwithstanding the direct benefits to Syrian refugees in neighboring states described above, the permeation of refugee governance by Third Sector groups has allowed for more ongoing global attention to their plight. This itself is crucial, since the 3RP and Jordan Compact require continuous funding from many sources to even begin to meet their hopes of both sustaining and empowering Syrian refugees, and it may be some time before these refugees are able or willing to return to post-Assad Syria.

7.5 Problems and Limits with Third Sector Governance in Refugee Hosting Countries

The above discussion highlights some ways in which the inflection of significant third sector activity in shaping governance of refugees in Middle Eastern host nations suggest alternative norms and outcomes to typical state policies and may even infuse government bureaucracies in hybrid situations. The engagement and norm diffusion of Third Sector groups has been important and has meant a great deal materially and psychologically to Syrians. Indeed, Third Sector groups work with UN agencies and national governments to frame, monitor, coordinate, publicize, and adapt aid to refugees and citizens in host countries, which has likely helped save and sustain countless lives. The Jordan Compact and the 3RP frameworks are models for reinvigorating a weakened international refugee regime that make good use of Third Sector expertise and experience and consider local cultures and needs. Such models will continue to influence and be influenced by the millions of refugees throughout the Middle East, with numbers likely to swell much further in the aftermath of the 2023 war in Gaza.

Yet the experience of significant Third Sector influence on refugee governance poses a variety of problems. Outcomes in terms of providing widespread employment to refugees (e.g., Empociello, 2021), keeping male, and especially female, students enrolled in school, and helping most refugees out of poverty remain disappointing and elusive (e.g., Karasapan, 2022). This is hardly surprising, given the scale of the problem, the global economic impacts of COVID (e.g., World Bank, 2020), broader Middle Eastern socioeconomic challenges (e.g., 3RP, 2023b, 6), and the long duration of the Syrian refugee crisis. Yet, it is concerning and a sign of possible limitations in Third Sector influence with money and good intentions.

Those limitations can come from a need for more streamlined knowledge-building and experience with trying to realize the goals of frameworks like 3RP. A major study early in the life of that agreement and the Jordan Compact found that standardized metrics were wanting for gauging the success of specific goals of the evolving regime for Syrians refugees in the Middle East (Center for Global Development and International Rescue Committee, 2017). Moreover, even goals that would seem to be helpful to refugees like integration can be contested in their value. For example, some Syrians in Jordan welcome the prospect of blending with citizens of their host country, while others wish to maintain their autonomy and at least cultural affinity with their home country (e.g., Culcasi, 2023). In any case, the economic shocks to the growth and stability of Middle Eastern host countries in light of COVID and other events like the wars in Ukraine and Gaza have muted concerted global focus on refining how Third Sector innovation can foster an efficacious or efficient revamped regime for Syrian refugees.

Yet, even if resources could continue to be concentrated on Syrian refugees, a major challenge in improved refugee governance and aid delivery remains the inevitability and necessity of state involvement and the tensions that this creates. This is important in several interlocking ways. For one thing, governments see control over all the territory and people within their borders as among their prime responsibilities. Thus, even when some combination of lack of capacity for seeking the best interests of refugees leads host countries to allow substantial Third Sector roles in governance, state authorities must be involved and must demonstrate some semblance of control over the refugees in their territory.

This in turn leads to a variety of results. Even with the well-developed strategies of the 3RP and the Jordan Compact to attract and disperse large amounts of funding for the benefit of both Middle Eastern refugees and citizens, national governments have to prioritize their sense of their own citizens' needs. In Lebanon and Turkey, major challenges unrelated to the refugee crisis but affecting the economy have helped fuel a backlash to refugees among citizens (e.g., Karasapan, 2022; Baylouny, 2020). This leads to complex negotiations, the occasional presence of overlapping state and Third Sector bureaucrats, and possible limits on how far governments are willing to go (Center for Global Development and International Rescue Committee, 2017, 18) to meet the resilience and social integration goals discussed above.

Perhaps even more troubling is the link between states' perceived needs to control people within their borders, securitization, and the monitoring and challenges to agency of refugees from Syria. Throughout the Middle East, noncitizens from other parts of the Middle East can represent challenges to unelected governments' political narratives or controls. Refugees with low socioeconomic status might seem especially likely to present such challenges, even with the generosity and dedication that host governments have shown them. For this reason, creating camps for refugees far removed from main population centers and subject to security and surveillance was the first major step Jordan and Lebanon undertook in the Syrian crisis.

One recent detailed study of one of Jordan's two major refugee camps showed clearly how the camp's visible and subtle securitization and levels of control made residents and some aid workers uncomfortable (Gatter, 2023).

To be clear, with respect to Syrian refugees, the way host governments surveil refugees does not mean that host country governments have been insincere about wanting to help. Rather, the challenge is that the logic of states' prerogative to control their borders leads to inevitable securitization. For example, a major human rights organization praised Jordan's genuine efforts to deploy donor funding to work for universal education for refugee children. Yet, an obstacle to this has been the requirement that these children produce a specific type of identification, known as a service card, which conforms to the government's interest in tracking people within their jurisdiction (Human Rights Watch, 2020, 1, 5).

It isn't just Middle Eastern national governments that constrain refugee autonomy. European governments and even some Third Sector organizations, perhaps still influenced by orientalist or colonial mindsets, have unenviable records around providing agency to refugees. Notably, the Jordan Compact itself did not include the direct input from Syrian refugees in its initial negotiation and concretization (Barbelet et al., 2018, 3). Third Sector groups are more likely to seek participation and input from the vulnerable populations they serve, which again underscores why they represent useful alternatives for norms of governance. Yet the need to work with governments more likely to feel pressures from these populations require pragmatism and compromise on all sides that undermines strong prospects for the prevalence of truly novel governance models in refugee-hosting countries.

Indeed, refugee advocates have proposed governing arrangements within host countries that take areas with large refugee populations even more out of national governmental jurisdiction (e.g., Betts & Collier, 2017). Even as host governments rely significantly on Third Sector contributions to refugee aid and management, formally ceding control over portions of national territory seems unlikely. This is even more the case since refugees themselves prefer to be in major national population centers, rather than in isolated camps, in part because of the securitization host governments maintain over their lives in camps.

7.6 Conclusion: The Perils and Promise of Third Sector Governance in the Middle East

The heavy involvement of Third Sector groups in governance of refugee populations in Jordan and other Middle Eastern refugee hosting countries shows that, even where states continue to exercise sovereignty, NGO's and well-meaning individuals can foster useful results. Specifically, Third Sector engagement in Jordan and other states hosting Syrian refugees has brought norms around resilience and empowerment consistent with democracy, has yielded complex, integrative approaches that have improved the lives of millions of refugees, and has provided a set of coordinated global policy entrepreneurs to help the Syrian refugee crisis continue to attract funding and attention, even after COVID and Russia's devastating more recent war against a European democracy.

Would a refugee regime with so extensive engagement from the Third Sector be even more effective if state governance gave greater way to more direct transnational and local Third Sector group management? Could this help refugees by eliminating the need to depend on national aid delivery mechanisms that must be subordinate to perceptions around security and the need to prioritize national citizens, amid genuine economic scarcity? Here, I think that the real challenges and dilemmas of Third Sector governance emerge.

Perhaps more than any other region, the Middle East and North Africa has been damaged by the limitation (e.g., Ayubi, 1995), and, during civil wars, absence, of state governance, as well as by its often coercive presence. A turn from the 2011 Arab uprisings mass movements aiming to overthrow coercive regimes to subsequent popular panic around disorder and even civil war happened in the wake of the breakdown of order in Syria, Libya, Yemen, and elsewhere (e.g., Worth, 2016). Moreover, and as the 2023 earthquakes in Syria and Turkey and the war in Gaza show, some state capacity and coordination are important to getting help to Middle Eastern citizens in crisis, even where NGO and other Third Sector involvement and continuity are high. Finally, limited state engagement in refugee governance can lead to blurred lines of accountability and challenging communication among Third Sector and other groups, as has occurred in Lebanon, in which the government has had less regulatory capacity compared with Jordan and Turkey (e.g., Fakhoury, 2021).

For the above reasons, a lack of involvement from national bureaucracies in refugee governance does not seem optimal or likely, at least while today's global system remains mostly dominated by states in the Middle East and globally. In the Middle East region specifically, the emergence of alternatives to state-dominated governance is hampered by two additional factors. First, regional organizations are very weak, so there is little pressure or containment of individual governments by an alternative set of institutions and bureaucrats grounded in the specifics and historical experience of the Middle East. Should the Middle East region develop true regional organizations that can coordinate refugee policy, the norms germinating through mixed Third Sector-government partnership might gain more consistent traction. Second, as a reaction against colonialism and the hypocrisy that colonial authorities represented, and, as I have learned through my own extended research, international law is viewed with suspicion by many in the region (e.g., Mednicoff, 2018). This leads Third Sector groups caught between navigating their general interest (and often that of the host government) in improving the lives of Middle Eastern refugees and contending with diverse national and international organizational politics in the region and in donor countries.

With these ongoing political challenges and the tremendous broader post-COVID shocks to the global economy, it is not insignificant that the situation of Syrian refugees has enjoyed some modicum of stability and ongoing funding. For that, Third Sector involvement and the robust and relatively novel partnerships between Third Sector groups, international organizations and Middle Eastern host governments, deserve much credit. The 3RP and the Jordan Compact may not (yet?) exemplify the clear emergence of more decentralized and democratic structures of governance that presage a world order of less influential authoritarian-leaning national governments. They nonetheless embody modest prospects that values of resilience, autonomy, and social inclusion derived from Third Sector groups can help people who have spent over a decade in truly challenging circumstances. Indeed, as Syrian refugees likely return in large numbers in the near future to their native country's new post-Assad government, observers and advocates can hope that the mixed-refugee governance model these refugees experienced equips them with some skills and resilience to transition back to more normal and stable lives.

Initiatives like the 3RP and the Jordan Compact could be enhanced substantially through more extensive regional organizational regime growth. Yet, such growth seems elusive, given ongoing, and increasing, conflicts and humanitarian devastation in the MENA. For now, with the number of refugees and internally displaced people rising catastrophically in the world, and particularly the Middle East, even the smallest modicum of hope for improved governance better aid delivery and ongoing global concern that Third Sector groups have helped maintain with respect to Syrian refugees' merits highlighting.

With many national governments turning their backs on refugees, sometimes with malevolence and disregard for their international legal commitments, the Syrian refugee crisis highlights the potential of Third Sector actors to bridge governance gaps, despite the constraints of state-centric systems. Initiatives like the Jordan Compact and 3RP offer valuable lessons but require sustained commitment and innovation. Further research should explore how Third Sector engagement can foster long-term resilience and inclusion for refugee populations throughout the MENA region.

References

Ayubi, N. (1995). *Overstating the Arab state*. I.B.

Bank, A., Bellin, E., et al. (2022). Authoritarianism reconfigured: Evolving forms of political control. In M. Lynch, J. Schwedler, & S. Yom (Eds.), *The political science of the Middle East* (pp. 25–61). Oxford.

Barbelet, V., J. Hagen-Zanker and D. Mansour-Ille (2018), *The Jordan compact: Lessons learnt and implications for future refugee compacts*, https://odi.org/en/publications/the-jordan-compact-lessons-learnt-and-implications-for-future-refugee-compacts/.

Baylouny, A. M. (2020). *When blame backfires: Syrian refugees and citizen grievances in Jordan and Lebanon*. Cornell.

Ben Kridis, B. (2021). *The Jordan compact: A model for burden-sharing in the refugee crisis.* https://rli.blogs.sas.ac.uk/2021/05/17/the-jordan-compact-a-model-for-burden-sharing-in-the-refugee-crisis/.

Betts, A., & Collier, P. (2017). Refuge: Rethinking refugee policy in a changing world. *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences, 36*(1), 68–71.

Bjarnegård, E., & Zetterberg, P. (2022). How autocrats Weaponize women's rights. *Journal of Democracy, 33*(2), 60–75.

Brown, K. (2015). *Resistance, development and global change*. Routledge.

Center for Global Development and International Rescue Committee. (2017), *Refugee compacts: Addressing the crisis of protracted displacement: Final report of the forced displacement and development study group*, https://www.cgdev.org/publication/refugee-compacts-addressing-the-crisis-of-protracted-displacement.

Culcasi, K. (2023). *Displacing territory: Syrian and Palestinian refugees in Jordan*. University of Chicago Press.

Empociello, E. (2021). *The Jordan compact's failure to create jobs and power exports: Explaining a missed opportunity*. Noria Research, https://noria-research.com/the-jordan-compacts-failure-to-create-jobs-and-power-exports/.

Fakhoury, T. (2021). Refugee return and fragmented governance in the host state: Displaced Syrians in the face of Lebanon's divided politics. *Third World Quarterly, 42*(1), 162–180.

Farha, M. (2019). *Lebanon: The rise and fall of a secular state under siege*. Cambridge University Press.

Freedom House. (2023). *Freedom in the world 2023*, https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2023/marking-50-years.

Gatter, M. (2023). *Time and power in Azraq refugee camp*. American University of Cairo Press.

Hanna, A. L. (2022). *25 Million sparks: The untold story of refugee entrepreneurs*. Cambridge University Press.

Huang, C. and Gough, K. (2019). *The Jordan compact: Three years on, where do we stand*? Center for Global Development. https://www.cgdev.org/blog/jordan-compact-three-years-on.

Human Rights Watch. (2020). *"I want to continue to study": Barriers to secondary education for refugee children in Jordan*. https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/06/26/i-want-continue-study/barriers-secondary-education-syrian-refugee-children-jordan.

Jaramillo, C. (2018). *A race to the bottom on migration*? Canadian International Council. https://opencanada.org/race-bottom-migration/.

Karasapan, O. (2022). Syrian refugees in Jordan: A decade and counting. *Brookings*. https://www.brookings.edu/articles/syrian-refugees-in-jordan-a-decade-and-counting/.

Khallaf, S. (2019). Refugee movements in the Middle East: Old crises, new ideas. *MENARA working papers* 29, https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/menara_wp_29.pdf.

Malik, A., Mohr, E. and Irvin-Erickson, Y. (2018). *Private-sector humanitarians? New approaches in the global refugee response*, Urban Institute Research Report, https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/99202/private_humanitarian_partnerships_report_1.pdf.

Mednicoff, D. (2018). Legitimacy still matters: The rule of law and governance in contemporary Arab Muslim majority states. In L. Pal & M. E. Tok (Eds.), *Global governance: Muslim perspectives*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Parekh, S. (2020). *No refuge: Ethics and the global refugee crisis*. Oxford University Press.

Petillo, K. (2023). Syrian refugees in Jordan are facing increasing uncertainty. *World Politics Review*, https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/syria-refugees-assad-jordan.

Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP). (2020). *Jordan: 2020–2022 Jordan response plan for the Syria crisis*. https://www.3rpsyriacrisis.org/portfolio/jrp2020_2022/.

Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP). (2022). *Annual report 2022*. https://www.3rpsyriacrisis.org/.

Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP). (2023a). *Eighth regional survey on Syrian refugees' perceptions & intentions on return to Syria*. https://www.3rpsyriacrisis.org/portfolio/rpis2023-2/.

Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP). (2023b). *Regional strategic overview 2023*. https://www.3rpsyriacrisis.org/publications/.

Tent. (2024). *U.S. employers' guide to hiring refugees*. https://www.tent.org/resources/us-refugee-hiring-guide/.

Tiltnes, A, H. Zhang and J. Pedersen. (2019). *The living conditions of Syrian refugees in Jordan: Results from the 2017–2018 survey of Syrian refugees inside and outside camps*. https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/67914.

United Nations Development Project (UNDP). (2022). *Integrating social cohesion in the 3RP: A regional guidance note*. https://www.undp.org/arab-states/publications/integrating-social-cohesion-3rp-regional-guidance-note.

United Nations Sustainable Development. (2015). *Transforming our world: The 2030 agenda for sustainable development*. https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda.

World Bank. (2020). *Compounding misfortunes: Changes in poverty since the onset of COVID-19 on Syrian refugees and host communities in Jordan, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and Lebanon*. https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/mena/publication/compounding-misfortunes-changes-in-poverty-since-the-onset-of-covid-19-on-syrian-refugees.

Worth, R. (2016). *A rage for order: The Middle East in turmoil, from Tahrir Square to ISIS*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

Part II
"Non-State Actors and Legitimacy in Governance," the Focus Shifts Towards the Quest for Legitimacy Within the Realm of Governance

Chapter 8
Armed Non-state Actors in Lebanon and Libya: A Comparative Analysis

Elie Abouaoun and Molly Gallagher

Abstract This chapter examines the rise and consolidation of non-state armed actors (NSAAs) in Lebanon and Libya. It analyzes the sociopolitical conditions that fostered their emergence and evolution, and it explores how state fragility, sectarian divisions, and foreign interventions shaped their trajectories. Using a comparative framework, the chapter highlights Hezbollah's strategic integration into Lebanon's political and social fabric contrasting it with the fragmented nature of Libya's armed groups in the post-Gaddafi era. The findings underscore the challenges of NSAA governance and its implications for regional stability and state-building efforts. In Lebanon, it studies the conditions that allowed a number of non-state armed groups to be established and grow between the 1960s and the 1990s, as well as the circumstances that allowed Hezbollah to overcome the decision to disarm the non-state armed groups agreed upon by the Lebanese Members of Parliament (MP) and spelled out in the Taif agreement that ended the war in 1990. Furthermore, the chapter analyzes the process through which Hezbollah was able to build a large constituency—and therefore strengthen its legitimacy—among the Lebanese Shias and how key events either helped or actually undermined the party's effort to solidify its popular base, among Shias but also across Lebanon's sectarian board. The analysis includes an assessment of how the absence—or flawed/poor performance—of state security institutions creates a permissive environment for Hezbollah to thrive and how the latter made sure to protect this space by undermining the work of state institutions. In Libya, the chapter articulates the process through which community-based voluntary initiatives started in the wake of the 2011 uprising grew and shaped

The chapter's comparative dimension could be deepened by explicitly drawing out broader theoretical implications for hybrid governance and state resilience.
Streamline redundant discussions on external influence and political fragmentation.

E. Abouaoun (✉)
St-Joseph University, Beirut, Lebanon
e-mail: elie@abouaoun.com

M. Gallagher
U.S. Institute of Peace, Washington, DC, USA

© The Author(s) 2026

M. Elayah (ed.), *Governance without Government in the MENA Region*, Nonprofit and Civil Society Studies,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-03953-8_8

with time to become non-state armed actors and how international and regional interference encouraged these groups to grow in size and importance. The chapter discusses the factors and mechanisms that allowed the major groups to acquire popular legitimacy as well as studying the conditions that led to an almost total cooptation of state institutions by these non-state armed groups (rather than the opposite). Last but not least, the chapter identifies the similarities and differences in both countries.

Keywords Armed non-state actors · Hybrid governance · Lebanon · Libya · Post-conflict reconstruction · Security provision · Comparative analysis · State fragility

8.1 Introduction

The rise of non-state armed actors (NSAAs) in Lebanon and Libya in recent decades has posed a major challenge to the stability, security, and prosperity of not only these two states themselves but the broader Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. According to the UN working definition, NSAAs are

> Groups that have the potential to employ arms in the use of force to achieve political, ideological, or economic objectives; are not within the formal military structures of States, State-alliances, or intergovernmental organizations; and are not under the control of the State(s) in which they operate.[1]

There are thousands of such groups worldwide that range from insurgent groups, terrorist organizations, separatist movements, and militias of varying degrees of organization and capability. More specifically, non-state actors have taken strongholds in states like Afghanistan, Colombia, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Nigeria, Sudan, Syria, Yemen, and other conflict-affected contexts globally. With few exceptions, these groups emerge organically onto the security landscape successfully during times of fragility, internal conflict, and when state institutions are weakened for one reason or another.[2] They are then legitimized and supported by external forces and contribute to the protraction of conflict. While some tend to be fluid, merging, or dissolving rapidly, others sustain their presence by either becoming a strong para-state actor or by actually coopting the state.[3] Such groups are financed through different sources—legal and illegal—and in some cases are funded by state sponsors with an interest in a particular conflict. Understanding trends and patterns in the dynamics and conditions that lead first to the creation, then the legitimacy of armed

[1] Clements, A. (2019). *Humanitarian negotiations with armed groups: the frontlines of diplomacy*. Routledge.

[2] Carter, W., & Haver, K. (2016). Humanitarian access negotiations with non-state armed groups.

[3] Berkowitz, J. M. (2018). Delegating terror: Principal–agent-based decision making in state sponsorship of terrorism. *International interactions*, *44*(4), 709–748.

NSAAs in Lebanon and Libya is crucial for policymakers and the international community seeking to promote peace and stability in the MENA region. After all, well-established NSAAs will eventually fold themselves into the political sphere of a host country, becoming a key player and often a potential spoiler in any conflict resolution efforts by the international community.[4]

This chapter will explore what led to the rise of NSAAs in Lebanon between the 1960s–1990s, and Libya in the wake of the 2011 uprisings, and unpack the conditions that allowed for these groups to thrive. It will then compare the similarities and differences between the two cases of Lebanon and Libya, laying out important historical and contemporary nuances that influenced the fate of each group. The rise of NSAAs in Lebanon and Libya illustrates the interplay between state failure, sectarian fragmentation, and regional geopolitics. This chapter investigates how these actors exploit governance vacuums to entrench themselves as powerful stakeholders. This study compares Hezbollah's integration into Lebanon's political system with the fragmented and volatile nature of Libya's militias, highlighting lessons for managing NSAA influence in fragile states.

8.2 Lebanon

8.2.1 From Independence to War: 1943–1975

In Lebanon, a small country with a kaleidoscope of communities formed around sectarian subnational identities, armed NSAAs arose due to a combination of domestic and regional factors. By 1948, just 5 years after the end of France's mandate over Lebanon, the country faced the proclamation of the state of Israel right on its southern border with severe repercussions on an already fragile and newborn social contract between Lebanon's two main religious constituencies: the Christians who abandoned their eternal request for French—or sometimes Western-protection—and the Muslims who ceased their attempt to have Lebanon merge with its eastern Muslim majority neighbor Syria or a pan-Arab coalition of countries of sorts. In 1948, the country absorbed a significant influx of Palestinian refugees—almost 10% of its total population—which impacted Lebanese demographics, economics, and political dynamics. The country struggled to provide services to its own citizens, let alone the increased number of Palestinians seeking refuge in Lebanon. The strain on resources and services increased domestic strife while the country's economic model was built to be a service oriented one, lucrative in times of stability but quite vulnerable in a broader region going through turbulences. The rise of the expansionist Pan-Arab movement, which sought to establish armed groups in Israel's neighboring countries, particularly resonated with Lebanon's Muslim

[4] Schmitt, M. N., Waxman, M. C., & Oakley, T. W. (Eds.). (2022). *The Future Law of Armed Conflict* (Vol. 7). Oxford University Press.

population and led to increased support for non-state actors such as Islamist groups and nationalist groups that aimed to counter western influence. In the 1950s, Lebanon witnessed an outstanding economic growth resulting in its national income rising by 50% as well as a 75% increase in imports.[5] Nevertheless, Lebanon was plagued by a decrepit social contract resulting from significant economic and social disparities and, consequently, spineless state institutions. In 1960, the richest 4% of the population earned 32% of the national income. Half the population lived in poverty, earning only 18% of national income. After the mini-civil war in 1958, the government deployed efforts to bridge the economic and social gap. Despite some improvements in the 1960s, the political polarization around the Palestinian issue, fueled by the 1967 humiliating defeat of the Palestinians and other Arab armies, the massive flow of Palestinian refugees to Lebanon, the country's state institutions were feeble and the social contract further eroded. Thus, the conditions in Lebanon were ripe for various subnational groups to entrench themselves further into their own identities and seek protection from what they considered as existential threats, by forming organic armed groups comprised exclusively of members coming from the same religious group. This process was significantly exacerbated by the arrival to Lebanon, in 1970–1971, of thousands of Palestinian armed guerrillas, known as the Fedayeen after they have been expelled by the Jordanian authorities in the aftermath of the "Black September" crackdown against Palestinian armed groups in the Hashemite Kingdom. The growing Palestinian armed contingent formed an alliance with communist and other Soviet-inspired groups that emerged to counter what they claimed to be a West-leaning Lebanon. In parallel, a steady militarization of the Christian political parties was underway. The Christian community perceived a growing demographic imbalance and the emergence of alliances between Pan-Arab, Soviet supported leftists, and Palestinian Fedayeen as a threat and sought to protect themselves and their interests by forming their own militias.

8.2.2 The Civil War: 1975–1989

At the onset of the multilayered and plural civil wars in April 1975 and until 1982, a number of NSAAs from across the sociopolitical spectrum mushroomed in Lebanon. Whether ideological (communist et al., right nationalist…), sectarian-based (often patronized by religious institutions), feudal, partisan, or otherwise, the vast majority of these actors were either created or coopted at some stage by regional powers either supportive of or hostile to Palestinian armed groups. While in the first few years, most of these groups were still cause-driven, the protraction of Lebanon's war, its complexity, the confusing overlap between global and regional powers, and the volatile support they provided to NSAA pushed many of these groups to seek alternative survival methods, either through alliances (domestic and international)

[5] *United Nations Library Statistical Yearbook 1956: Eighth Issue* 1958a

or by establishing themselves as political and economic actors. The growing and fierce competition between these groups over political and economic power pushed them to eliminate each other. After the Israeli invasion in 1982, smaller groups either merged with more powerful ones or just vanished. Besides implementing the agendas of their regional sponsors, neo-NSAAs became over time platforms to conduct—licit and illicit—business and to propel some of their—sometimes unknown—figures into the public space. From a popular standpoint, the NSAA's relevance suffered even further between 1985 and 1989 during a stalemate in the Lebanese conflict.

The exception to this trajectory is Hezbollah. As the Islamic revolution settled in Iran in 1979 and the Mullahs' regime started executing a regional expansionist vision a few years later, they found in Lebanon the perfect recipe to take hold. For decades, the Shia community in Lebanon had been economically deprived and socially marginalized due to the fact that the country's power-sharing system was structured to their disadvantage. Historically, most Shias lived outside the main cities[6] where the bulk of Lebanon's economic activity took place. Most lived in rural, underserved towns or villages, which perpetuated their marginalization and disillusionment. These disparities were denounced and later instrumentalized by a cast of Shia religious clerics convened under the Supreme Islamic Shia Council of Lebanon, led by the cleric Imam Mussa Al-Sadr. The Council, legally recognized in 1967, states in its official presentation[7] the following:

> Since the independence of Lebanon, from the year 1943 to 1959, the political and economic conditions of the Shia community were caught in a struggle for balance among various Lebanese sects. The Shia remained marginalized economically and socially, surrounded by deprivation and poverty. They lived around the capital, Beirut, in residential complexes lacking the most basic forms of livelihood. This introduced rural patterns into the city, carrying with them religious beliefs, the bitterness of living conditions, the harshness of life, social injustice, and a rejection of the policy of dispossession practiced by a political system rooted in sectarian, religious, and regional categorization. This system relied on the appropriation of power and dominance over various state institutions, as well as its financial and military apparatuses. This occurred while the Shia community was largely excluded, struggling with poverty and the difficulties of life, especially in the Bekaa Valley and the South, where suffering was profound due to increasing neglect and the absence of institutions. The state's shortcomings in fulfilling its duties towards Shia citizens led to their victimization, as they were subjected to a dual collusion between the authority and the entrenched elite of that time.

The Israeli occupation of Southern Lebanon (1978–2000), including the demographically dominated Shia areas, provided an irrefutable moral ground for the emerging "Islamic Resistance" that no Muslim in Lebanon and the region could have challenged.

The Iranian approach to co-opt Lebanon's Shias and setup a new Shia-dominated armed group was multifold. From a doctrinal standpoint, the newly established regime in Iran invested heavily in sending religious dignitaries to mainstream their

---

[6] i.e. Beirut, Tripoli, Sidon and Zahleh

[7] A Historical Overview of the Supreme Islamic Shiite Council—Lebanon (2023)

own version of Islam that included the Wilayat Al-Faqih—or guardianship of the Islamic jurist—which is a system of governance that has underpinned the way Iran operates since the country's 1979 Islamic Revolution. Up until the 1980s, most of the Shia clerics studied in the religious schools (Hawzas) in Najaf, southern Iraq. These centers nurtured and fueled the mounting Arab-leaning Shia Islamist movement in both Iraq[8] and Lebanon.[9] While Iran was at war with Iraq, hijacking Lebanon's Shia community was very tempting for the newly established Iranian theocracy as part of their plan to further weaken Najaf and shift the balance of power to the clerics and institutions based in Iran's Al-Qum.

Trainers from Iran's Revolutionary Guards were also dispatched to build up the party's war machine and train the new recruits, mostly coming from other existing militias. Politically speaking, Hezbollah was often at odds with the Syrian agenda in Lebanon, competing for leadership over the Shia community with the notorious Shia NSAA Amal Movement. On a national level, Hezbollah wrestled, including leading a campaign of assassinations, to establish itself as a major anti-Israeli resistance movement while many Soviet-bankrolled groups were playing this role since the 1960s.

Concurrently, the nascent Hezbollah, initially branded as the "Islamic Jihad," worked hard to gain community sympathy and support by filling gaps in public service provision and local security left by the state. For example, in the context of weak Lebanese state institutions, Hezbollah strategically and successfully provided key services to the Shia community that they barely had access to, such as networks of healthcare facilities, education, and welfare programs. Hezbollah went as far as to provide scholarships and financial aid to low-income students and social support to orphans and widows. In terms of infrastructure, Hezbollah contributed to improving the quality of life for Shia communities. Additionally, Hezbollah, as most other political parties in Lebanon, launched its own media and strategic communication in the form of TV, radio channels, and printed media (later on websites, digital, and social media) to promote its ideology and stay connected to the community. Added to the political and military components spearheaded by Iran's revolutionary guard to conquer a space in Lebanon, all of the abovementioned public service endeavors awarded an embryonic Hezbollah loyalty and support from communities, making it an even more legitimate actor.

8.2.3 The Pax Syriana: 1990–2005

The war ended in 1989 with the internationally sponsored Taif Agreement, which called for the disarmament of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese (e.g., Palestinian) militias, including Hezbollah. The agreement was dubbed the "Pax Syriana" in

[8] Al-Daawa Party

[9] Harakat Al-Mahroomeen—Amal Movement

reference to the informal and tacit mandate granted by the international community to Syria to stabilize Lebanon. Although the Taif Agreement did not explicitly allow Hezbollah to continue its operations in Lebanon, the savvy group was able to work around the agreement indirectly and sustain its presence and influence. Hezbollah was able to do this because the group remained ambiguous and vague around its function, exact military capacities, and its relationship with the Lebanese state, while Syria, as Lebanon's newly mandated tutor, embraced the exception as part of the consolidation of its regional role. In this way, the group was not dissolved or disarmed under the Taif Agreement as other armed groups were and was able to continue implementing its expansionist agenda in Lebanon. In the 1990s, the Iranians and Syrians aligned their agendas, which shielded Hezbollah from Lebanon's domestic politics. Between 1992 and 2005, Hezbollah significantly expanded its social, economic, and military capacities, maintained a symbolic political presence in the Parliament, but did not participate in the executive power. More broadly, Shia representation in state institutions as well as public administration was mostly confined to Amal movement, led by Nabih Berri, a Lebanese warlord who latches onto the position of Speaker of the Parliament uninterruptedly since 1992.

However, Nabih Berri's tale is not unique. With the exception of three notorious mainstream Christian leaders (Michel Aoun, Amine Gemayel both exiled in Paris, and Samir Geagea who was detained from 1994 to 2005), most of the other warlords or lead politicians were somehow given a slice of the post-Taif cake. This is translated into political appointments (transitional members of parliament 1990–1992, ambassadors, ministers, civil servants…) and in the integration of scores of former fighters into the army and internal security forces. The massive entry into state institutions of individuals affiliated with NSAAs during the war, and the paradigm shift that resulted, would turn the situation into "NSAAs co-opting the state" rather than a conventional integration of a small circle of NSAAs into a larger state ecosystem, simply because the latter did not exist after 15 years of war and five decades of fragility and instability. This conferred a great deal of legitimacy to a cast of people who, in any other context, should have been either put to trial for war crimes or simply sent into "political retirement."

As most of the Palestinian NSAAs were allies of Syria's Assad, they were able to maintain their military infrastructure and arsenals despite the injunctions of the Taif agreement to disarm. However, the Syrians succeeded in prelimiting the Palestinian NSAAs to the refugee camps, thus giving them the role of policing inside the camps only. They were not allowed—and rarely operated—outside these boundaries.

8.2.4 Post-2005

With the assassination of the late Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in February 2005 and the ensuing rushed withdrawal of the Syrian armed forces from Lebanon by the end of April 2005, Hezbollah found itself quite vulnerable without the Syrian tutelage role over Lebanon's politics. The party decided then to scale up its political presence in state institutions and started being represented in the executive branch, on top of the members of parliament elected on the party's lists since 1992.

Hezbollah's military trajectory that included tremendous pressure on Israel to withdraw its troops from Lebanon in 2000, its relative distance from domestic politics, the sustained support from Iran, as well as its role as the main service provider for Shias in Lebanon positioned the group strategically to expand its influence, grow and evolve far beyond the initial cause of "liberating Lebanon" (i.e., from Israel), and even eventually become involved in regional conflicts, in Iraq, Yemen, and more actively in the Syrian civil war. In Iraq, for example, Hezbollah has supported Shia militia groups in terms of training and providing tactical and material military assistance, especially to those involved in the campaign against US forces (2003 onwards) and against ISIS (2014–2018). In Yemen, Hezbollah has supported the Shia-led Houthi rebels mainly to set up some of the core non-military functions but also at times supplying weapons and even offering tactical support on the battlefield sharing their expertise in guerilla warfare. In Syria, Hezbollah has outright supported the Assad regime, a key ally of both Russia and Iran, and was particularly involved in key battles first on the Lebanese Syrian border and then in the heart of Syria. Hezbollah has been critical in doing groundwork for the Assad regime during the civil war, regaining control of strategic areas and reopening supply routes. These few examples of Hezbollah's participation in ongoing conflicts highlight how an NSAA can evolve and expand its influence on a regional scale when given the right combination of financial resources, political power, military might, and social influence. As Hezbollah grew stronger and further entrenched in Lebanon's security infrastructure, the party attributed to itself the responsibility of security in some areas considered as strategic for their own operations, obviously at the cost of state legitimacy.

This regional expansion did not affect the party's performance at home.[10] After the withdrawal of the Israeli Defense Forces from Lebanon in 2000, Hezbollah used its arsenal mostly in pursuit of domestic political objectives, with the notorious exception of the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah. Perhaps the most infamous example of how important Lebanon is for the party is the Blitzkrieg style operation in Beirut in May 2008 when Hezbollah' s allies clashed with pro-Hariri groups, resulting in dozens of death and heightened sectarian tensions. The show of force in the capital and in the vicinity of the government's headquarters in downtown Beirut came in response to a ministerial decision on May 5, 2008, to dismantle Hezbollah's private communication network, a decision considered by the party as an "act of war" since it seriously undermines its military capability. Hezbollah's entry into the political institutions after 2005, the war against Israel in 2006 and the super-fast reconstruction of the affected areas through funding from Iran, the May 2008 operation in Beirut, and the ensuing political settlement between the main

[10] The devastating Israeli attacks of 2024 and 2025 revealed how Hezbollah's overt participation in the Syrian war exposed it to Israeli intelligence, contributing to its demise, including a fading influence on domestic politics.

Lebanese political groups in Doha in 2008 (known as the Doha agreement mostly in favor of Hezbollah and its allies) highlighted the group's military and political clout and led to their increased representation in Lebanese government, including formalizing their veto power over cabinet decisions. The group displayed another show of force in January 2011 to impose their own candidate, a wealthy telecommunications tycoon, Najib Mikati, as a Prime Minister after they provoked the fall of Prime Minister's Saad Hariri government.

Disarming Hezbollah or removing its influence from the various levels of Lebanese state and society where it is deeply entrenched has become an extremely costly and complicated challenge, necessitating substantial international involvement.

Hezbollah enjoys a high degree of popular support among Lebanese Shia communities who deem the group their defenders and most reliable provider of services and security. The group is highly advanced in social service provision and in many cases outperforms the state in terms of healthcare, education, housing, employment, and even disaster relief. With this myriad of social services, especially in economically disadvantaged areas of Lebanon, it is not difficult to see how the group has amassed such strong support.

Between the years 2000 (withdrawal of Israeli Defense Forces from Lebanon) and the 2005 assassination of late PM Rafik Hariri who was considered as the most prominent Sunni political leader, Hezbollah was praised by a vast majority of Lebanese Muslims and a sizeable portion of other non-Muslim Lebanese as a credible and patriotic "resistance" movement that transcends Lebanon's lines of division. This political capital among non-Shias in Lebanon and the wider Middle East region in general took a hit when many speculated that Syria and Hezbollah were to blame for Hariri's assassination. However, the outcome of the war with Israel in 2006 largely replenished the party's capital and portraits of its Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah were seen often in Middle Eastern capital cities praising the party's "victory" over Israel. As suspicions about the party's role in Hariri's assassination were corroborated by the findings of the official United Nations investigation, Hezbollah's popularity started to fade again, with the turning point being, in May 2008, the invasion of the city of Beirut, traditionally inhabited by non-Shias, in just a few hours by hundreds of undisciplined armed individuals called on by the party's allies (mostly the Amal movement and the National Syrian Socialist Party). This is when most Sunnis and Druzes as well as a sizeable portion of Christians settled on the idea that the party will never act as a normal political player and that its weapons will be used at every turn in support of its own or Iran's agenda in Lebanon and the region. The 2011 parade of Hezbollah members in black shirts to impose their candidate Najib Mikati as Prime Minister, as well as the party's unilateral decision to send fighters and military support to the Syrian regime in the wake of the 2011 uprising in Syria, just reinforced this assumption. In light of this, and of the party's disruptive behavior in the parliament at the end of the Presidential mandate in 2014 and until their ally, Michel Aoun was elected President of the Republic in 2016, the group lost to a large extent public support among non-Shias in Lebanon and the region. Hezbollah's obstruction of the presidential elections, initially scheduled for October 2022, and its unjustified participation in the post-October 7 war further intensified public resentment among non-Shia communities. Many believe that the Presidential elections would not have happened in December 2024 if it was not for Hezbollah's reduced influence after substantial losses, including the decimation of its leadership in late 2024.

In summary, after 2005, Hezbollah has been successful in maintaining and expanding its military capacities but most importantly to remain a key actor by co-opting the Lebanese political institutions, maintaining seats in parliament, participating in cabinet politics, and using the power and influence it consolidates in order to block policies it opposes. These tactics have yielded the group a parallel system of power and influence in the country, thus further weakening an ailing state and protecting its own space to operate. However, the party lost the bet of positioning itself as a trans-sectarian actor focused on Israel. Hezbollah's friends and foes look at the party as part of Iran's proxies in the region and therefore deal with it rarely out of affinity, mostly out of interest or even fear.

After the withdrawal of the Syrian forces from Lebanon in 2005, the Palestinian NSAAs—or at least some of them—started looking for a role to play. As the idea of "arming Sunnis to counter the Shias/Hezbollah" in Lebanon was gaining traction with different regional powers, some Palestinian armed groups offered their mercenary services. The most notorious example is Shaker Al-Absi's Fatah Al-Islam which seized the Nahr Al-Bared Palestinian camp in 2006 and sustained a 4-month war against the Lebanese Armed Forces in 2007. Others include the military support provided by some Palestinian groups to the Lebanese firebrand radical Sheikh Ahmad Al-Assir and other grassroot Sunni Jihadist initiatives in Northern Lebanon and the Beqaa valley. All of these attempts failed to stand up a structured viable Sunni armed group.

8.3 Libya

In Libya, since the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, a diverse array of armed groups and militias that emerged as a result of the power vacuum continue to play a powerful role in shaping the political, military, economic, and social landscapes.

8.3.1 The Genesis: 2011

A report by the RESOLVE Network titled "From Self-Defense to Vigilantism, a Typology Framework of Community-Based Armed Groups" puts forth the hypothesis that if a community-based armed group grows in size and influence, has significant access to natural resources, and is threatening the state or enters into direct mutual conflict with the state, then it may transition to a non-state actor. This hypothesis proves true in the case of Libya where the rise of armed non-state actors has origins in well-intentioned community-based volunteer initiatives that sought to provide security and essential services to local communities in the wake of the state's collapse in 2011. Organically, community volunteers filled the gap left by the state in service provision and support began to form organized committees, and as the conflict intensified some of the committees found themselves positioned to take on more of an active role in opposing the regime and protecting their communities.

As early as 2012, researchers distinguished between four types of NSAAs in Libya: the revolutionary brigades (those formed as early as February 2011), the unregulated brigades (those that broke away from the revolutionary brigades), the post-revolutionary brigades (created to fill in security vacuum resulting from the disintegration of state institutions), and the militias (referring essentially to criminal and violent extremist groups).

In 2014, attempts to rebuild a Libyan National Army (LNA), an effort undertaken by former Libyan Officer Field Marechal Khalifah Haftar, led to the creation of another category, the closest to a structured hierarchical military organization. In this context, it is worth highlighting the distinct case of the "Petroleum Facilities Guard" (PFG) led by Ibrahim Jadran, a controversial figure who was able to hold tight to the east-based oil crescent in 2013–2014. The life span of the PFG was extremely short compared to many other groups who had access to Libya's natural resources. Jadran's PFG was soon after neutralized by Haftar in 2016.

As in most other conflicts, international and regional powers lent financial, political, and military support to the vast majority of these groups. France, Italy, the UK, Russia, the UAE, Qatar, Türkiye, Egypt, and others used their support to specific NSAAs to leverage a political settlement to their favor.

Turkish and Russian mercenaries operate in Western Libya while the UAE supplies flow through Egypt to the East-based LNA, which also controls most of the Southern parts of the country. Russia and Türkiye seek both geopolitical but also economic gains while the UAE prioritizes strategic interests. These actors, including Sudanese and Chadian mercenaries, hinder the state ownership of governance and security, thus indirectly sustaining the justification that NSAAs are a necessity until strong state institutions are up and running.

Meanwhile, ISIS-like groups established themselves in several major cities of Libya and exerted control for some time over the central Mediterranean coast. Over time, the militarization of local communities created a permissive environment for the armed groups to take hold and thrive. Although most of them remained loosely organized and lacked centralized command structures, these groups became entrenched in Libyan society, gaining control over key areas and resources which made it nearly impossible for the Libyan government to control them. Like Hezbollah in Lebanon, these groups have amassed popular support for their provision of basic services and protection in the absence of a functioning effective and legitimate government.

8.3.2 *"Warlords Becoming Statelords": Shifting and Consolidating Power (2014–2021)*

From 2014 to 2021, armed groups in Libya were multiplying exponentially in size and influence, in a context of sharp political division and dual executive branches respectively based in the West[11] and the East.[12] As both governments remained weak and incapacitated, various groups filled voids in security, service provision, and protection and gained substantial credibility.

The Government of National Accord (GNA), formed in 2015, enjoyed the support of the UN and the recognition of the international community as the legitimate government in Libya throughout its existence until 2021. The Tripoli-based GNA, however, faced significant threat from armed groups, including the LNA, until 2020 when the two groups agreed, under the UN facilitated Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF), to a ceasefire and opened the door for a new unity government.

The LNA emerged in 2014 onto the military landscape as a major force in the East, opposing the GNA and attempted—but ultimately failed—to seize control of Tripoli through a large-scale military campaign in 2019. Despite their failure of taking over Tripoli, the LNA remains one of the major military and political actors in Libya.

A key point from the period of 2014–2021 is the fact that the array of armed groups indeed started to play, overtime, a significant role in domestic politics, compared to a peripheral political influence in the first couple of years after the revolution. By 2021, these groups had infiltrated the political arena and subsumed most of the political actors. This consolidation of power was described by Stephanie Williams, former acting UN Special Representative to Libya, as a "vertically integrated model" that included "*senior government offices all the way down to amateur weapon-toting youngsters on the streets, with unregulated authority to arrest, detain, surveille, etc. and thus became involved in gross human rights violations, human trafficking, and the smuggling of weapons, drugs and fuel.*"

Just as Hezbollah in Lebanon carved out a space for itself as a key line of defense against Israeli aggression, NSAAs in Libya attached themselves to fallacious political objectives such as preserving Libya's territorial integrity, fighting foreign mercenaries or a more realistic one such as confronting terrorism. The on-the-ground developments during the period when both the GNA and LNA launched separate antiterrorism campaigns strengthened armed NSAA in Libya and fueled the narrative that they are an indispensable part of protecting Libyans from terrorist groups. With the rise of the Islamic State in Libya in 2014 , the jihadist threat was eventually almost eradicated in 2016/7 due to intense US airstrikes and distinct—though almost concurrent—efforts by the West-based armed groups affiliated to the GNA as well as the campaign carried out by Haftar's LNA in the East. Although jihadist

[11] The capital Tripoli being the political epicenter of the Western region.

[12] Although officially established in the city of Tobruk, most decision makers affiliated with the Eastern region are actually based in the city of Benghazi.

groups still exist and operate modestly in Libya, their influence was greatly diminished, thanks in large part to the myriad of "boots-on-the-ground" armed NSAAs that took to the battlefield.

During this period, the status of the armed groups shifted to become multilayered, involving military activities that complement political activities but most importantly business operations, a process described as "warlords becoming statelords" in the report "From Warlords to Statelords" by the Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI). The research finds that in Libya, warlords are both patrons and clients simultaneously. On one hand, in the territories they have control over, modern-day warlords have the power to arbitrarily decide how to allocate resources, permits, licenses, and jobs—dictating almost complete control over communities. On the other hand, they act as clients of external powers, implementing foreign agendas in Libya in exchange for military and financial support. The report also finds that contemporary warlords rely on top-down recognition from state institutions and international actors for increased legitimacy while at the same time garnering support on the community level within the education and religious bureaucracies. Ultimately, the research indicates that "as long as armed leaders monopolize economic relations in Libya, imagining an actual transformation from conflict to a post-conflict economy is simply unrealistic." Additionally, NSAAs in Libya have blurred the boundary between licit and illicit economic activity by essentially laundering illicit money through smuggling consumer goods. The same ISPI report notes that armed groups in Libya use this mechanism to start businesses and even philanthropic nongovernmental organizations. Going forward, these groups disposed of a diversified toolbox that included major political influence, dissuasive military might, and an economic clout that allowed them to further consolidate their control of their constituents and stranglehold of public institutions. As per a senior diplomat in Libya,[13] the human trafficking "business" in Libya brings an estimated income of about 2 billion US dollars per year that are distributed among NSAA and smuggling rings.

8.3.3 Co-opting State Institutions and the Larger Public Space: Post-2021

A political vacuum that was forming over the years but that became significant in the wake of the indefinite postponement of the 2021 elections allowed for the armed groups and their leaders to substitute for the traditional political elites and to cement their instrumental role in the ongoing efforts to stabilize the country. These altered power dynamics allowed these groups to hold sway over both prime ministers (PM). The political survival of the "Government of National Unity" (GNU) Prime

[13] Conversation with the author in January 2023

Minister[14] (PM) continues to depend on the support provided by the West-based armed groups while the PM and his "Government of National Stability" (GNS) appointed by the East-based House of Representatives[15] would be easily toppled without the protection provided by Haftar and the LNA.

The love-hate "frenemies" relationship between government officials and armed groups is not fortuitous. With an expansive involvement in private business, these groups strived continuously for legitimacy, an attribute that can be provided by government officials. Unfortunately, this vicious cycle of moneymaking continues to drive the behavior of most armed groups and will remain the most significant challenge of any process to disarm and integrate the individuals affiliated with these groups. As one warlord in Az-Zawiyah is reported to have said when he was approached to free a senior commander from another group, "Al-Cash Yunhi Al-nikash" (cash money ends the discussion, i.e., if you are coming with money, no need to discuss/argue).

The cooptation of Libyan politics by armed groups is almost irreversible—or at best difficult to achieve and too costly to reverse—as the amount of clout and gravitas the leaders have been able to amass is substantial. Unfortunately, those who have risen to power since 2021 and who now enjoy political legitimacy are notoriously violent and opportunistic. At this stage, all efforts put forth by the international community to resolve the Libyan conflict include armed group leaders in positions of even greater political power and leading flourishing war economies. If such narrowminded "stabilization" endeavors come to fruition, it is almost certain that any space for a genuine, inclusive, and civilian political leadership to emerge through merit and good intentions will be eliminated.

8.4 Conclusion

This chapter examined the complexities and dangers posed by NSAAs in conflict-affected states, using the cases of Lebanon and Libya to illustrate how hybrid governance models undermines state resilience. Hybrid governance, where state and non-state actors share authority, manifests in distinct forms that impact state resilience. These forms can be broadly categorized as co-optive hybrid governance, where the state integrates an NSAA's power to maintain stability, and competitive hybrid governance, characterized by fragmented power among NSAAs, hindering the consolidation of a centralized governance structure. Regardless of the specific model, the long-term impact of NSAAs on state resilience is often detrimental, even if they provide short-term stability or fill service gaps. State resilience, in this context, depends not only on strong institutions but also on a state's capacity to navigate and manage the power dynamics that threaten its legitimacy and authority.

[14] Abdel Hamid Debaibah

[15] Osama Hammad

Lebanon exemplifies the "co-optive" model. Hezbollah's integration into Lebanon's political system, while initially contributing to stability, has come at the cost of state sovereignty and democratic accountability. The Lebanese state has struggled to assert control and maintain a monopoly on the legitimate use of force, a situation that has deepened its fragility. In contrast, post-Gaddafi Libya illustrates the "competitive" model. The fragmentation of power among various NSAAs has prevented the establishment of a centralized governance structure, severely impairing state capacity and contributing to persistent instability. Beyond these models, the relationship between NSAAs and state institutions is often characterized by a complex "love-hate" dynamic. On one hand, NSAAs assume some state functions, such as providing security, protecting civilians, and delivering essential services like healthcare, education, and infrastructure. In certain contexts, they also engage in counterterrorism and counterinsurgency efforts. However, NSAAs also erode state legitimacy, foster lawlessness, and fuel economic instability through illicit activities. Over time, states may become dangerously reliant on NSAAs for security and service provision, further weakening state capacity. A critical factor in the endurance of NSAAs has been the protracted weak governance and institutional failures. Coupled with the proliferation of weapons, NSAAs were enabled to challenge state forces and establish themselves as significant military players.

The emergence and evolution of NSAAs in Libya and Lebanon, while shaped by different historical contexts, share some key similarities. In Libya, armed groups emerged largely after the 2011 uprisings, evolving from community-based initiatives into entrenched militia networks. In Lebanon, the militarization of Palestinian refugees following the 1967 defeat contributed to the rise of more structured, ideologically driven organizations. Despite these different origins, both contexts are marked by political and communal fragmentation, which facilitated the growth of NSAAs with diverse agendas. In some instances, militancy transformed into mercenary-style activism, influenced by regional and international actors. Addressing the challenges posed by NSAAs requires a multifaceted approach that combines security, governance, and development strategies. Efforts must focus on strengthening state institutions and addressing the underlying sociopolitical conditions that allow NSAAs to thrive, such as state fragility, societal fragmentation, and external interference. This includes realistic approaches to engagement, disarmament, and reintegration, rebuilding state institutions to reduce dependence on NSAAs, promoting political frameworks that integrate marginalized groups, regulating foreign funding and support for NSAAs, and encouraging regional collaboration to address cross-border NSA dynamics.

The cases of Lebanon and Libya underscore the interplay between state fragility, external interventions, and localized governance needs in the rise of NSAAs. Future research should explore how hybrid governance models can facilitate the transition of NSAAs into formal state frameworks without compromising sovereignty, ensuring that governance arrangements enhance stability rather than entrench parallel power structures.

Bibliography

AbouZeid, R. (2021, October 30). How corruption ruined Lebanon. *The New York Times*.

Asfura-Heim, P., Steinitz, C., Schbley, G. (2013). *The specter of Sunni military mobilization in Lebanon*. CNA Analysis and Solutions.

Badi, E. (2020). *Exploring armed groups in Libya: Perspectives on security sector reform in a hybrid environment*. Geneva Centre for the Study of Security Sector Governance.

Badi, E. (2022, July 6). *Armed groups no longer: Libya's competitive political militias*. The Italian Institute for International Political Studies.

Beeri, T. (2020, October 14). *May 5th, 2008—Nearly civil war and a narrative which is an internal Lebanese warning sign*. Alma Research and Education Center.

Blanford, N. (2010, April 1). Did Hezbollah kill Hariri. *The Foreign Policy*.

Cameron, G., & Salem, W. (2014). *Non-state actors in the Middle East: Factors for peace and democracy*. Routledge.

Cowel, A. (1991, April 30). Syria and Iran agree militias can Remain in parts of Lebanon. *The New York Times*.

Eaton, T. (n.d.). *Libya's war economy: Predation, profiteering, and state weakness*. Chatham House.

Eaton, T., Alageli, A., Badi, E., Eljarh, M. (2020). *The development of Libyan armed groups since 2014: Community dynamics and economic interests*. The Chatham House.

Eaton, T., Alageli, A., Badi, E., Eljarh, M., Stocker, V. (2020). *The development of Libyan armed groups since 2014*. Chatham House.

Editorial Team. (2014, July 11). *Cleric Ahmad Assir still in Ain al-Helweh camp*. MTV Lebanon.

Editorial Team. (2016, October 31). *Lebanon: Michel Aoun elected president, ending two-year stalemate*. The British Broadcasting Corporation.

Editorial Team. (2020a, May 20). *Breaking down Ahmad al-Assir: The man behind the beard*. Al Arabiya News.

Editorial Team. (2020b, May 20). *10 years after Hariri's death, are Lebanon's Sunnis still leaderless*. Al Arabiya News.

Fasanotti, F., Ardemagni, E. (2022). *From warlords to state lords: Armed groups and power trajectories in Libya and Yemen*. The Italian Institute for International Political Studies.

Fetouri, M. (2022). Libya is a game of guns and militias with no end in sight. *Middle East Monitor*.

Ghaddar, H. (2020, December 9). *Hezbollah has created parallel financial and welfare systems to manage the current crisis*. The Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

Glenn, C. (2017). *Libya's Islamists: Who they are and what they want*. Wilson Center.

Hazbun, W. (2016). Assembling security in a 'weak state:' The contentious politics of plural governance in Lebanon since 2005. *Third World Quarterly, 37*(6), 1053–1070.

Jacinto, L. (2022, May 31). *Nabih Berri: Lebanon's 'untouchable' parliamentary speaker. France 24*.

Kalian, Y. (2017). *Iran's Hezbollah Franchise in Iraq: Lessons from Lebanon's Shiite militias*. The Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

Karouni, M. (2011, January 24). *Hezbollah-backed Mikati set to lead Lebanon government*. Reuters.

Levitt, M. (2021, July 26). *Hezbollah's regional activities in support of Iran's proxy networks*. The Middle East Institute.

Marques, M., Rognvik, S. (2018). *Non-state armed actors and transitions from conflict to peace: Lessons from peace processes and implications for stabilisation*. Emirates Diplomatic Academy.

McQuinn, B. (2012). *Armed groups in Libya: Typology and roles*. Small Arms Survey.

Norris, M., & Amos, D. (2008, May 9). *Hezbollah seizes control of West Beirut. All things considered*. The National Public Radio.

Perry, T. (2008, May 9). *Lebanon government denounces Hezbollah 'coup' in Beirut*. Reuters.

Pollock, D. (2019, December 4). *New Lebanon poll: Despite protests, most shiites still back Hezbollah, while Sunnis and Christians turn more negative*. The Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

Robinson, K. (2022, October 14). *What is Hezbollah*. Council on Foreign Relations.

Samaha, N. (2013, June 26). *Who is Lebanon's Ahmed al-Assir*. Aljazeera.

Sayigh, Y. (2018, October 30). *Hybridizing security: Armies, militias and constrained sovereignty*. The Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center.

Siklawi, R. (2017). The Palestinian resistance movement in Lebanon 1967–82: Survival, challenges, and opportunities. *Arab Studies Quarterly, 39*(3), 923–937.

Van Metre, L. (2019). *A typology framework of community-based armed groups*. The Resolve Network.

Wehrey, F. (2021). *Libyan armed groups and the "day after" elections*.

Young, M. (2021, September 29). *Lebanon is a model of militias taking over the state*. The National News.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

Chapter 9
Libya: The Path from State Absence to the Long-Awaited Government

Noureddine Selmi

Abstract This chapter explores Libya's ongoing struggle to transition from a fragile state to a governance framework characterized by stability and institutional resilience. Drawing on two comprehensive field studies, the chapter highlights the enduring challenges posed by the legacy of Gaddafi's regime, the complexities of post-revolution reconstruction, and the contentious role of civil society. The findings reveal significant gaps in governance and underscore the need for political will, institutional reform, and coordinated international support to achieve sustainable governance. Libya's situation remains marked by a fragile state structure, exacerbated by the absence of robust institutions even during Gaddafi's rule. Since the 2011 revolution, the country has been a persistent battleground for conflict and instability. The chapter is based on two key studies: the first conducted by the author during a visit to Libya in mid-2021, engaging with experts in political, governance, and economic fields, and the second based on interviews conducted in early 2023. The diverse sample includes politicians, economists, diplomats, intellectuals, civil society workers, and state officials, offering a wide range of perspectives. Three key conclusions emerge first, the lack of legal and institutional frameworks during the Gaddafi era; second, the formidable challenges of reconstruction amidst ongoing conflict, divisions, militias, and state fragility since 2011; and third, the widespread skepticism towards civil society and NGOs, particularly foreign ones. Many view these entities with suspicion, questioning their potential to contribute to a stable Libya and perceiving them as possibly driven by external agendas that may not align with the interests of the Libyan people.

Keywords Governance · Libya · Civil society · Crises · Conflict · Democratic transition

N. Selmi (✉)
Department of Public Administration, School of Economics, Administration and Public Policy, Doha Institute for Graduate Studies, Doha, Qatar
e-mail: noureddine.selmi@dohainstitute.edu.qa

© The Author(s) 2026

M. Elayah (ed.), *Governance without Government in the MENA Region*, Nonprofit and Civil Society Studies,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-03953-8_9

9.1 Introduction

The topic of governance holds critical significance, with widespread acknowledgment of its essential role in managing the affairs of nations and institutions. However, the existing literature has predominantly focused on advanced and stable states (Farah et al., 2021), raising the question: what about countries facing crises, conflicts, or wars? Academic exploration of this issue, particularly in relation to fragile or conflict-affected states, remains limited (Elayah & Lambert, 2023). Given the frequent occurrence of crises, armed conflicts, and wars worldwide, particularly in regions like the Middle East and North Africa (Anderson, 2011; Selmi, 2025; Yom, 2005), the aftermath of the Arab Spring revolutions has further intensified these challenges. As a result, it is essential to direct scholarly attention to these regions and explore effective pathways toward achieving good governance in such volatile contexts (Selmi & Alawami, 2025). While the literature on governance is extensive and varied, often drawing on credible data and statistics provided by international organizations such as the World Bank, a significant portion of it closely associate good governance with a democratic political environment and the presence of transparent, effective institutions. Consequently, there is a notable lack of studies addressing scenarios where the state is absent or in a state of near-collapse, or where the government is ineffective or incapable. This gap in the literature represents a critical area for further inquiry and academic exploration.

Following Tilly's (1985) assertion that states emerge through conflict and resource mobilization, Libya's fragmented post-revolutionary landscape presents a case in which war has weakened, rather than consolidated, state institutions. This chapter applies this framework to analyze Libya's failure to establish an effective central authority. The focus is on Libya, where the state appears to be quasi-absent. Many stakeholders in Libyan affairs argue that, during the Gaddafi era, there were no institutions in the proper, internationally recognized sense (Boose, 2012a; Bruce St John, 2011; van Genugten, 2011; Zagoub, 2019a). Since the fall of Gaddafi, Libya has faced numerous challenges, including the need to build civil society, restore security, establish rule of law, rebuild trust among citizens, and reconstruct public administration, as well as forge a coherent national identity (Anderson, 2011). Given that Libya has remained a theater of conflict and war since the February 2011 revolution, it continues to be a critical subject of research.

This study is based on two key studies. The first is a field study conducted by the researcher during a visit to Libya in mid-2021, where he met with various experts and stakeholders involved in political, economic, and governance matters. The second study draws on interviews conducted in the first quarter of 2023, with transcribed recordings used to extract conclusions and results from the statements of 29 participants. The sample included politicians, economists, diplomats, intellectuals, civil society actors, and government officials. From these meetings and interviews, three primary conclusions emerge: first, during the Gaddafi era, there was no rule of law or institutions in the internationally recognized sense. Second, the ongoing realities of conflict, divisions, militias, and state weakness since 2011 have made reconstruction a complex and challenging task. Third, a majority of Libyans view civil society and nongovernmental organizations, particularly foreign ones, with skepticism. Most do not believe these organizations will contribute to building a stable Libya; some even perceive them as driven by external agendas that do not align with the interests of the Libyan people.

This chapter begins with a brief overview of the concept of governance, followed by a detailed presentation of the outcomes from the two studies. The subsequent section synthesizes the conclusions and findings, organized into two main parts: the first addresses "Gaddafi's Libya," or what can be termed the "Bare People's Republic," and the second examines the "New Wounded Libya." The third section explores how Libya can move towards stable governance and the realization of good governance. In the first part, the chapter presents the key findings from the study on whether civil society and non-governmental organizations contribute to achieving these goals. The second part addresses the steps Libyans must take to prevent a return to the destructive cycle of war, which could lead to both physical and societal collapse. It also considers the potential for Libyans to transition from their current state to one characterized by the establishment of a state and institutions grounded in good governance.

Libya's governance challenges are rooted in decades of institutional decay under Gaddafi (Selmi, 2025), further exacerbated by the fragmentation and conflict following the 2011 revolution. This chapter explores the critical question of how Libya can transition from a fractured state to one characterized by effective governance. The study synthesizes findings from two field studies conducted in 2021 and 2023, examining Libya's governance trajectory and the role of civil society in promoting institutional resilience.

Chapter Structure

- Section 9.1 discusses governance under Gaddafi's rule.
- Section 9.2 examines post-revolution challenges and opportunities.
- Section 9.3 evaluates the role of civil society in Libya's governance landscape.
- Section 9.4 provides future scenarios and policy recommendations.

9.2 Governance and its Reality in Libya

Before examining the state of governance in Libya, it is important to recall that the concept of governance (or good governance) gained prominence after the World Bank's 1989 declaration, which highlighted that governance crises were at the heart of many development challenges in numerous countries. Gisselquist (2012) outlined ten different definitions of good governance from various organizations, concluding that good governance is defined as "a system of governance that is capable, responsive, comprehensive," and transparent. As a result, the United Nations asserts that good governance plays a crucial role in promoting equality, participation, pluralism, transparency, accountability, and the rule of law in an efficient and sustainable manner. Tsegaw (2020) further argues that much of the literature on governance is structured around six key dimensions, represented as follows:

- *Voice and Accountability:* The extent of citizen participation in choosing their leaders, as well as the freedoms of expression, association, and the press.
- *Political Stability and Absence of Violence/Terrorism:* The likelihood of disruptions to government stability or attempts to overthrow it through unconstitutional or violent means, including politically motivated violence and terrorism.
- *Government Effectiveness:* The quality of public services, the independence of the civil service from political pressures, as well as the formulation, implementation, and credibility of government policies and adherence to those policies.
- *Regulatory Quality:* The government's ability to formulate and implement sound policies and regulations that foster the development and promotion of the private sector.
- *Rule of Law:* The trust and adherence of agents to societal rules, particularly the quality of contract enforcement, property rights, and the functioning of the police and courts.
- *Control of Corruption:* The degree to which public power is exploited for private gain, including both petty and large-scale corruption, as well as the "capture" of the state by elites and special interest groups.

Understanding Libya's governance challenges requires situating them within the broader literature on state-building failures in post-conflict societies (Rotberg, 2004). Upon examining the current situation in Libya and assessing the presence of the aforementioned conditions for good governance, it becomes apparent that they are almost entirely absent. The path to achieving these goals is long, difficult, and fraught with challenges (Selmi, 2025). Consistent with Boose (2012a) observations, the scarcity of civil institutions in Libya significantly reduces the prospects for democracy in the country. A comprehensive evaluation of these governance indicators from 2011 to 2021, based on the World Bank's assessment, confirms that governance levels remain exceedingly weak. All indicators fall within the range of −1.05 to −2.37 on a scale from −2.5 to 2.5, reflecting one of the lowest rankings, not only in the Middle East and Africa but globally.

Readers can refer to the tables on the World Bank website, specifically the "Worldwide Governance Indicators: Interactive Data Access Graph view and Table view," for data presenting the six indicators. This allows for a comparison between Gaddafi's era, characterized by 42 years of autocratic rule, and the decade following the Libyan revolution from 2011 to 2021 (the last available statistics on the World Bank's website). In Table 9.1, all figures and percentiles for global governance indicators in Libya for the year 2011 are exceptionally low. Each percentile ranks below 16%, with Voice and Accountability at 6.57%, Political Stability and Absence of Violence at 11.85%, Government Effectiveness at 15.17%, Regulatory Quality at 6.16%, Rule of Law at 14.08%, and Control of Corruption at 7.58%. This results in a total average of 10.23%. These figures suggest that, despite the appearance of stability during the late Gaddafi era, the governance indicators tell a different story:

In addition to the decline in the indicators for Voice and Accountability, Regulatory Quality, and Control of Corruption, the scores for Political Stability and Absence of Violence, as well as the Rule of Law, remain exceptionally low. This raises a critical question: do these indicators reflect merely a lack of effective

Table 9.1 Worldwide governance indicators (statistical data)[a]

Indicator	Country	Year	Number of sources	Governance (−2.5 to +2.5)	Percentile rank	Standard error
Voice and accountability	Libya	2012	13	−0.90	23.00	0.12
		2017	9	−1.44	9.36	0.13
		2022	8	−1.39	11.11	0.13
Political stability and absence of violence/terrorism	Libya	2012	7	−1.59	6.64	0.23
		2017	6	−2.35	2.38	0.22
		2022	5	−2.20	3.77	0.24
Government effectiveness	Libya	2012	7	−1.27	8.53	0.22
		2017	7	−1.61	5.24	0.22
		2022	6	−1.75	2.36	0.25
Regulatory quality	Libya	2012	7	−1.62	2.84	0.23
		2017	6	−2.15	1.43	0.23
		2022	4	−2.09	1.42	0.27
Rule of law	Libya	2012	12	−0.98	16.90	0.16
		2017	8	−1.68	4.29	0.19
		2022	7	−1.80	2.36	0.19
Control of corruption	Libya	2012	10	−1.32	3.32	0.16
		2017	7	−1.56	3.33	0.15
		2022	7	−1.53	3.77	0.20

Number of Sources shows the number of individual data sources on which the aggregate indicator is based
Governance Score (−2.5 to + 2.5) estimate of governance measured on a scale from approximately −2.5 to +2.5. Higher values correspond to better governance
Percentile Rank (0–100) indicates rank of country among all countries in the world. 0 corresponds to lowest rank and 100 corresponds to highest rank
Standard Error captures the precision of the estimate of governance for each country. Lower values indicate more precision. Standard errors are related to confidence intervals reported elsewhere as follows: a 90% confidence interval is the estimate of governance +/− the standard error multiplied by 1.645
[a]World bank

governance, or do they point to the broader absence of the state and its institutions altogether?

9.3 The State in Libya: Before and After the February 2011 Revolution

9.3.1 Before 2011: The Gaddafi "Jamahiriya"

The figures presented in the previous paragraph clearly indicate that, after four decades of Gaddafi's rule, the situation was dire. Despite what some view as attempts at reform during the final decade of his rule (beginning in 1999), the indicators remained dismal. Many observers attribute the failure of these reforms to several factors, with the primary aim being to prepare Muammar Gaddafi's son, Saif al-Islam, for succession. Although Saif al-Islam was the public figure largely associated with human rights reform in Libya, and the Gaddafi Foundation he established was the sole organization through which citizens could raise concerns about torture, arbitrary detention, and enforced disappearances, its impact was limited. The Foundation's activities began in the late 1990s, and its first human rights report, published in 1999, called for significant and urgent reforms. However, the second report was not issued until December 2010, where it expressed regret over a "serious setback" in civil society. Furthermore, Saif al-Islam helped Human Rights Watch hold a press conference that represented a breakthrough in this area (Bruce St John, 2011). Despite these efforts, the situation worsened, especially after Human Rights Watch published a report in December 2009. In response, Muammar Gaddafi declared in January 2010 that civil society organizations had no place in Libya, leading to the suspension of newspapers and the arrest of journalists who criticized the country's corruption practices (Bruce St John, 2011).

As Yom (2005) notes, leaders in many countries support civil society not to foster improvement but to control and suppress opposition. This was certainly the case with Muammar Gaddafi, who dismantled any potential opposition and prevented the formation of civil society organizations (van Genugten, 2011). Libya's governance indicators in 2011 serve as a stark testament to this reality. This perspective is shared by most of the interviewees, who expressed negative views about Gaddafi's era. Their responses to questions regarding the level of governance and the state of the government during Gaddafi's reign were strikingly consistent. The following statements from some of the respondents illustrate the prevailing sentiment among Libyans, who firmly believe that, under Gaddafi's rule, Libya lacked a state in the internationally accepted sense. Some examples include the following:

- *"Regarding the state before 2011, there was no state and no institutions. Instead, there was an oppressive dictatorial regime, and the best evidence of this is that all the institutions collapsed when the regime fell." (Respondent 4)*
- *"No, there was no state in the sense of institutions. Even the security and military institutions were linked to the power hierarchy, and they collapsed once Gaddafi fell. If we compare with neighboring countries like Egypt and Tunisia, institutions were present there." (Respondent 17)*
- *"Regarding political culture, the general culture in Libyan society was distorted systematically as the previous regime led by Gaddafi played a significant role. Going back to the early 1970s, Libyan people had a sophisticated culture where education and healthcare were good. There was a decent private sector, a proper judicial system, security, and even media at a good level. All of this was reflected in the culture of the people and the political culture, an integral part of it. However, the Gaddafi regime turned Libya into a field of experiments, particularly after the release of the Green Book and the Popular Conferences system, changing from a republic to a 'Jamahiriya.' This system returned people to the peak of political chaos. We also can't forget the nationalization of the private sector, the prosecution and criminalization of political parties, and the creation of a unique hybrid economic system… All of this had a negative impact on the*

culture and political culture, which was almost non-existent until the eruption of the February 17 revolution." (Respondent 15)

- *"Before 2011, there was no state in the conventional sense. There were no state institutions; there were only some institutions used to suppress the people and maintain some basic services to enforce their oppressive policies without the presence of opposition capable of affecting their continued control over the state." (Respondent 14)*
- *"In Libya, there were no institutions; there was an institution built on individuals. To this day, we suffer from this. All institutions are built on individuals; individuals are the foundation. To this day, we still suffer from this problem. Despite the fact that there was more discipline before the revolution than after, which has become worse, the deterrent was the fear of security. It was a security state. Of course, security institutions were built on individuals and not on protecting and serving the people." (Respondent 20).*

However, a minority of the respondents adopted a less critical view, not attributing all the flaws solely to the regime before the revolution. This perspective reflects the beliefs of a small group of Libyans who, while acknowledging the failures of the Gaddafi regime, also recognize its attempts at late-stage reforms. The opinions of some of these respondents are outlined below:

- *"Before 2011, undoubtedly, there was a state, but it had its shortcomings… Institutions existed, and there was compliance with decision-making levels. For instance, there was the National Oil Corporation and the Central Bank of Libya… The state's structure and decision-making hierarchy were present, as were the flow of funds, budgets, expenditures, and adherence to budget allocations… So, the state was there." (Respondent 1)*
- *"Despite the serious steps taken by the previous regime during the last ten years before 2011, there was a comprehensive reform process that ensured support for building state institutions, separate from a system built around a single individual, the head of the state. However, these steps were late, which became evident after 2011 when institutions showed significant weaknesses in performance. This hindered state-building to this day, and this made the division between institutions and administrations easy. The weakness of institutions also facilitated the spread of corruption due to the absence of administrative, financial, and regulatory oversight mechanisms for monitoring the state's budget expenditure. This can be traced back to the practices of the previous regime, which did not establish the foundations of these control systems to ensure the proper management of oil revenues. The policies and operations of institutions before 2011 relied on the arbitrary decisions and whims of the head of state without clear policies and legislation based on studies. Moreover, the lack of a constitution acted as a legal basis for the state." (Respondent 13)*
- *"Yes, there was a state before the 2011 revolution in Libya, but it was governed by a ruling system with extensive powers largely centered around the former leader, Muammar Gaddafi. Nevertheless, there was an institutional system overseeing civil, security, and government entities as well as controlling economic,*

social, and cultural aspects of the country. However, these governmental structures and institutions suffered from many issues and challenges, including corruption, authoritarianism, discrimination, lack of transparency, and accountability, as well as a lack of economic opportunities for citizens. Therefore, it can be said that there was a state in the institutional sense, particularly in terms of security and maintaining order, but the governing system in Libya before the revolution was plagued by significant weaknesses, resulting in institutional and bureaucratic bottlenecks, inefficient regulations, unclear legal and economic frameworks, poor governance, and a chronic shortage of skilled labor." (Respondent 12).

This second perspective represents a subset of Libyans who recognize that, during the final years of Gaddafi's rule, there were certain aspects, or at least indications, of governance. According to this viewpoint, these elements extended to both the public and private sectors, suggesting a delayed reform process that, ultimately, failed to free the regime from the burdens and legacies of its past. The challenges identified included high levels of bureaucratic management, institutional stagnation, a lack of regulatory efficiency, ambiguous legal and economic frameworks, poor governance practices, and a shortage of skilled labor. Although some governance-related activities are acknowledged, these respondents emphasize that the overall foundations of governance were either absent or severely lacking. A near consensus emerges among the respondents, suggesting that, throughout Gaddafi's prolonged rule, the core elements of governance were deficient. The prevailing perception is one of an autocratic, repressive, and security-controlled regime that permeated all aspects of life.

9.3.2 After the February 2011 Revolution: The New Struggling Libya

The deteriorating political, economic, and social situation in Libya since 2011 is widely acknowledged. The absence of institutional foundations under Gaddafi (Boose, 2012b; Selmi, 2025) left Libya without bureaucratic continuity after his fall, presenting a challenge central to state-building theories that emphasize the importance of institutional persistence (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). Without such continuity, post-revolutionary Libya struggled to establish effective governance structures. Since the February 2011 revolution, Libya has experienced numerous changes in government, while being engulfed in disputes, divisions, conflicts, and wars since 2015. Some argue that the current situation precludes the possibility of speaking of a sovereign state, as the Libyan government remains incapable of forming a national army strong enough to maintain unity and ensure security and stability across the country's territories.

Published figures from various organizations and sources confirm the ongoing deterioration in Libya since 2011. Returning to the six World Bank indicators discussed earlier, it is evident that, with the exception of the "Voice and Accountability" indicator, which has slightly improved from 6.57% to just over 10%, all other indicators have declined. The percentile rank for "Political Stability and Absence of Violence" now stands at 2.36%, a sharp drop from 11.85% in 2011. "Government Effectiveness" has decreased to 3.37%, from 15.17% in 2011, while both "Regulatory Quality" and "Rule of Law" have declined to 2.88%, down from 6.16% and 14.08%, respectively. Additionally, "Control of Corruption" has fallen to 3.85%, compared to 7.58% in 2011. Thus, it can be concluded that five out of the six indicators have continued to deteriorate, reaching near the bottom of the global rankings. While this does not signify an absolute absence of governance, it highlights the profound severity of the situation Libya faces.

To gain a clearer understanding of the circumstances, we can further elaborate on the following statements:

- *There are certain political, economic, social, cultural, and military figures who have a firm grip on entire cities and regions with a strong security presence. Many wishes for this chaos to persist. The legislative authorities, lacking legitimacy, seek to maintain power for personal and familial gains, with no interest in forming a sovereign state. Instead, many of these individuals are executing the agendas of foreign powers, and most of them are financially corrupt and have been controlled through unethical means. The path to establishing stable authority involves removing those currently in the forefront and conducting free elections to rid themselves of the remnants of the past. Additionally, there is a sense among the people that their political immaturity was exploited, and they now aim to correct past mistakes and start anew. In general, the population desires to rid itself of those currently in power and conduct fair elections. As for external intervention, another problem may lessen when the current players exit the scene. Political parties, in general, lack experience and are largely supported by foreign actors implementing their agendas (Respondent 19).*
- *Libya has not known independent parties or organizations, whether local or international, and there has been no political or electoral activity by parties since Libya's independence in 1952. All parties currently in existence were founded after 2011 and lack a popular base capable of mobilizing the masses and exerting influence on the streets (Respondent 22).*

Nevertheless, Libya is not an exception (Tsegaw, 2020). Extensive research, statistical data, and scholarly publications indicate that countries in crisis consistently record low scores in governance indicators and the Human Development Index (Acemoglu et al., 2019). In this context, Zagoub (2019b) argues that political and security instability remains the primary obstacle to governance stability in Libya. This instability has profound repercussions on economic and social indicators, including rising corruption, challenges in combating it, weak accountability mechanisms, and entrenched bureaucracy. These factors significantly hinder the transition to effective governance, necessitating fundamental reforms in a context where no resolution to the crisis appears imminent in the short or medium term.

9.4 The Path to Salvation

Despite the challenging circumstances outlined above, some analysts and observers maintain that there is still hope for improvement and the achievement of stability, which is viewed as a necessary step toward better governance. This hope is contingent on the permanent cessation of conflict and the eradication of its manifestations in Libya. However, others argue that achieving high scores in governance indicators requires more than just the resolution of conflicts. While conflict resolution is necessary, it is seen as insufficient on its own. Indeed, many Arab countries, despite the absence of conflict and war, continue to score poorly on global governance indicators, with exceptions such as Qatar, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates, which exhibit positive rates (Farah et al., 2021).

9.4.1 Civil Society in Libya: A Complex Perspective

In weak states, civil society can either compensate for or exacerbate state fragility. This section examines this dual role in the context of Libya. While an exhaustive exploration of civil society and its various dimensions exceeds the scope of this research, it is important to briefly touch on certain key concepts, particularly those addressed in both academic and practical discussions. Broadly speaking, civil society refers to a collection of organizations and individuals who collaborate toward shared goals, often in pursuit of democratic ideals. In this view, civil society is considered a distinct realm within society, operating independently of the state. It is characterized by organized social groups and associations where individuals come together to advance common interests, express viewpoints, and engage in collective actions.

Building on this understanding, Yom (2005) points out that there is no consensus on the exact definition of civil society in the Arab context. He challenges the assumption that a strong civil society can bring about democratic change in Arab nations, arguing that it cannot be seen as a cure for despotism in the region. Yom further critiques the notion of civil society organizations in Arab countries, highlighting that the absence of individual freedoms and autonomy, particularly in societies dominated by traditional structures such as clans and tribes, makes the establishment of a true civil society particularly difficult (Bishara, 1996).

In developing countries, civil society organizations are often regarded as key components of development policies, used to advance progress (Hulme et al., 1997). These organizations are generally perceived as simpler and more transparent than governmental entities, with stronger connections to the public and a better ability to address development needs (Lewis, 2014; Edwards, 2014; Howell and Pearce, 2001). However, these organizations have faced significant criticism. At times, they have been accused of "losing their roots by becoming more aligned with governments and donors than with their members, supporters, and those they aim to serve.

Furthermore, their growing dependence on aid has raised concerns (Hulme et al., 1997; Atia & Herrold, 2018). Some critics argue that these organizations have become "ideological weapons" used to promote neoliberalism, which is viewed as a form of new cultural and economic colonization (Ismail & Kamat, 2018; Choudry & Kapoor, 2013). As a result, aid-dependent civil society organizations may be seen as instruments of governance, used by donors to further their own agendas and exert influence.

Numerous researchers have examined the substantial funding and aid provided by Western countries to assist Libya in addressing its ongoing crisis, particularly in the context of the Libyan Political Agreement and the support for the Government of National Unity. For instance, Madeline Gammari (2023) highlights that Western nations, especially the European Union, have contributed significant funds for humanitarian support and development in Libya. Gammari notes that 23 projects, totaling $70 million, have been implemented to improve governance, health, civil society, and overall development. However, some studies and statistics suggest that a large portion of this funding is actually directed toward addressing emergency situations and Europe's security concerns regarding migrants and refugees. Much of this funding aligns with the European Neighborhood Policy for 2019. As a result, Libyans have varied opinions on the funding and its impact, with some viewing the role of civil society organizations positively, while others perceive them as causing more harm than good, seeing these so-called non-governmental organizations as tools of soft power, operating in line with foreign agendas.

Based on the two field studies conducted for this research, it appears that the majority of individuals who value the role of civil society in Libya are those directly involved in it or engaged in its projects and activities. Despite being a minority, there is a faction that strongly believes in the crucial role of civil society and non-governmental organizations in helping Libya overcome its current political and security challenges. For example, an activist who has been working for years with a well-known international organization underscores the following:

- *"Since 2011, the role of civil society organizations and non-governmental organizations has become highly effective, filling the void left by the weakness of state institutions at various humanitarian and social levels. They supported elections, formulated policies, conducted studies and research related to public policy, especially organizations that managed to establish sustainable mechanisms. Many of them worked as watchdogs over state institutions and issued reports that monitored their performance in support of the reform process, as is the case in democratic countries. Today, in light of the political vacuum and the lack of consensus, we can sense a return to policies and practices followed by the previous regime, which negatively affects the work of these organizations, both in terms of procedures and security, as many of them are harassed by security forces and internal security." (Respondent 24)*

Below are some statements from the second group that have a completely different perspective:

- *"The civil society in Libya is divided into two categories. The first relies on foreign aid and agendas, and this category further tears the social fabric apart because it executes foreign agendas in the name of civil society. As for the second category, it is powerless against political manipulators and armed groups who manipulate them as they wish, sometimes through defamation and other times through subjugation, and they are innocent victims of this. Therefore, these organizations are also incapable of shaping the political landscape today." (Respondent 16)*
- *"The main problem in Libya now is foreign intervention and the diversity of these parties and their different aspirations. Civil society organizations are penetrated, and every faction in Libya executes foreign countries' plans, and most of them are financially corrupt and have been controlled by unethical means. The role of civil society is a marginalized and incapable one that cannot bring about any change, in addition to being subordinated to unknown entities." (Respondent 14).*

Furthermore, activists are often portrayed as organizations promoting a Christian movement that threatens the country's identity and social values. External interventions, regional polarization, and the lack of a cohesive international agenda for rebuilding the country have legitimized this narrative among various local communities. However, there is a middle ground, with some individuals believing that not all civil society organizations are inherently harmful, but they should not be fully trusted. This group acknowledges the potential benefits of civil society, provided it operates under certain conditions and aligns with the best interests of the Libyan people. Two viewpoints emerge: the first argues that it is very difficult for civil society to be effective and provides reasons for this, while the second believes that civil society and NGOs have room for intervention and significant potential for success:

- *Unfortunately, the role of civil society in Libya is very weak due to various reasons.*
  - *Lack of a profound culture in the work and role of some of these institutions, causing them to deviate from their primary purpose.*
  - *Weakness of institutions due to the absence of precise and well-regulated laws that define their roles in society and the state.*
  - *Dominance of armed individuals over state institutions, including civil society institutions, which significantly hampers their effectiveness.*
  - *Utilization of some of these institutions by certain individuals for personal gain.*
  - *Foreign penetration of some of these institutions.*

However, some of these institutions have shown signs of maturation in comparison to their early history, and a few have played a commendable role. Nonetheless, their numbers are limited (Respondent 15).

- *Civil society and non-governmental organizations are always seen as vital actors in the democratic process, and they can play a significant role in state building.*

However, the current circumstances in Libya still pose substantial challenges to the role of these organizations. On one hand, non-governmental organizations are relatively new in Libyan society, and they face many difficulties in their work. These include issues related to legislation and laws governing their operations, security disturbances, political instability, and a lack of robust infrastructure for support and sustainable development. Additionally, these organizations encounter difficulties in reaching the public and delivering their messages, owing to the general chaos in their establishment and scope of work. Nonetheless, non-governmental organizations can help in constructing the public sphere and improving the general situation in Libya by enhancing societal awareness, strengthening local capacities, promoting local governance, and advocating for human rights. Moreover, Libyan civil society can play a crucial role in rebuilding the state by acting as a collective force to pressure the government to effect change and reform the current system. It is also possible to engage non-governmental organizations in electoral processes, enhancing democratic processes and supporting democratic transition in Libya (Respondent 12).

It is important to note that some interviewees highlighted the crucial role of political culture for all stakeholders involved. Many parties, whether in government or legislative positions, perceive civil society organizations as adversaries, leading to a lack of trust, cooperation, and friendly relations between the government and these institutions. This gap is significant, as civil society organizations could play a vital role in the political process by pressuring governments and legislative bodies to meet the desires and aspirations of the people.

However, a closer examination of the situation reveals that Libya hosts three major international organizations focused on peacebuilding and facilitating the transition to a secure and stable environment: the European Union, the United Nations, and NATO. Despite their presence, it is evident that they have not made a positive impact on the situation. NATO, for example, has been unable to actively contribute to the reform of Libya's security sector, remaining on the sidelines due to the conflicting interests of various member states (such as France, Italy, and Turkey) during the post-revolution period following February 2011. Many observers and researchers argue that international intervention in Libya, contrary to popular belief, has actually undermined efforts toward peace, security, and stability since 2011 (Dessì & Greco, 2018).

According to various reports, the European Union considers Libya's security and stability essential to its own economic and political interests. Consequently, the EU's approach to the Libyan crisis is largely shaped by two key concerns: migration and the expansion of political Islam. Studies indicate that since 2011, foreign actors—including EU member states, Gulf countries, Turkey, and Russia—have adopted divergent political strategies, offering varying degrees of support to Libya's political factions and competing security militias. These external powers are often perceived as pursuing conflicting agendas, with some analysts arguing that, despite their rhetorical commitments to peace, all involved parties ultimately benefit from the ongoing instability.

A notable example supporting this claim is a statement made in July 2019 by Ghassan Salamé, then Special Representative of the Secretary-General and Head of the United Nations Support Mission in Libya. He asserted that “Libyans are now fighting more than in any other wars, seemingly content to fight until the last Libyan and see the country completely destroyed to settle their private scores.” While his remark underscores the severity of the conflict, it has also been met with criticism. Many Libyans have accused Salamé of lacking neutrality and exacerbating the crisis rather than facilitating its resolution. Some factions have even alleged that his actions align with the interests of Khalifa Haftar and his international backers, notably France.

In conclusion, despite the harsh criticism voiced by some interviewees regarding the activities of civil society organizations, particularly those linked to international bodies, others offer more constructive criticism of their role. Supporters of these organizations argue that their critics either fail to recognize or choose not to focus on the priorities that truly matter to the Libyan people. Some interviewees suggest that these organizations focus on issues perceived as secondary or trivial, such as “gender rights and the rights of minorities.” This skepticism toward civil society aligns with Migdal’s (1988) concept of the “strong society, weak state” dynamic, where fragmented social forces hinder the consolidation of the state.

9.4.2 Future Scenarios

Predicting future scenarios remains a challenging task; as highlighted throughout this presentation, external factors are numerous, complex, and interconnected. Therefore, based on our ongoing monitoring of the Libyan situation, the regional context, and the two studies conducted within the scope of this research, we will outline two potential scenarios. The first scenario, while not the most favorable, is considered more probable. The second scenario, though optimistic, is less likely.

The Most Likely Scenario

Given the developments in several neighboring countries and the mismanagement of the Arab Spring’s resources, it seems unlikely that the conflicting parties in Libya will relinquish their ambitions, interests, and factional goals. Many observers argue that it is highly improbable that armed militias or individuals, in general, will lay down their weapons and work towards a unified, inclusive Libya for all Libyans. After the failure of the December 2021 elections, an opportunity that could have marked a decisive step in transitioning Libya from pre-revolutionary authoritarian rule and post-revolutionary political division to a stable and secure state, it has become extremely difficult for Libyan elites to even find a minimal common ground. This challenge ensures the continuation of a past filled with deep wounds, unresolved desires, and, in some cases, calls for retribution and revenge.

The disagreements in Libya are both deep and multifaceted. Beyond the absence of a legal framework and an election plan, there is no consensus among Libyans on the form of governance, whether it should be parliamentary or presidential. Additionally, there are varying opinions on whether a government should be established first and then the constitution addressed, or whether the constitution should be drafted and approved before forming a government. These issues represent significant obstacles to progress towards a solution. As long as there is no unified government, no cohesive army, and no functioning central bank, the concept of a meaningful state in Libya remains absent. One of the interviewees highlighted this, stating:

- *"Of course! Yes, there is a significant possibility to overcome the crisis if there is only the will! The mechanisms are there, the tools are there, and most importantly, it is the money. As long as there is a minimum level of oil production, we have the money. In Libya, the missing element is political will. We do not need financing, we do not need housing, and we do not need salaries, state commitments, or government spending. Oil revenues are sufficient for us." (Respondent 2).*
- *Now, I believe that establishing stable authority and founding a state on permanent foundations is a difficult task for many reasons, primarily due to the lack of political stability. Political culture is considered relatively new in Libya, as it is a rentier state built entirely on oil revenues. People rely on the government for employment. In Libya, political party culture, political activism, civil society, and working outside the state framework are all weak. As you are aware, there is political division with the House of Representatives in the east, the General National Congress in the west, an eastern government, a western government, and the central bank reached a point of division… meaning the state is divided. (Respondent 10).*

In Libya, there is currently no effective central government. While the "state" is present through its official institutions in many regions, it needs to extend its authority and legitimacy across the entire country. Achieving this requires reducing the significant influence of various entities and individuals, such as tribal leaders, military councils, and militias, or improving cooperation with them. Notably, these groups and individuals have earned the support and trust of many Libyans because they provide the security that successive government regimes have failed to deliver.

As one of the interviewees candidly acknowledged, *"On a personal level, most people, especially young people with specific aspirations, tell you to join a powerful military alliance or a specific militia or form a particular group to achieve what I want. Thus, the culture of parties and institutional and civil work without any security force doesn't help at all." (Respondent 27).*

To successfully assert government authority, some believe that international assistance is necessary, but it must come with the understanding of what Libyans truly want. This understanding can only be achieved by listening to Libyans and implementing policies that align with their culture and nature, rather than imposing foreign agendas and preconceived notions.

In simple terms, civil society does not always act as a catalyst for democracy, as various studies have shown, with political, cultural, and external factors often playing a significant role. Abdalla (2011) even suggested that donors funding civil society organizations might inadvertently support entities that contribute to the government's survival strategy. He also acknowledges the dilemma surrounding Islamic non-governmental organizations, which are often more effective but are excluded from external funding.

Furthermore, although Boose (2012a) concluded that a strong civil society is a prerequisite for successful democracy, its absence represents a significant obstacle to democratic consolidation in countries like Libya. His analysis primarily drew upon the Tunisian case, where he confidently predicted the success of democracy based on the presence of an active civil society. Selmi (2024) further strengthens this argument, showing that Tunisia's democratization efforts required a careful balance between political reforms and economic development, a balance that remains critically relevant to Libya, where the lack of economic stability continues to hinder state-building efforts. However, subsequent events have demonstrated that Tunisia's democratic trajectory has faltered. The civil society that many believed would serve as a pillar for protecting democracy quickly weakened and retreated from the political landscape following President Kais Saied's coup on July 25, 2021, which severely undermined democracy, constitutional legitimacy, and state institutions.

The expectations of many observers regarding the situation in the Arab Spring countries, as well as the assessments of several interviewees within this research, do not align with the prevailing view of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) over the past four decades. While it is true that some experiences—particularly in countries far removed from the Arab context—have shown that civil society organizations can be more effective and efficient than government entities, offering cost-effective solutions, innovation, and a more significant impact on local communities (Bebbington, 1997; Hulme et al., 1997), the situation in developing countries is more complex. Donor assistance, which has traditionally been directed toward governments, has shifted toward non-governmental organizations in many development efforts (AbouAssi & Trent, 2016; Fowler, 1991).

However, the reality has shown that many organizations fail to fulfill their intended roles, facing severe criticism regarding their governance. It is not uncommon for individuals within civil society organizations to pursue personal gain by forging questionable relationships with external stakeholders, whether formal or informal. While donor organizations are not the sole cause of this, their dealings can exacerbate such behavior, especially when mechanisms for oversight and accountability are lacking, leaving internal governance processes weak (Selmi & Alawami, 2025).

Ultimately, while we may not be as pessimistic as van Genugten (2011), who expressed concerns that Libya could end up like Somalia due to the disunity of anti-Gaddafi factions, the lack of clear leadership, and ongoing conflicts, it is clear that Libya's transition to a democratic state will be lengthy and extraordinarily challenging.

The Desired Scenario and its Challenging Conditions

According to Fukuyama (2004), our findings reinforce the argument that without a preexisting bureaucratic framework, state-building efforts are significantly hindered. In contrast to the first, more pessimistic scenario, some argue that it is still possible for Libya to emerge from its current predicament, provided there is the necessary political will. Proponents of this view believe that constructing a new state on solid foundations is preferable to trying to rebuild a corrupt and decayed system. The existence of the so-called "deep state or administrative bureaucracy in many Arab Spring countries, and its role in obstructing efforts for change, bolsters this argument. The situations in Egypt and Tunisia further demonstrate that reform, in some cases, can be more difficult than constructing something new. Supporting this perspective, one young Libyan states, "*Yes, challenges and difficulties exist, but we can say that Libya is still a blank slate. Meaning, it is possible to establish it from scratch, and this is an advantage that distinguishes it from most countries in the region. When there is already a prevailing system, it is difficult to break away from it. But when there is no system at all, you can at least establish it in some sectors, I am not saying all sectors. This is a real opportunity for a country like Libya…*".

One of the interviewees, who is well-versed in both Tunisia and Libya's situations, offers a compelling example. He suggests that the administrative and financial reform of the Port of Tripoli in Libya would be easier than reforming the Port of Rades in the Tunisian capital. Despite numerous attempts by successive governments, the Port of Rades has remained resistant to change due to corruption that is protected by powerful unions.

It is worth noting that many interviewees remain optimistic about the possibility of reform and a swift exit from the current situation. Below are some of their statements:

- *Respondent 4: "Concerning the state and reconstruction: "Reconstruction is possible provided that the social fabric of Libya is not tampered with, and that armed factions are not involved in political life, especially those who have dominated the political scene… All parties must be involved, both in the east and west, and south, with a need for the participation of the 'Septemberists' and the 'Februaryists,' the 'Dignity' movement, and several parties. There must be a transparent and fair electoral law under broad international supervision."*
- *Respondent 15: "Regarding the solution in restoring the state: "The ultimate solution is for all political stakeholders and influencers to sit at the dialogue table, away from foreign interventions. The United Nations mission should be present as a witness to what emerges from this dialogue and support it without intervening… Finally, it should accompany and provide the tools and resources for its success."*
- *(Respondent 29): "The political environment needs to be prepared, and we should move away from this division. Everyone is currently striving for power, and everyone is seeking influence in one way or another."*

- *Respondent 13: "There must be a consensual framework among all influential factions, encompassing essential consensual points (in a concise form without complexity) to initiate a confidence-building process, representing a future vision for the Libyan state, and serving as a basis for reforms in various sectors. Elections should be held for the legislative body with the goal of issuing reform legislation in line with the consensual points included in the constitution, similar to the experiences in some other countries. Reformative laws and legislations are critical in supporting stability and building effective institutions, alongside community-based consultative processes to ensure the establishment of mechanisms for transitional justice, addressing societal grievances with the aim of promoting stability and preventing violence or disputes by some groups."*
- *Respondent 12: "Rebuilding the public sphere in Libya requires significant effort and comprehensive cooperation among various concerned parties, including the government, political parties, human rights organizations, and international organizations. Achieving this remains possible, despite the absence of a political and organizational culture after decades of individual rule followed by years of war and chaos."*

To summarize the consensus of those who believe in the possibility of overcoming the current situation, the following steps are considered essential:

- *Agreement on a Constitutional and Legal Framework*: All relevant parties must come to a consensus on a permanent constitution that will define the structure of government and other institutions. This framework should be developed with the participation of all stakeholders.
- *Strengthening Dialogue and Communication*: It is crucial to enhance dialogue between all parties. Civil society and human rights organizations should play a role in fostering communication and building trust among the government, political parties, and armed groups.
- *Enhancing Transparency and Combating Corruption*: The government should take proactive measures to promote transparency and combat corruption. Civil society and media organizations can support these efforts by holding institutions accountable.
- *Strengthening the Economy and Providing Employment*: The government should create conditions that promote economic growth, including investing in infrastructure and encouraging foreign investments. Sustainable job opportunities should be created to improve the livelihood of Libyan citizens.

Although the road ahead is long and challenging, elections remain the most viable path for Libya to break free from years of conflict and poor governance. They are crucial for restoring legitimacy and establishing a consensus government that can stabilize state institutions. Once elections are held, a new parliamentary council can begin finalizing the constitution, a top priority. While having a constitution is essential, it alone does not guarantee the creation of strong state institutions. Tunisia's experience in building a democratic system offers valuable lessons, particularly in how effective governance relies on adaptive policymaking. This approach could be vital for Libya, where fragmented institutions require dynamic responses to evolving political and economic challenges.

The possibility of success depends on two key conditions. First, foreign powers must prioritize the Libyan issue, ensuring it is actively addressed in negotiations. Second, these powers must work to convince both regional and international stakeholders, as well as Libyan parties, of the necessity of holding elections and accepting their results. If these conditions are met, the path to a stable and democratic Libya becomes more achievable.

9.5 Conclusion

The prevailing political and security conditions in Libya pose a significant barrier to achieving progress in effective governance. A lack of awareness regarding governance principles, coupled with an absence of a culture that prioritizes transparency and accountability, has negatively impacted various aspects of life, especially the economy (Zogbi, 2020). Some observers argue that this situation aligns with the interests of influential foreign powers, as the ongoing conflicts and divisions, along with the continuous extraction of oil, primarily serve international and regional corporations, as well as a few Libyans linked to external power centers. As Selmi (2025) asserts, Libya's post-revolution governance crisis is deeply rooted in the absence of institutional continuity and civil society's struggle to assert its role in policymaking, highlighting the need for both top-down reforms and grassroots political involvement in the state-building process.

The situation in Libya remains highly complex, with an unclear sense of unity among Libyans, as sectarian, tribal, and regional allegiances may supersede national identification. The challenges impeding Libya's reconstruction are further compounded by the heavy legacy of past crimes and suffering. The issue of transitional justice remains largely unresolved, continuing to fuel discord, similar to the struggles faced by other African nations that have experienced severe human rights violations and atrocities (Brankovic & van der Merwe, 2018).

There is ongoing skepticism regarding Libya's ability to build a robust state capable of effectively governing domestic affairs and upholding rights and freedoms within the framework of good governance. This raises the critical question: Is foreign intervention in Libyan affairs an unavoidable necessity? Should external involvement come through non-governmental organizations as an indirect approach, or is intervention by governments, regional bodies, or international actors an inevitable reality to restore order? Some argue that these concerns may be a façade designed to sustain the new global system envisioned at the start of this century.

In the aftermath of Gaddafi's tumultuous rule, expectations for a unified national identity and immediate government effectiveness are understandably low, as Anderson (2011) notes. However, despite the prevailing insecurity and political divisions, there is unanimous recognition of the activity and impact of civil society organizations since the early stages of the Libyan uprising. Although these organizations face significant challenges and threats, they have remained engaged, even if their efforts have not fully addressed security concerns or resolved major issues. In line with Perroux (2015), we emphasize the gradual and positive impact that civil society organizations and initiatives can bring at the individual and community levels.

Future research should further explore the intricate dynamics of civil society organizations in Libya, with a particular focus on their contributions, challenges, and evolving roles in post-conflict governance. Examining the strategies these organizations use to navigate the political landscape and address pressing societal issues could provide valuable insights into their adaptability and resilience. Moreover, investigating the perceptions and experiences of individuals directly engaged with or affected by civil society initiatives would offer a more nuanced understanding of their grassroots impact. Employing qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews, focus groups, and participant observations could enhance this analysis by capturing the complexities of their interactions and influence within the broader governance framework.

Furthermore, analyzing the evolving role of external actors—such as international organizations and foreign governments—in shaping Libya's civil society is essential. Investigating the impact of foreign interventions, whether through financial aid, capacity-building programs, or political engagement, would shed light on the broader geopolitical dimensions of governance in the region. Additionally, a longitudinal study tracking the development of civil society organizations over time could offer valuable insights into their trajectory, adaptive strategies, and shifting roles within Libya's governance framework. Such an approach would provide a deeper understanding of how these organizations navigate ongoing challenges and contribute to state-building efforts.

Appendix: Statement of Study Interviews

Number	Interviewee data (initials and affiliation)	Interview method	Notes
1	A-C: A businessman and political figure, running as a candidate in the presidential elections.	Face to face	
2	S-H: A businessman in the construction sector.	Remotely	
3	R-G: A regional official.	Remotely	
4	J-S: Director at the Libyan investment council.	Face to face	
5	Mahdi Warhami: Former minister.	Remotely	
6	T-H: Official at the Ministry of Higher Education.	Remotely	
7	R-C: Official responsible for foreign affairs in one of the ministries.	Remotely	
8	A-B: Cultural attaché at one of Libya's embassies abroad.	Remotely	Libyan diplomat abroad

Number	Interviewee data (initials and affiliation)	Interview method	Notes
9	M-F: President of the largest private university in Libya.	Face to face	
10	W-J: Businessman in the consulting sector.	Remotely	
11	K-A: Libyan diplomat.	Remotely	Libyan diplomat abroad
12	S-A: Former general manager and current diplomat.	Face to face	Libyan diplomat abroad
13	I-B: Activist in civil society, working with an international non-governmental organization.	Remotely	
14	M-G: Academic and scholar.	Face to face	
15	A-S: Politician and economist.	Face to face	
16	A-D: Businessman and activist in civil society.	Face to face	
17	N-A: Journalist and politician.	Face to face	
18	N-J: Businessman.	Remotely	
19	M-F: Former minister.	Remotely	
20	A-S: Executive at the World Bank.	Face to face	
21	T-G: Diplomat.	Face to face	Foreigner in Libya
22	A-B: Academic and civil society activist.	Face to face	
23	J-T: Academic and scholar.	Face to face	
24	E-A: Executive at an international non-governmental organization.	Face to face	Foreigner in Libya
25	R-B: Former Tunisian ambassador to Libya.	Remotely	Foreigner
26	M-L: Professor academic researcher.	Face to face	Libyan, residing abroad
27	M-D: Academic researcher. Specialization in conflicts and humanitarian work.	Face to face	Libyan, residing abroad
28	A-A: Academic researcher. Specialization in conflicts and humanitarian work.	Face to face	Libyan, residing abroad
29	M-A: IT engineer	Face to face	Libyan, residing abroad

References

Abdalla, N. H. (2011). *Civil society in Egypt: A catalyst for democratization. International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL).* https://www.icnl.org/wp-content/uploads/Egypt_Civil-Society-in-Egypt.pdf

AbouAssi, K., & Trent, D. L. (2016). NGO accountability from an NGO perspective: Perceptions, strategies, and practices. *Public Administration and Development, 36*(4), 283–296.

Aboueldahab, N. (2018). Navigating the storm: Civil society and ambiguous transitions in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia. In J. Brankovic & H. van der Merwe (Eds.), *Advocating transitional justice in Africa: The role of civil society* (pp. 183–204). Springer.

Acemoglu, D., Naidu, S., Restrepo, P., & Robinson, J. A. (2019). Democracy does cause growth. *Journal of Political Economy, 127*(1).

Acemoglu, D., & Robinson, J. A. (2012). *Why nations fail: The origins of power, prosperity, and poverty*. Crown Publishers.

Anderson, L. (2011). Demystifying the Arab spring: Parsing the differences between Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. *Foreign Affairs, 90*, 2.

Atia, M., & Herrold, C. E. (2018). Governing through patronage: The rise of NGOs and the fall of civil society in Palestine and Morocco. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations, 29*, 1044–1054.

Bebbington, A. (1997). New states, new NGOs? Crises and transitions among rural development NGOs in the Andean region. World Development, 25(12), 1755–1765.

Bishara, D. (1996). Civil society and democratization in the Arab world: The role of NGOs. *Journal of Democracy, 7*(2), 30–42.

Boose, J. W. (2012a, July). Democratization and civil society: Libya, Tunisia and the Arab spring. *International Journal of Social Science and Humanity, 2*(4).

Boose, J. W. (2012b). Governance in post-Gaddafi Libya: Challenges and prospects. *Middle East Policy, 19*(1), 86–97.

Brankovic, J., & van der Merwe, H. (2018). *Advocating transitional justice in Africa: The role of civil society*. Springer Series in Transitional Justice. ISBN 978–3–319-70415-9 ISBN 978–3–319-70417-3 (eBook).

Bruce St John, R. (2011). *Libya: Cracks in Qaddafi foundation*. Report.

Capasso, M., Czerep, J., Dessì, A., & Ga, S. (2020). *Libya: A country report, EU-LISTCO project, Europe's external action and the Dual challenges of limited statehood and contested order*.

Chivvis, C. S., & Martini, J. (2014). *Libya after Qaddafi lessons and implications for the future*. Rand Corporation.

Choudry, A., & Kapoor, D. (Eds.). (2013). NGOization: Complicity, Contradictions and Prospects. London, UK: Zed Books.

Clément, F., & Salah, A. (2014). Post-uprising Libyan associations and democracy building in urban Libya. *Built Environment, 40*(1), 118–127.

De Groof, E. (2019). *The features of transitional governance today* (1st Ed.).

Dessì, A., & Greco, E. (Eds.). (2018). *The search for stability in Libya. OSCE'S role between internal obstacles and external challenges - IAI research studies*. Istituto Affari Internazionali.

Dodge, T. (2010). The ideological roots of failure: The application of kinetic neo-liberalism; to Iraq. *International Affairs, 86*(6), 1269–1286.

Edwards, M. (2014). Civil Society (3rd ed.). Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

El Kamouni-Janssen, F., Shadeedi, H., & Ezzeddine, N. (2018). *Local security governance in Libya perceptions of security and protection in a fragmented country*, CRU-Report October 2018. Netherlands Institute of International Relations 'Clingendael'.

Elayah, M. A., & Lambert, L. A. (2023). *Conflict and post-conflict governance in the Middle East and Africa*. Palgrave Macmillan.

European Commission. (2024, October 2). Libya — European Commission: Civil Protection & Humanitarian Aid. Retrieved from https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/where/middle-east-and-northernafrica/libya_en

Farah, et al. (2021). Corporate governance in the Middle East and North Africa: A systematic review of current trends and opportunities for future research. *Corporate Governance International Review, 29*, 630–660.

Fowler, A. (1991). The role of NGOs in changing state–society relations: Perspectives from Eastern and Southern Africa. Development Policy Review, 9(1), 53–84. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7679.1991.tb00175.x

Fukuyama, F. (2004). *State-building: Governance and world order in the 21st century*. Cornell University Press.

Gisselquist, R. M. (2012). Good governance as a concept, and why this matters for development policy (No. 2012/30). WIDER Working Paper.

Ismail, F., & Kamat, S. (2018). NGOs, social movements and the neoliberal state: Incorporation, reinvention, critique. Critical Sociology, 44(4–5), 569–577. https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920517749804

Howell, J., & Pearce, J. (2001). Civil Society & Development: A Critical Exploration. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
Hulme, D., & Edwards, M. (Eds.). (1997). Too Close for Comfort: NGOs, the State and Donors. London, UK: St. Martin's Press / Macmillan.
Joffe, G. (2010). *Sif Al-Islam: The whole Libyan world in his hand*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/24686
Lamont, C. K. (2016). Contested governance: Understanding justice interventions in post-Qadhafi Libya. *Journal of Intervention and State building, 10*(3), 382–399. https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2016.1199479
Larbsh, M. M. (2020). *An evaluation of corporate governance practice in Libya: Stakeholders' perspectives*. Thesis, Published by ProQuest LLC.
Lewis, D. (2014). Non-Governmental Organizations, Management, and Development (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.
Migdal, J. S. (1988). *Strong societies and weak states: State-society relations and state capabilities in the third world*. Princeton University Press.
Molnár, A., Szászi, I., & Takács, L. (2021). Security sector reform by intergovernmental organizations in Libya. *International Journal of Euro-Mediterranean, 14*(1), 7–48.
Perroux, J. L. R. (2015). *Libya's untold story: Civil society amid chaos*. Middle East brief, Crown Center for Middle East studies, Brandeis University.
Raineri, L. (2019). Security and informality in Libya: Militarisation without military? *Conflict, Security and Development, 19*(6), 583–602.
Ronald, B. J. (2011). *Libya: Cracks in the Qadhafi Foundation*. https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/42319
Rotberg, R. I. (Ed.). (2004). State failure and state weakness in a time of terror. Rowman & Littlefield.
Selmi, N. (2024). Democratization in Tunisia: Negotiating the interplay of policy and economic development. *International Journal of Euro-Mediterranean Studies, 17*(2), 259–282.
Selmi, N. (2025). Libya in transition: Governance challenges and civil society's prospects in political and economic reforms. *Global Security: Health, Science and Policy, 10*(1). https://doi.org/10.1080/23779497.2025.2449614
Selmi, N., & Alawami, H. (2025). Rethinking Tunisian tourism policies: Challenges and pathways to governance and sustainable mainstreaming. In *Tourism governance approaches for facing the new challenges of the tourism industry in the Mediterranean region* (Vol. 4, pp. 73–100). Mc Graw Hill.
Tilly, C. (1985). War making and state making as organized crime. In P. Evans, D. Rueschemeyer, & T. Skocpol (Eds.), *Bringing the state back in* (pp. 169–191). Cambridge University Press.
Tsegaw, P. C. (2020). The nexus between good governance indicators and human development index in Africa: An econometric analysis. *Journal of Public Administration and Governance, 10*(2), 1.
van Genugten, S. (2011). Libya after Gadhafi. *Survival, 53*(3), 61–74.
World Bank web site: https://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/Home/Reports.
Wehrey, F. (2017). *Insecurity and governance challenges in southern Libya*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
Yom, S. (2005). Civil society and democratization in the Arab world. *Middle East Review of International Affairs, 9*(4), 4.
Zagoub, A. (2019a). An overview of the corporate governance framework in Libya. *Corporate Ownership and Control, 17*(1, Autumn), 95.
Zagoub, A. (2019b). Political and security instability in Libya: Implications for governance. *Journal of North African Studies, 24*(2), 156–176.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

Chapter 10
Civil Society Organizations and Peacebuilding in Libya: Reality and Challenges

Faouzia Zeraoulia

Abstract Civil society organizations (CSOs) in Arab countries play a pivotal role in the peacebuilding process by fostering dialogue, promoting reconciliation, and addressing the root causes of conflict. In societies fractured by political instability, sectarian divisions, and extremist violence, CSOs create safe spaces for community engagement and mediation between opposing groups. They work together to rebuild trust, advocate for inclusive policies, and support transitional justice initiatives that acknowledge past grievances and promote social cohesion. Recently, growing academic attention has been paid to examining and analyzing this role, particularly in conflict zones and transitional contexts such as Yemen, Iraq, and Tunisia. However, additional studies are required for a better understanding of that role. This chapter scrutinizes the CSOs in Libya and their efforts to cope with authoritarianism and to address victimized groups' concerns. It explores how they address the legacies of authoritarianism, advocate for human rights, and promote transitional justice. By highlighting the complexities of civil society engagement in the country, the chapter identifies key achievements and explores the main challenges they face.

Keywords Civil war · Documentation · Civil society · Libya

10.1 Introduction

Libya, a country suffering from an unstable transition, has been a subject of debate by scholars and policymakers. The country is polarized between armed actors that have monopolized the country's resources, while political actors have failed to constitute a government of national unity. Since the early stages of the uprising, the competing armed groups succeeded in maintaining their grip over state resources

F. Zeraoulia (✉)
Department of Political Science, African Dynamics (DYNAF), University of Jijel, Algeria, Jijel
e-mail: zeraoulia-faouzia@univ-jijel.dz

© The Author(s) 2026

M. Elayah (ed.), *Governance without Government in the MENA Region*, Nonprofit and Civil Society Studies,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-03953-8_10

(Lacher, 2021; Ntaka & Csicsmann, 2021; Raineri, 2019; Rizk, 2021). These armed fragmentation and security atomization have not been only justified by the lack of political consensus and regional interference but also by the Qaddafi regime policies established to marginalize the army and to prevent a state coup against his reign (Droz-Vincent, 2020; Gaub, 2019). Those dispersed military actors have deeply affected the political and security situation of the country as they embedded themselves into political life and the national fabric through tribal linkages and social services networking (Abouzzohour & Yousef, 2023).

Beside the absence of unified security structures, regional and international intervention, spread of extremism, the emergence of a complex war economy, and tribal disputes which are deeply linked to political alliances have hindered all attempts of political unity. A whole range of decrees and laws that have been issued since 2012 failed to reach a political consensus on how to organize the presidential elections. The country is divided between the Tripoli-based Government of National Unity (GNU) and the Government of National Stability (GNS) based in the east. Political talks facilitated by the United Nations Mission to Libya (UNSMIL) failed to produce presidential and legislative elections that were planned in December 2021, and Abdul Hamid Dbeibeh, the president of GNU, refused to hand over the power. In response, in January 2022, the House of Representatives (HoR), based in the east, appointed Fathi Bashagha, who allied with Khalifa Hiftar from the Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF), as the prime minister of the newly formed government, the GNS. Today, it is presided by Osama Hamad, but the political impasse continues and the country suffers a fragile stability. Recently, the UNSMIL formed an Advisory Committee that will provide recommendations for resolving the contentious issues that have prevented the organization of national elections. However, the prospects of unification are very modest according to Rosemary Dicarlo statements, the head of UN Political and Peacebuilding Affairs. On 19 February 2025, she affirmed in the UN Security Council that Libya has faced a deep political crisis that hinders all attempts for political unification and called for international support for a peaceful transition.

The LAAF, or what is known as the Libyan National Army, has captured the resources of the eastern part and extended its control to the southern part of the country. The management of the Derna natural disaster is an illustration of the LAAF's influence and its position in the transitional process. While the western part of the country is secured by the GNU security force formed from the dispersed armed groups. Besides the war economy that has been strengthened and rienforced by both parties during the past decade, a new tendency has been documented towards a process of politicization and professionalization to gain more political weight and legitimize their presence (Lacher, 2023). The violent confrontations between the two camps decreased remarkably during the last two years, a fact that has been justified by the interviewees by reaching an implicit compromise to share the resources revenues. However, localized clashes and tensions persist, especially in the west of the country, but usually between rival armed groups within Tripoli and nearby areas—not necessarily between the LNA and the GNU. Based on data from Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED, 2024), the rising competition between those local forces in the western part made Libya in 2024 a zone of worsening violence.

Within this chaotic situation, an emerged activism of CSOs has been noticed and documented since the early stages of the uprising. Local communities and diaspora activists have mobilized their resources and conducted various initiatives across the country in response to citizens' demands and have contributed effectively to peacebuilding process. However, ethnographic and detailed research about bottom-up activism in Libya is modest, a fact that could be generated in other cases in the Arab region. Indeed, some cases have been fairly discussed and examined, such as Egypt, Lebanon, Tunisia, Morocco, Syria, and Yemen (Ali Elayah et al., 2018; Comaty, 2019; Elayah et al., 2023; Elayah & Verkoren, 2020; Marchetti, 2018; Natil, 2021; Natil et al., 2019). But other cases, such as Algeria, Libya, and Sudan, have been under-analyzed due to the difficulty of accessing the field, lack of data, security vulnerability, and political constraints. Moreover, various published papers address mainly the role of international organizations and how diaspora communities have dealt with past legacies and contributed to the peace process with narrowed attention to the local approaches that have been promoted by local agents (Başer, 2019; Kennedy, 2022; Stokke & Wiebelhaus-Brahm, 2019, 2022; Tenove, 2019). limited research projects examine the construction, fragmentation, and reconfiguration of the CSOs in those countries during the war and after peace accords, how the religious narrative has shaped the bottom-up activism, the extent to which the financial dependency on external donors affects the internal structure and the functioning of CSOs, and how they reframe their role in the peacebuilding process.

In order to fill this scientific gap, this chapter examines the role of CSOs in the peace process, particularly in post-Qaddafi Libya. It is a qualitative research that draws on a variety of resources, including digital surveys, seminars, colloquiums, international organizations reports mapping the main political developments in the country, and interviews with Libyan academics and activists who are involved in bottom-up activism. The interviews were semi-structured and carried out in Tunisia during December 2022, March 2023, and October–November 2024. The chapter is divided into three sections focusing on bottom-up associations in the form of non-profit organizations and volunteer associations. Trade unions are not included in this study. The first part of the analysis maps the literature on civil society and peacebuilding in conflict zones and transitional contexts. Then, the chapter illuminates how the Qaddafi regime positioned CSOs: the legal frameworks organizing bottom-up associations and the CSO-regime nexus. The third section addresses the role of CSOs after the overthrow of the dictatorship, particularly in functions that have been designed to diminish violence and strengthen social peace and national reconciliation. Finally, it discusses the main constraints and challenges activists confront in carrying out their functions aiming to strengthen social cohabitation and diminish violence in all its forms.

10.2 Civil Society Organizations and Peacebuilding

Civil society (CS) has often been perceived as separate from the state and distinct from the political sphere that includes political parties (Spurk, 2010, p. 7). It mentions associations and groups emerging during the transitional phase or during authoritarianism with the aim to strengthen peace, including voluntary organizations, women groups, youth groups, trade unions, and human rights organizations. Civil society organizations (CSOs) have been identified as key stakeholders playing a crucial role in the peacebuilding process, an assumption that has been defended and supported by neoliberal model. There is an increasing body of works in conflict studies and transitional literature that have examined how this agent has been positioned in transitional societies. This growing attention to investigate the role of CSOs has developed with the fall of the communist regime in Eastern Europe and the collapse of Apartheid in South Africa (Grosescu, 2007; Howard, 2003; Ignatieff & Gellner, 1995; Kligman, 1990; Woods, 1992) where CSOs have been seen as agents for democratization, empowering freedom of expression, and enforcing good governance.

But during the past decades, CSOs have gained additional visibility in peacebuilding and conflict research that has considered it as an important actor in the landscape of post-conflict reconstruction and reconciliation. This visibility and interest have been confirmed by the widening commitment of CSOs in collapsed states and conflict zones (Van Tongeren et al., 2005). Scholarly accounts seek a better understanding of the role of these bottom-up agents, their approaches to mitigating violence, forms of collaboration, and legal framework. Accordingly, CSOs may engage in all levels of peacebuilding, from the top leadership to the grassroots activities. In this regard, everal theories of peacebuilding have underlined the extent to which CSO initiatives can leverage peace efforts, reinforce communal trust, and accelerate social building which are vital for transition to sustainable peace (Lederach, 1997). CSO could participate actively in peace diplomacy by engaging leading activists. as official mediators in peace agreements (Paffenholz, 2010). But, this is rare to happen particularly when the CSO is highly fragmented and politicized due to societal factionalism and absence of national consensus about peacebuilding strategies. A fact that has been confirmed and evidenced during the Arab uprisings. However, CSOs could contribute in the application of II track diplomacy. In this case, and parallel to official negotiations, informal meetings and building trust initiatives could be conducted by CSOs in order to diminish the levels of polarization and provide a common ground for dialogue. Scholars advance various models of CSOs inclusion in this process: consultation, observer status, and inclusive commission. Those efforts could be led by religious leaders, political figures, academics, and women activists who have enjoyed trust in the belligerent camps (Dayal, Christien, 2020, Little, 2007, Odak, 2021). Both Mozambique and Northern Ireland are illustrations that evidenced the role of religious actors in negotiation facilitation and enhancing constructive communication (Kelleher and Johnson, 2008).

Second, CSOs could frame and outline for the transitional phase through training, sharing expertise and consultancy, enhancing accountability and transparency during the elections, collaborating with external donors, and issuing reports about root causes of violence and key determinants that are significant for peacebuilding architecture (Paffenholz & Spurk, 2010). Those tasks generally have been conducted by academics, well-trained activists, religious leaders, and leaders of human rights organizations. Finally, CSOs can contribute to the peace process through community mobilization that targets rebuilding the state-society relationship and enhancing the societal fabric. This grassroots space is one of the main spheres where CSOs have succeeded in achieving remarkable efforts and conducting pioneering initiatives, particularly in societies that adopted top-down peace initiatives. In this case, CSOs became an alternative service delivery supplier and a guarantor of basic victims' rights such as humanitarian relief, education, women empowerment, psychological services for affected victim communities, and documentation. Indeed, CSOs in conflict zones and transitional settings have shown concerns with social justice, governance of humanitarian aid, and individual and communal reconciliation.

However, two points should be evoked when we address CSOs' role in transitional settings and post-conflict societies. it is noteworthy to mention that the space and the effectiveness of CSOs depend on the context in which those organizations have operated. Rather than embracing the old perception that portrays CSOs as a "good thing" and a peace-driving force, it is better to neutralize its role and understand it in the context within which it has acted. Thania Paffenholz, for instance, maintained that the constructive role of the CSOs has been determined by plenty of factors, including state behavior, level of violence, freedom of expression, diversity within civil society, influence of external donors, and the role of donor engagement (Paffenholz et al., 2010). Thus, on one hand, the effectiveness of CSOs in post-conflict settings has been deeply determined by social, political, and economic contexts. On the other hand, it is affected by the internal structure and organization: its vulnerability to political and tribal divisions, approach of intervention, funding, external network, and linkages with diaspora activists. Case studies research exploring the contribution of the CSOs in post-conflict societies has evidenced and maintained the variation of this impact.

Moreover, liberal responses to conflicts and that put emphasize on the role of western model of peacebuilding in terms of the role of CSOs have faced numerous criticisms by either scholars or policymakers and activists (Lewis, 2010). There is an urgent necessity to decolonize, democratize, and decentralize peacebuilding research and to reconsider peacebuilding localization. The post-Cold War peacebuilding architecture appeared to have faced a critical juncture in favor of local ownership seeking to promote new models for peacebuilding taking into consideration the local approaches for societal construction. This criticism has been associated with a growing engagement of local associations and indigenous peace efforts in troubled zones, particularly in what was called contexts of authoritarian conflict management. Many conceptual debates affiliate to questions around what and where the "local" really is, its relation to the "international," and what this local is independent have organized. Transitional justice scholars, for instance, have progressively situated "locality" as a means to build a more effective regime that would guarantee victims' rights and the rule of law (Kochanski, 2020; Manning et al., 2023; Volčič & Simić, 2013). Initial interest has been directed to the role of CSOs that respond to past legacies and their resonance among the victimized communities by addressing various aspects. Cases such as Rwanda, Cambodia, Argentina, Chili, Timor-Leste, and Guatemala are typical examples that illustrate this academic interest toward understanding localization of peace efforts (Boonpunth & Saheem, 2022; Cosgrove, 2010; Eschmann & Nilsson, 2023; Hoyos, 1980; Kent, 2020; Masabo, 2017; Shefik, 2018).

10.2.1 Civil Society Organizations During the Qaddafi Regime

CSO's functioning under authoritarianism is a controversial subject. While this last one was broadly portrayed as a democratization vehicle for many decades in the transition paradigm, recent research has directed to examine the variation of CSO activism in those contexts (Browers, 2006; Hinnebusch, 2006; Volpi, 2006). The protest wave across the Arab countries that has called for political change and the countermovement against this political change attempt have led us to reconsider further the role of CSOs under authoritarianism and to understand the complexity of its reproduction and activism beyond neoliberal normative biases. The deep fragmentation that has been recorded within the CSOs in Arab countries and diaspora activism has reflected that how the society is expressing itself has affected directly modes of civic engagement and, thus, the role of CSOs. Qaddafi Libya is a typical example to the limits of civic activism in authoritarian contexts and the significance of contextualizing this activism in its social and political framework. The legal framework for CSOs in Libya was among the most restrictive in North Africa, effectively impeding the emergence of genuine structures that would promote a real democracy. Qaddafi rule imposed significant legal restrictions on the formation, independence, and funding of these associations. In September 10, 1970, law No.111 was issued addressing the main instructions to create what was called "non-profit organizations." Based on the main articles, all the decisions and activities should be organized under the supervision of the Social Affairs Ministry. This law was followed by many decisions that were related to public liberties and freedom of speech. All of them were served to exercise control on bottom-up actions that would threaten Qaddafi rule. The Act No. 45 of 1972 prohibited strikes and demonstrations, while Act No. 75 of 1973 nationalized independent newspapers and journals to control the printed media. These new legal frameworks resulted at the increasing opposition against Qaddafi system by who were mentioned as "Fatih revolution enemies". Broadly mobilizing a conspiracy account, the regime claimed that these opponents were recruited by foreign intelligence, threateninig the interest of Libyan people and launched a large repressive campaign against them.

During the 1990s, and as a response to the failure of revolutionary inspiration, Qaddafi regime promoted new tribal politics to establish his grip on power, natural resources, and society. Tribal cooptation policies became one of regime's avenues to serve its political interests and prevent all attempts of a state coup, a thing that ultimately exacerbated the preexisting rivalries among Libyan tribes (Barmin, 2022, p. 727). Unfortunately, the focal role that the tribe play in the constitution and reproduction of the Libyan society facilitated this cooptation policy and hindered the constitution of real CSOs. This policy was intensified and emphasized after the American bombing raids on Tripoli and Benghazi in April 1986 and then the failed state coup in 1993 (Joffe, 2013; Obeidi, 2001). The regime provided economic and government positions for loyal tribesmen in the General Committees of People and security apparatus. Also, bottom-up projects to sustain local communities were developed using those tribal connections and networks: privileged tribes were given a space to conduct certain economic and social projects in the form of associations (Aboueldahab, 2018, pp. 193–194). Qaddafi maintained that these associations provided a social umbrella for people who were disadvantaged. Thus, Libyan, according to him, did not need bottom-up organizations in the Western sense.

In 2001, due to the international pressure, a new act was issued in favor of the constitution of CSOs: Law No. 19. Contradictory to his previous discourses, Qaddafi emphasized the importance of civil associations because they employed a significant number of people and provided social services. The regime changed his "rupture account" to a more moderate narrative calling to draft new legal framework to organize civic activism in Libya. He ordered for the People's Conferences to prepare a draft law that will organize their formation and functions (Salhi, 2015, p. 116). Nonetheless, few differences could be noticed between the past legal framework and the new one: the law No. 19 allowed to found associations, but it guaranteed the state oversight on them through securing the recruitment of clientelist representatives in different organs. Also, foreign funding was severely restricted; the approval of the national authorities was mandatory to receive external donations. Article 14 of the law banned cooperation with organizations whose headquarters lay outside Libya, and all forms of collaboration with foreign donors outside the official legal frameworks were considered a national treason that could lead to death sentence (Aboueldahab, 2018, p. 193).

Activists affirm that registering a new association under law 19 during Qaddafi era could take up to two years, with no guarantee of obtaining a permit. Associations had to be approved by the security apparatus and had to include government representatives among their executive boards. In addition, the new judicial framework privileged only associations that were directed to provide social and economic services (Salhi, 2015, pp. 116–117). In contrast, associations that seek to defend human rights were highly banned. These restrictions and the climate of fear that prevailed at that time largely dissuaded activists from seeking foreign financial support and from forming associations. A report of the Commission of Civil Society (CCS) issued in 2020 asserted that there were about 270 organizations distributed between various districts. It comes in the first place: Tripoli, Benghazi, Derna, and Al- Bayda (Elmemadani, 2020a, 2020b). Most of them conducted activities linked to tourism, African heritage, environment, and social services. However, it is worthy to mention the remarkable efforts of human rights defenders to reveal the state atrocities against civilians at that time such as massacres of Abu Salim prison in 1996 (Human Right Watch, 2009), and which led to a visit carried out by the Human Rights Watch to Abu Salim prison in May 2005. The Head of the agency Colonel Tohamy Khaled declared that the government opened an investigation, but did not provide information on the tools, agents, and timing of that initiative (Human Rights Watch, 2003). However, victims' families continued their contests against the absence of truth and impunity culture. Indeed, in Benghazi, they led protests with the support of human rights activists every Saturday since June 2008, in which they demanded the truth about the fate of their relatives (Human Rights Watch, 2009). Salwa Bugaighis, a human rights lawyer, for instance, demonstrated continued efforts in order to defend victims who filed several "political cases against the state during Qaddafi" particularly requesting compensation for the detained (Aboueldahab, 2017, pp. 86–88).

Among the main organizations that have been active in the field of human rights in Libya at that time was the Qaddafi International Charity and Development Foundation (GICDF) which was headed by Saif al-Islam Qaddafi who declared in Cairo in May 2010 that the GICDF was registered in 2003 in Switzerland, due to difficulties in obtaining registration in Libya. While regime's opponents largely assumed that GICDF was a means to support the regime and its policies, it is essential to acknowledge that the organization at least provided a sphere to examine critical issues (Joffe, 2013). Saif al-Islam Gaddafi's reform program during Libya's rapprochement with the west in the 2000s opened up a space for victims of state violence to seek accountability and redress (Kurze & Lamont, 2019, p. 161). He worked to impose new reforms, and the GICDF was the country's only association that addressed complaints about torture, arbitrary detention, and disappearances (Bruce St. John, 2011). It called for more freedom of expression and association, looked into allegations of torture within Libya, and pursued several cases with the authorities. The GICDF played a vital role in facilitating the Amnesty International's visit to the country during February 2004 and May 2009 (Amnesty International, 2010, p. 20) and in the organization of Human Rights Watch' press conference in Tripoli in December 2009 (Bruce St. John, 2011). Those initiatives led to the issue of its first human rights report in 2009 calling for reforms and a second report released in December 2010 denouncing restrictions against civil society and called for more media freedom. However, Saif Islam Qaddaf's efforts to promote the freedom of association and defend the creation of civil society organizations were constrained by the regime policies sought to restrain all attempts to strengthen the collective actions for addressing human rights concerns, particularly after the start of Tunisia uprisings. The leader Muammar Qaddafi announced publicly in January 2010 that there was no place for CSOs in Libya. Furthermore, he suspended the newspapers and detained journalist who criticized corruption practices in the country (Bruce St. John, 2011; Joffe, 2010).

In sum, pre-transition Libya was thus marked by a crippled civil society that was unable to effectively push for a better human rights situation and democratic reform without being brutally repressed by Qaddafi's regime. However, it is undeniable that this limited sphere of activism acted as a catalyst for mobilizing resistance against the dictatorship in the 2000s and for framing post-revolutionary justice demands. Indeed, mass demonstrations denouncing the regime' policies were sparked by the arrest of a human rights lawyer in Benghazi, Fathi Terbil, who represented the families of Islamist prisoners killed in Abu Salim prison (Kurze & Lamont, 2019, p. 160). This protest movement was one of the triggers that precipitated the overthrow of long-standing dictatorship in North Africa.

10.3 Civil Society Organizations and Peacebuilding After Qaddafi

In the wake of the civil uprising in Libya that started in February 2011, CSOs have flourished and proliferated across the country in the form of volunteer groups (Clément & Salah, 2014, p. 118). Causes and motivations explaining "CSO boom" in the country are multiple such as the horizontal solidarity to overthrow the dictatorship, raising awareness among citizens about political situation, providing legal assistance, humanitarian relief, facilitating registration procedures, and the return of many diaspora activists to the country (Salhi, 2015, pp. 247–250). In the early days of the revolt, registration simply entailed submitting contact information to the Ministry of Social Affairs which explains the increase of bottom-up activism organizations (Mercy Corps & The Governance Network, 2011, p. 7). In 2012, Libya recorded the highest number of CSOs that was estimated upon 1915 organizations (Elmemadani, 2020a, 2020b). They were remarkably supported by international organizations, external donors, and International Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) (UNDP, 2015). In 2012, for instance, the European Union funded the "Civil Initiative Libya" to strengthen the capacity of emerging Libyan CSOs that were founded to deliver services and to promote good governance (UNDP, 2015, p. 8).

With the start of the uprising, the concept of CSOs was still quite new to the Libyan context. There was limited experience about how these organizations should work in chaotic contexts. Even analysts expressed their surprise at this "CSOs fever." However, the absence of the CSOs in its western form during Qaddafi era does not reflect necessarily a total absence of solidarity-based collective identities. Collective networks were reconfigured and reconstituted during the dictatorship based on multiple connections: tribe, neighborhood, and common victimization. With the spread of contest movement across the country challenging the regime, these horizontal networks were mobilized, and civilians reacted spontaneously to provide economic and social assistance for vulnerable communities and affected zones. Volunteering networks, for instance, were formed and expanded throughout the Eastern region; a part of them succeeded in organizing aid to the southern population in Kufra Oasis, as well as providing emergency relief to Misrata and Nafusa Mountains by sea (Clément & Salah, 2014, p. 120). They addressed the dysfunction of the state institutions, responded to the needs and demands of the population, and supported the contest movement. In areas where salaries were cut off and financial transfers stopped by Tripoli, people collected money to provide food and medical relief to what was called “Thuwar,” the families of the victims, and the vulnerable segments (Clément & Salah, 2014, p. 120).

As an effort to organize civil society organizations, the Libyan transition government under Abderahim Alkeib issued a decree to create the center to support civil society organizations, which become in 2018 the Commission of Civil Society (CCS). Many volunteer groups and charities evolved later into more structured entities, especially that include experts from diaspora communities who have considerable experience in human rights militancy and benefited from professional training abroad. However, the prevalence of violence and the start of civil war caused a decrease in those activism forms and negatively affected the CSO activities. During 2014 and 2015, the number of CSOs decreased remarkably due to tribal polarization, lack of funding, situation of insecurity and political uncertainty, societal fragmentation, and the spread of extremism (Altai Consulting, 2015). The CCS report of 2020 affirmed that CSOs between 2011 and 2018 reached 5415 addressing a variety of Libyan citizen’ concerns mostly concentrated in Tripoli and Benghazi. But, most of them address social services, economic concerns, scientific innovation, and culture. A limited number of newly created associations have examined and involved efficiently in political reform: 12 organizations of national reconciliation, 54 organizations examine democratic reform and electoral process, and 497 focus on legal reform and human rights (Elmadani, 2020b).

10.3.1 Mediation, Peace Training, and Humanitarian Relief

The failure of the transitional government to demobilize armed groups and the escalation of violence resulting from the crisis of 2014 directed further the attention of CSOs in Libya towards security and peacebuilding tasks. Stopping violence, mediation, enabling peacebuilding capacities, and local reconciliation have been prioritized in the grassroots agenda as prerequisites for democratic transition. The role of CSOs in mediation process and political negotiation that targets to achieve a national reconciliation is limited and broadly narrowed to a consultative role due to political divergences, security dynamics, the dominance of tribal loyalties, and militarization of the society. This marginalization from the peace agreements is a generalized act that has affected all the countries in the region, such as Algeria and Lebanon. Indeed, the bottom-up activism failed to promote joint actions that would enhance collaboration between eastern and western authorities in the country. It is undeniable that CCS integrated CSOs under its institutional umbrella; nevertheless, collaboration has been limited to the organization of debate platforms, seminars, and conferences. Asma Khalifa, a human rights activist, described the total absence of local CSOs representatives in the main peace talks: “It is pointless to organize roundtables and workshops by international actors to train youth on mediation and reconciliation skills, while the main peace agreements have excluded and marginalized them" (LEFPD, 2023). CSOs representatives are only involved as consultants with United Nation Support Mission in Libya UNSMIL: they work together to develop a new agenda directed to discuss the reform of the security sector, disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration. The peace decision-making process has been dominated by military actors and tribal networks. Also, the interference of external powers has played a great role in determining the potential outcomes of a future agreement and has limited the participation of the CSOs in negotiations, a fact that has been affirmed by all respondents. Using the words of an activist, "they decide how the future of Libya should be, until now they do not perceive a national unity government as an outcome that will serve their interests. Thus, they are reluctant to support all attempts toward that solution."

However, locally, CSOs have contributed to the peace initiatives between antagonist communities through multiple channels: monitoring ceasefire agreements, in-group peace socialization, intermediation and contact facilitation, strengthening dialogue, peace awareness, and prisoners exchange (British Council, 2017). By creating peacebuilding networks, activists from various associations debate and examine the aspects of local peace initiatives in Libya through colloquiums, roundtables, dialogues, and workshops: Defender Center for Human Rights, Libyan Crime Watch, Lawyers for Justice in Libya, Libyan Women's Platform for Peace, Libyan Network for Legal Aid, and Youth Gathering of Tawargha are illustrative examples of organizations working on the ground advocating and advancing social cohabitation. Human rights activists also have been invited by the tribal sheikhs in order to take a part in the committees engaged to conduct local reconciliation or ceasefire agreements such as a conflict between Awlad Suleiman and Qadhafa tribes in Sabha, Zintan and Mashashia in Western Mountain, the Mazawgha and Amamra conflict in 2014 in Sirte, fighting between Tebu and Twareg in 2013, and dispute between Qadhadfa and Warfalla in 2013 (Obeidi, 2018, 2019).

The intervention forms of CSOs in local disputes have differentiated from one case to another and have been determined by various factors such as the intensity of violence and tribal loyalties. Djumaa Koussa, the director of the Libyan National Center for Democratic Development and a member of the Committee of Free Dialogue in 2016, stated that the increasing extremist violence in the southern region during 2014 and 2015 caused humanitarian assistance cut off. Access to the region was difficult and CSOs had no means to diminish the violence or to contribute effectively in mediation process. Thus, their activism was only limited in surveying the levels of confrontations, documenting atrocities, and contacting tribal figures who have the power to mediate and influence conflict parties. In addition, they prepared reports and policy briefs for policymakers.

Despite these security and political constraints, human rights activists from different trends have continued to work in order to make their presence more visible in conflict zones and connect between local communities. In the Misrata-Tawergha mediation process of 2015, in cooperation with UNSMIL, they conducted activities aiming at consolidating social cohesion and raising awareness (British Council, 2017, p. 23). In Kufra, also, the Libyan Dialogue and Reconciliation Organization engaged in a facilitation function through the participation in the ceasefire agreement between local communities in 2012. Besides, the organization conducted monitoring activities to diminish the levels of violence and secure humanitarian relief (USIP). In Ubari, a marginalized city where the United State Institute of Peace (USIP) dialogue project is underway in partnership with the State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, Azgar Association was essential in establishing peace between protagonist communities. The initiative that was signed in September 2019 was directed to contain the inter tribe violence through promoting dialogue facilitation sessions, building trust, and encouraging the positive communication (Wilson & Corey, 2019).

Moomken is a further demonstration of leading organizations that have conducted peacebuilding projects integrated in the two track diplomacy. The Municipal Leaders Building Peace project is an initiative that was designed and implemented in November 2023 with the cooperation of New York University to understand the impact of local conflicts in the region. Also, as a capacity building for the administration, Communication Committee between Batin Al-Jabal and Nalut Municipalities in 2022 with the cooperation of the USIP also was directed to strengthen the local governance, enhance communal cohabitation, and gain mediation and negotiation skill.

10.3.2 Defending Human Rights

Defending human rights has been prioritized by the CSOs since the first stages of Libyan uprising. The success of national reconciliation process and establishing a democratic regime are profoundly linked to the necessity to encourage a human rights regime in the country. Stopping the cycle of violence in all its forms—tribal, political, and individual—is dependent on the promotion of a human rights system, establishing an accountability regime, and raising awareness about the respect of individual and collective liberties. First, CSO plays a substantial role in the documentation of human rights violations against civilians. The bottom-up documentation process goes back to the Qaddafi era and Abu Salim massacres. Activists and families of missing people formed associations to alert public opinion. Pictures, testimonies, and stories were collected and shared with the international community to raise awareness about the brutality that Libyans experienced under dictatorship. Documentation acts and projects have continued and associations worked hard to register, survey, and map those atrocities across the country by creating transitional archives. Some associations campaigned to extend the documentation initiative to include pro-Qaddafi's victims of the war, a political sensitive subject that could even threaten the life of engaged activists (Clément & Salah, 2014, p. 123). The Libya Crime Watch that was founded in 2019, for instance, established a digital platform that issues an annual report addressing the main transgressions across the country; also, it provides services for victims who have the intention to share their stories.

Secondly, bottom-up associations in Libya conducted plenty of joint activities targeting accountability and punishment of different perpetrators who are responsible for committing atrocities against civilians. While Qaddafi was killed after a few months of the uprising, there were appeals within civil society activists to punish those who were responsible for authoritarianism crimes and state violations. But, after Qaddafi Libya decided not to establish a transitional court or to try former regime members. Instead, the ordinary courts in Tripoli are handling these cases, with the coordination of organizations such as "No Peace Without Justice (NPWJ)" (No Peace Without Justice, 2013), advising the judiciary on how to prosecute war crimes and crimes against humanity (Aboueldahab, 2017, p. 91). In June 2014, Amnesty International estimated that approximately 170 guards and officials suspected of involvement in the Abu Salim killings were detained since 2011 (Aboueldahab, 2017, p. 91). However, CSOs affirm that accountability should extend to cover all crimes committed by all parties after the Qaddafi era, including the armed forces.

Indeed, associations call to resist and fight the victors' justice approach that was embraced by the post-Gaddafi ruling structures in favor of a judicial system supporting the rule of law and justice for Libyans regardless of their political and tribal affiliation. Like other transitional settings, Libya post-Gaddafi faced a victim-perpetrator dilemma: there was in the beginning a large controversy about how to define a martyr, who has the legacy to define victims and who benefits from the compensations and recognition. Spaces for punishing perpetrators after the death of Qaddafi were severely restricted and limited to previous regime abuses. The transitional government promoted a selective retributive system, where only crimes committed by the past regime and its supporters have been highlighted and punished. Furthermore, on May 2, 2012, the Libyan National Transitional Council (NTC) passed Law No. 38 which granted amnesty to the military personnel who committed crimes under the pretext of "protecting the revolution" (Sougheh & Nordin, 2019). A narrative of revolutionary triumph emerged and has been reinforced in favor of armed groups and political parties which sought to liquidate their enemies and opponents.

For instance, the Ministry of Families of Martyrs and Missing Persons would not consider an individual to be a missing person if the date of his or her disappearance followed the liberation of Tripoli on October 23, 2011, which means that crimes of disappearance after that date would not be punished. If someone disappeared after the revolutionary armed groups entered the capital, he or she could not be considered a missing person. Punishing of human rights transgressions that have been perpetrated by the revolutionary armed groups has been highly neglected and silenced (Amnesty International, 2012; Kurze & Lamont, 2019, p. 170). In this point, a respondent mentioned that the uprising divided the country to liberated districts and revolution leading districts, labels that have been penetrated into the political narrative, daily activities, and schools and university campuses. Those politicized connotations are not merely the production of the fall of the dictatorship, but also a conceptual framework that has legitimized the revenge justice, the presence of regional actors, and endured polarization. She added that the peacebuilding process and building a government of national unity require a revision to those labels. Libyan activists also oppose amnesty measures and argue that these laws perpetuate a culture of impunity.

Besides resisting amnesty law, CSOs contributed largely to defending the rights of marginalized communities. CSOs activism in Libya have shown constant efforts to include gender issues in the constitution and to guarantee the access of women to key positions. Including women's voices in the peace process, mediation and negotiation initiatives, and also the political sphere is an indispensable component to enhance societal cohabitation and diminish social divergences. In addition to a myriad of institutional constraints limiting women's ability to freely participate in civil and political spheres, women face threats, killings, abductions, torture, rape, hate campaigns, and online violence. The assassination of Fariha al-Berkawi, Salwa Bugaighis, and Hanan al-Barassi who worked for defending human rights is a typical example of exclusive practices against women. A previous member of the National Conference affirmed that the Libya uprising leading actors complained about woman political participation and tried to isolate her from the transition process.

The Lawyers for Justice in Libya published a report addressing online violence against women in the country. The report emphasizes that Libyan female human rights activists, journalists, bloggers, and politicians regularly face intimidation, harassment, and threats from different parties under either religious pretexts or security justifications (Lawyers for Justice in Libya, 2021). Activists denounce how religious structures, including mosques in remote areas, diabolize the female human activists through adopting a narrative that rejects the integration of women in CSOs and political life. This discourse claims that CSOs export western doctrines that contradict the national and societal values in the society, a religious account that has restrained activities targeting to raise political awareness among women. In 2022, the High National Elections Commission (HNEC) announced the creation of a digital platform to survey the electoral violence and hate speech against women participation in political life, which issued its first report on May 21, 2023. Rabab Haleb, a member of HNEC, maintained that 1300 from 3800 analyzed posts on social media platforms were directed to diabolize women who have participated in political activities.

Remarkable efforts have been shown since the fall of Qaddafi regime to resist those mentalities and to empower women through education programs and training projects. Initiatives were launched to guarantee their political rights such as the Charter of Libyan Women's Constitutional Rights and Dastoor project carried out by the Libyan Women's Union and the Libyan Forum for Civil Society (Perroux, 2015). Female activists participated in the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum and played an active role to ensure women's meaningful inclusion and participation in the political dialogue as well as peacebuilding process. In addition, they gave a remarkable attention to atrocities committed and that could be marginalized and neglected under religious pretexts, social stigma, or conspiracy narrative such as the widespread rape crimes during the war. Recognition of those victimization would help affected victims to access help, psychological assistance, and financial compensation, instead of being stigmatized and punished by divorce, isolation, or murder (Clément & Salah, 2014, p. 124).

10.3.3 Preparation for the Electoral Process

It is widely acknowledged that elections are a crucial component of peacebuilding process in divided societies. Indeed, international norms of accountability and democratization emphasize that elections are the only avenue for establishing a legitimate post-conflict government and for guaranting the establishment of reconciliation (Lindberg, 2006; Reilly, 2001; Wilkinson, 2004). They have a broader impact on post-conflict environment including the implementation of a democratic regime that respects individual and collective liberties and consolidation of the sense of citizenship and rule of law. However, a substantial scholarship has identified several challenges associated with the electoral processes in post-conflict societies and post-authoritarian contexts including timing, agents leading electoral process, role of external actors, funding, demilitarization of politics, legal frameworks organizing the electoral game, and sustainability of peace after elections: how societies devastated by violence, burduned with inherited tribal and ethnic cleavages, and lacking resources organize a peaceful electoral process (Jarstad, 2009; Jarstad & Sisk, 2008; Reilly, 2017; Wagner & Dreef, 2014).

The Libyan case demonstrates the difficulty to organize elections in divided societies. Despite the successive international appeals for elections, the country continues to suffer deep political divergences on rules that should regulate this electoral process. Besides, regional interventions and militarization of the society have further complicated this process and reinforced the domestic polarization. In front this delicate situation, CSOs have planned training activities to diminish this political fragmentation and to increase the opportunities for creating a joint platform encouraging and facilitating pathway towards presidential elections (UNDP, 2015). Activists are highly aware that the absence of centralized institutions that could settle demobilization programs and manage the country's resources is the main political constraint for the peace process. They engage thereby in plenty of projects that tend to establish a democratic behavior such as organizing demonstrations, meetings and colloquiums, citizen journalism for raising awareness, and formation of newspapers.

In early stages of uprisings, activists mobilized the resistance against Qaddafi authoritarianism using multiple means. They provided the required support for the opposition and organized a counter campaign against Qaddafi's conspiracy narrative using social media. Online platforms became channels for information sharing and exchange. Inspired by the protest movement in neighboring countries, citizen journalism spread in Libya to unveil the atrocities committed by the regime and circulate the information (Ali & Fahmy, 2013; Alqudsi-Ghabra, 2012). The Tobruk-based Youth Group for the Protection of the 17th February Revolution, for instance, played a crucial role in mobilizing protesters against dictatorship (Mercy Corps &

The Governance Network, 2011, p. 8). After the fall of Qaddafi regime, CSOs engaged in activities and collective projects connected directly to the electoral process.

First, activists got involved in the major debates that divide Libyan society and had a strong impact on its future territorial organization such as tribal cohabitation, education, citizenship, transitional justice, federalism or decentralization, and cultural rights of minorities. Dialogue roundtables and workshops became the main venue to train citizens and raise awareness about the necessity to organize an electoral process. In 2012, the "Eye on the General National Congress" project, for instance, carried out by H2O Team and Bokra Youth Organization reflected the grassroots intention in order to conduct the country towards a democracy. The main aim of this bottom-up initiative was to collect and exchange information with citizens and provide the main decision of the legislative body (Jaddaliya, 2013). Similar projects have been implemented in various districts such as the Support to Civic Engagement in Libya's Transition (SCELT)—Libya (Arab Reform Initiative, 2021). Members of political parties and the Congress of National Council (GNC) used to attend similar civil society workshops and activities, a thing that created various connections between activists and policymakers (Geha, 2016, p. 143). However, those linkages have been affected later by the generated violence and internal polarization between east and west.

Secondly, CSOs have conducted monitoring and surveillance activities which are linked to the transitional process. Activists participated directly in the organization of the local elections. Since December 2011, many members of the associations have been involved in all stages of local council elections as campaigning participants to make people vote, individual candidates, and observers. CSOs organizations formed networks whose mandate included observation of the elections. In June and July 2012, their experience was reflected in the organization of the elections to the National Congress where they took an active part in the political campaigns (Carter Center, 2012). The direct involvement provided them the opportunity to access the information and know much better about the challenges that confront this process. Although the vulnerable security situation characterizes the country, these associations continue to monitor the political process in the country. During the elections of 2021, civil society organizations deployed about 336 in the polling centers in Tripoli including Libya Network for Democracy and Development (LNDD), Aladasa, the Tripoli Women's Union (TWU), and H2O (Cooley, 2021).

10.4 Bottom-Up Activism in Libya and Peacebuilding: Challenges and Constraints

Activism in conflict settings and transitional contexts is highly difficult and exposes human rights defenders to risk. The CSOs in Libya have confronted various constraints that we divide into two sections: the first is linked to the external environment that activists have acted within, and the second set of obstacles is connected to the internal structure of these associations. In terms of external context, CSOs have been highly restrained by security situation, political censorship, and patriarchal mentalities. The proliferation of extremist groups, armed fragmentation, and regional intervention affected their activism. Interviewees stated that escalation of violence in the east in 2014 and 2015 for instance led to the withdrawal of most international organizations and activists who were active in Benghazi. The Civil War during the past decade and the following chaos were associated with a remarkable decrease in funding and training initiatives. While many activists sought asylum abroad or relocated to safer Libyan districts, various extended donors suspended their activities in the country (UNDP, 2015, p. 14). Access to conflict zones for delivering relief and documenting the committed crimes could threaten activists' life. As Zohra Langhi, a human rights activist, mentioned in her discussion about women protection in Libya and bottom-up activism: Libya does not only need women empowerment, but also we should prioritize war lords disempowerment (International Peace Institute, 2023). Activists are vulnerable to violence and armed groups attacks, while the relevant authorities failed to adopt a legal framework protecting their lives and guaranteeing their rights (UNDP, 2015, p. 14). A fact that continue until now days. The economic crisis, the lack of liquidity, and high prices of commodities exacerbated the situation and caused a decline in CSOs activities even in districts that witnessed less levels of violence.

In the eastern part of the country, particularly Benghazi, young civil society activists were kidnapped and killed. Salwa Bugaighis, a renowned Libyan human rights lawyer and activist, was shot dead in her home in the eastern city of Benghazi in 2014 by unidentified gunmen. Siham Sergiwa, a parliament member and a defender of women human rights, was kidnapped by an unidentified group on 17 July 2019. Besides, on 10 November 2020, Hanane Al-Barassi was assassinated by an unidentified armed group in eastern Libya after denouncing violence committed against women by Hiftar forces. In the western part of the country, journalists and human rights defenders also claimed that aggressions against human rights associations have escalated after 2014. The Libyan Center for Freedom of Press (LCFP), a Tripoli-based nonprofit organization, underscored in its media statements and reports that journalists and media workers who act as human rights defenders generally fear to fill complaints against armed groups and state forces. The absence of accountability and state of impunity make them more vulnerable to harassment and attacks (Human Rights Watch, 2017).

Besides, the absence of security a large campaign of defamation and diabolization against CSOs has been launched since 2019 by different parties. Mansour Al-Atti, a human rights activist, proclaimed that plenty of actors are engaged and got involved in this campaign of diabolization including mosques, armed groups, and local authorities (Libyan Expertise Forum for Peace and Development, 2023). Even social media have been used to mobilize this hate narrative against them. This defamation campaign has associated with the growing restrictions and offenses that have been imposed by relevant authorities on human rights activists including harassment, detention, prosecution of local staff members, and obstacles for non-Libyans working in humanitarian operations to obtain entry visas. It is largely argued that this campaign plans to expand the gap between human rights activists and local communities and to reinforce the distrust crisis. Activists were portrayed by religious agents as associations presenting a Christianity movement threatening the country's identity and social values. The external interventions, regional interference, and the absence of an international agenda to reconstruct the country are all additional elements that have legitimized this narrative among various local communities.

The absence of a legal framework ruling bottom-up activism has reinforced this defamation campaign and made activists more vulnerable to its supporters. CSOs participated in the 2013 consultations with the Ministry of Culture and Civil Society to prepare a new draft law to regulate collective action; also, in 2016, human rights organizations took part in the revision of the draft law on associations (Libyan Center for Freedom of Press, 2021). Yet, Libyan civil society has been still regulated by dictatorship legal frameworks: law no. 19 that was issued during the Qaddafi regime. On March 13, 2023, Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibah's office instructed the CCS to revoke the licenses of every CSOs created in Libya since 2011 as they have been considered as illegal associations. This decision provoked a large contest movement among activists and human rights defenders as well as the international community. As a response, on 21 March 2023, the Government of National Unity issued Decree no. 7 allowing local and international associations in Libya to continue working until their conditions are "corrected" according to Law no. 19, which only privileges associations that provide social, cultural, sports, charitable, and humanitarian services.

This lack of a new legal framework that adopts the needs of transitional phase reinforces the coercive policies against CSOs. Activities and collective actions in terms of corruption, election transparency, gender equity claims, transitional justice prerequisites, and tribal patronage are highly questioned by state authorities, armed groups, and Hiftar forces. In contrast, the CSOs that conduct relief charitable activities generally count on a good level of acceptance from their municipal councils and even local communities (Libyan Expertise Forum for Peace and Development, 2023). There is a general tendency to limit the role of bottom-up forces to an advisory or consultancy actor without taking into account their recommendation in the general policy. Abeer Amninah, a human rights activist, stated that the CSO in Libya is suffering a domination and censorship that is exercised by different authorities including the communication ministry and municipal councils. There is no clear judicial framework that regulates the CSO activism. The CCS is able to unilaterally accept or reject the registration of associations without reasons, suspend or dissolve the associations without judicial permission, cancel the decisions of the association's board of directors and replace them, and preapprove any activity or funding of the association.

The absence of a clear judicial framework organizing these associations makes them also more vulnerable to political and religious manipulation and intensified attacks against female activists. Associations defending women empowerment is a typical example illustrating the extent to which judicial ambiguity would facilitate state censorship, weaken the CSOs, and limit the role of those associations in the transitional justice process. Women participation in bottom-up activism augmented remarkably in 2012 with a focus on political empowerment, economic empowerment, national reconciliation, gender equality, and rights awareness. This expanded engagement of women in civic activism has been supported by international organizations, but it has been perceived with high suspicion in many local communities. Women who express views critical for political and security actors on Twitter or Facebook are being harassed, threatened, and defamed. Women activists also acting against the patriarchal mentalities and religious extremist narratives and criticized corruption have been labeled as "traitors," and "foreign agents," in an attempt to discredit their views before the general public. According to activist Rha Chenib, the new approach to empower women's role in public and political life has been perceived as a religious threat to Islamic values and an attempt to replace them with Western doctrines (Libyan Expertise Forum for Peace and Development, 2023). This exclusive narrative has been supported by new restrictive procedures against women's travel. In May 2023, the Internal Security Agency (ISA), operating under the GNU, introduced a new procedure whereby Libyan women traveling alone from an airport in western Libya are required to complete an official declaration that includes their reasons for travel, an explanation of why she is traveling alone, and detailed information about her travel history (Lawyers for Justice in Libya, 2023).

In addition to external environment constraints, CSOs suffer deep internal deficiencies that do not separate from the surrounding context. Activists denounced the CSO's vulnerability to political manipulation, clientelism policies, tribal loyalties, self-enrichment, and political fragmentation. Indeed, the CSOs activism has been affected by the prevailing violence, tribal belonging, and political bias and divergences, especially after 2014. According to Mansour Atti, a human rights activist, the political situation created two clusters of organizations. On one hand, there are organizations that continue to confront the security apparatus and armed groups' abuses seeking to establish values of democratic reform and accountability. On the other hand, we find organizations that became a means to justify the power choices and decisions (Libyan Expertise Forum for Peace and Development, 2023). A complex relationship of compromise and bargaining has been set at the expense of societal values that should be established to enhance peace and national reconciliation. Then, the CSOs have become means for many activists to access the political arena and acquire more privileges, a thing that influences its efficiency and durability.

Moreover, Libyan CSOs face a deep functional disequilibrium in terms of its internal structure and organization. The survey achieved by the Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development (ACTED) demonstrated the lack of financial transparency, lack of sustainability, and lack of a quality control mechanism (ACTED, 2018). This fact was confirmed by various respondents. Based on the findings of that report, local associations have been unable to establish well-functioning internal accountability and have no long-term vision for their activities. Few organizations prepare their annual report and use a formal financial system (ACTED, 2018, p. 9). The lack of information and transparency in terms of the CSOs functioning extended the gap between these associations and security apparatus as well as local communities. Abeer Amninah considers financial transparency a dispensable component to revise and rebuild the relationship of CSOs with the state and to guarantee the well-functioning of bottom-up activism (Libyan Expertise Forum for Peace and Development, 2023).

The financial dependency of CSOs on external donors has extended and reinforced the distrust crisis between those associations and the Libyan society and made people hesitate to deal with them. Farida Al-Allagi mentioned that although there are plenty of reports that have been issued examining CSOs-external donors collaboration in Libya, few of them explain how the funding has been dispensed and for what purposes (Libyan Expertise Forum for Peace and Development, 2023). It is a fact that has been denounced even from activists themselves. There are no detailed surveys regarding the funding programs and geography of actions. Furthermore, it is largely claimed that this financial dependency to external donors impacted the sustainability of bottom-up activism that tends to stop violence and reconstruction of the country. Rather than establishing a well-planned agenda that prioritizes the Libyan people's demands and needs on the long term, CSOs have imposed the external donors' approaches and programs that fit their priorities and perspectives. For instance, there are calls to decolonize the women empowerment insight through focusing on main needs of local communities and their perspective in term of peacebuilding and women participation in political as well as economic life. Women's organizations view that international organizations use to portray Libyan women as victims and passive actors who receive Western knowledge on activism and peacebuilding. Even the conceptualization of women empowerment fits only donors' western approaches with little consideration of the contextual factors and women's past activism against authoritarian and patriarchal mentalities. For them, women have been situated as objects of analysis and passive recievers of knowledge rather than partners who could contribute effectively to knowledge production and peacebuilding. This prevailing and imposed perspective has affected negatively the knowledge production about bottom-up activism in the region and impacted CSO's credibility and their role in the reconstruction process. CSOs in collaboration with external donors, they set up specific fixed-term projects and "evaporative initiatives" that serve the international organizations' guidelines to gain access to international funding. This fact not only negatively affected the sustainability of bottom-up activism but also limited the horizontal networking initiatives by inciting fragmenting competitiveness between different associations (Barnes, 2022).

10.5 Conclusion

Libyan civil society organizations make immense efforts in order to diminish levels of local violence and local reconciliation in the country. Despite the absence of logistics required for their activism and the intensive international interference, efforts and projects have been established to fulfill vulnerable communities demands. However, the promotion and sustainability of that bottom-up activism is determined by the political will to establish peace and implement a real democracy. CSOs fail and unable to enhance territorial unity in the absence of political will and the domination of armed groups on large part of the country. Reaching a national accord between competing authorities and setting a whole program for demobilization and disarmament is vital to enhance these association's actions and guarantee their civic rights. However, this role is dependent not only to political will and armed groups' readiness to stop the violence but also to transitional government-civil society organizations nexus. The establishment of government that lack accountability and transparency rule would reconfigure and renegotiate the role of these associations to transform them into more clientelist organizations supporting the national authorities and comprising their power rather than make them as an independent actor balancing the state influence. Thus, empowering CSOs role in peacebuilding process is deeply connected to the political will to overthrow the authoritarian practices that have been sustained during the past decades: state censorship on collective and individual freedom of expression, absence of accountability, and tribal manipulation politics.

Acknowledgments I would like to acknowledge and thank the Arab-German Young Academy for Science and Humanities (AGYA) for funding the fieldwork and interviews that were conducted to achieve this chapter. Also, I acknowledge the remarkable support of Merian Center for Advanced Studies in the Maghreb (MECAM), which provided me with the academic environment and scientific guidance to finish the edition of that study.

References

Aboueldahab, N. (2017). *Transitional justice and the prosecution of political leaders in the Arab region: A comparative study of Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and Yemen*. Bloomsbury Academic.

Aboueldahab, N. (2018). Navigating the storm: Civil society and ambiguous transitions in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia. In J. Brankovic & H. Van der Merwe (Eds.), *Advocating transitional Justice in Africa: The role of civil society* (pp. 183–204). Springer.

Abouzzohour, Y., & Yousef, T. M. (2023). What drives public trust in the military in non-democracies: Evidence from Libya (2014-2019). *Journal of North African Studies, 6*(28), 1373–1401.

Ali, S. R., & Fahmy, S. (2013). Gatekeeping and citizen journalism: The use of social media during the recent uprisings in Iran, Egypt, and Libya. In *Media, war and conflict* (Vol. 6, Issue 1, pp, 55–69).

Ali Elayah, M. A., Abu-Osba, B., & Al-Majdhoub, F. (2018). Building a civil service system for Yemen. In A. Farazmand (Ed.), *Global encyclopedia of public administration, public policy, and governance* (pp. 1–15). Springer.

Alqudsi-Ghabra, T. (2012). Creative use of social media in the revolutions of Tunisia, Egypt & Libya. *International Journal of Interdisciplinary Social Sciences, 6*(6), 147–158.

Amnesty International. (2010). *Libya: 'Libya of tomorrow': What hope for human rights*.

Amnesty International. (2012). *Libya: Rule of law or rule of militias*.

Arab Reform Initiative. (2021). *Programming youth and society civil Libyan social and, political, economic promoting integration*, Policy Dialogue Report, Arab Reform Initiative.

Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACTED). (2018). *National CSOs Consultation in Libya: Findings and Recommendations*. https://www.acted.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/14-ctn-cso-consultation-report-national-cso-consultation-tosubmit.pdf

Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACTED). (2024). *Regional Overview Africa July 2024*. https://acleddata.com/2024/08/12/africa-overview-july-2024/#keytrends1.

Barmin, Y. (2022). Revolution in Libya. In J. Goldstone, L. Grinin, & K. Andrey (Eds.), *Handbook of the revolutions in the 21 th century: Societies and Political Orders in Transition* (pp. 725–738). Springer.

Başer, B. (2019). Engaging diasporas in development and state-building: The role of the Kurdish diaspora and returnees in rebuilding the Kurdistan region of Iraq. *Ethnopolitics, 18*(1), 76–91.

Boonpunth, K. C., & Saheem, N. (2022). Roles of civil society in peacebuilding in Southeast Asia: The case studies of Mindanao, Aceh, and southernmost Thailand. *Asian Affairs (UK), 49*(2), 88–112.

British Council. (2017). *Enduring social institutions and civil society peacebuilding in Libya and Syria*. Report. https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/h101_enduring_social_institutions_and_civil_society_peacebuilding_in_libya_and_syria_final_web.pdf

Browers, M. (2006). *Democracy and civil Society in Arab political thought: Transcultural possibilities*. Syracuse University Press.

Bruce St. John, R..(2011). *Libya: Cracks in Qaddafi foundation*. Report, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Carter Center. (2012). *General national congress elections in Libya,* Report. Carter Center. https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/news/peace_publications/election_reports/libya-070712-final-rpt.pdf.

Clément, F., & Salah, A. (2014). Post-uprising Libyan associations and democracy building in urban Libya. *Built Environment, 40*(1), 118–127. https://doi.org/10.2148/benv.40.1.118

Comaty, L. (2019). *Post-conflict transition in Lebanon: The disappeared of the civil war*. Routledge.

Cooley, D.. (2021). *Libya's election observers sustain momentum despite national crises*. Report, National Democratic Institute, USA. https://www.ndi.org/our-stories/libya-s-election-observers-sustain-momentum-despite-national-crises.

Cosgrove, S. (2010). *Leadership from the margins: Women and civil society organizations in Argentina, Chile, and El Salvador*. Routgers University.

Dayal, A. K., & Christien, A. (2020). Women's participation in informal peace processes. *Global Governance: A Review of Multilateralism and International Organizations, 26*(1), 69–98.

Droz-Vincent, P. (2020). *Military politics of the contemporary Arab world*. Cambridge University Press.

Elayah, M., & Verkoren, W. (2020). Civil society during war: The case of Yemen. *Peacebuilding, 8*(4), 476–498.

Elayah, M., Al-Sameai, N., Khodr, H., & Gamar, S. (2023). Community-based initiatives and public services delivery in a fragile context: The case of Yemen. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly.* https://doi.org/10.1177/08997640221145182

Elmadani, S.. (2020a). *The guide to civil society organizations in Libya, CSOs in Libya before 2011*. The Civil Society Commission. https://ccs.gov.ly/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Directory1969-2011.pdf.

Elmadani, S.. (2020b). *Directory of Libyan civil society organizations (2011-2018), the Commission of the Civil Society*. https://ccs.gov.ly/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Directory2020lngo.pdf.

Eschmann, N., & Nilsson, D. (2023). Better together? Civil society coordination during peace negotiations. *Cooperation and Conflict, 58*(1), 42–60.

Gaub, F. (2019). Like father like son: Libyan civil–military relations before and after 2011. *Mediterranean Politics, 24*(2), 181–195.

Geha, C. (2016). *Understanding Libya's civil society*. Report, Middle East Institute. https://www.mei.edu/publications/understanding-libyas-civil-society.

Grosescu, R. (2007). The role of the civil society and Anticommunist actors in the Romanian transitional Justice partial failure. In D. Validimira & M. Andelko (Eds.), *Lustration and* *consolidation of democracy in central and Eastern Europe* (pp. 183–195). Political Science Research Center.

Hinnebusch, R. (2006). Authoritarian persistence, democratization theory and the Middle East: An overview and critique. *Democratization, 13*, 373–395.

Howard, M. M. (2003). *The weakness of civil society in post-communist Europe*. Cambridge University Press.

Hoyos, M. C. (1980). Addressing the crimes of torture and enforced disappearances in Latin America: Achievements and challenges from a human rights perspective. *Global Politics Review, 5*(2), 50–62.

Human Rights Watch. (2003). *Libya: June 1996 Killings at Abu Salim*. https://www.hrw.org/news/2006/06/27/libya-june-1996-killings-abu-salim-prison.

Human Rights Watch. (2009). *Libya: In repressive atmosphere, pockets of improvement.* https://www.hrw.org/news/2009/12/12/libya-repressive-atmosphere-pockets-improvement.

Human Rights Watch. (2017). *Libya: Activists being silenced, attacks, threats, and harassment*. https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/07/27/libya-activists-being-silenced.

Ignatieff, M., & Gellner, E. (1995). On civil society: Why Eastern Europe's revolutions could succeed. *Foreign Affairs, 74*(2), 128–136.

International Peace Institute. (2023). *Creating enabling environment for women's participation in Libya*. https://www.ipinst.org/2023/07/creating-enabling-environments-for-womens-participation-in-libya.

Jadalliya. (2013). *Eye on the Libyan General National Congress: First Report*. https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/28044

Jarstad, A. K. (2009). Post-accord elections and armed conflict. In A. Swain, R. Amer, & O. Joakim (Eds.), *The democratization project: Opportunities and challenges* (pp. 153–164). Anthem Press.

Jarstad, A. K., & Sisk, T. D. (2008). *From war to democracy: Dilemmas of peacebuilding*. Cambridge University Press.

Joffe, G. (2010). *Sif Al-Islam: The whole Libyan world in his hand*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/24686.

Joffe, G. (2013). Civil activism and the roots of 2011 uprisings. In J. Pack (Ed.), *The 2011 Libyan uprisings and the struggle for the post-Qadhafi future* (pp. 23–51). Palgrave Macmillan.

Kelleher, A., & Johnson, M. (2008). Religious communities as peacemakers: A comparison of grassroots peace processes in Sudan and Northern Ireland. *Civil Wars, 10*(2), 148–172.

Kennedy, G. (2022). Diaspora incorporation mechanisms: Sustained and episodic mobilisation among the British-Egyptian diaspora after the Arab spring. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 48*(5), 1286–1304.

Kent, L. (2020). Transitional justice and the spaces of memory activism in Timor-Leste and Aceh. *Reconceiving Civil Society and Transitional Justice, 31*(2), 181–199.

Kligman, G. (1990). Reclaiming the public: A reflection on creating civil Society in Romania. *East European Politics & Societies, 4*(3), 393–438.

Kochanski, A. (2020). The "local turn" in transitional justice: Curb the enthusiasm. *International Studies Review, 22*(1), 26–50.

Kurze, A., & Lamont, C. K. (2019). *New critical spaces in transitional Justice*. Indiana University Press.

Lacher, W. (2021). Social cleavages and armed group consolidation: The case of Khalifa Haftar's Libyan Arab armed forces. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism.* https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2021.2013757

Lacher, W. (2023). *Libya's militias have become the state dimensions and consequences of a consolidation process*, SWP Comment, *No*. 44.

Lawyers for Justice in Libya. (2021). *We will not be silence: Online violence against women in Libya*.

Lawyers for Justice in Libya. (2023). *Crushing liberty: Relentless restrictions on Libyan women and enforced male guardianship*. https://www.libyanjustice.org/news/crushing-liberty-relentless-restrictions-on-libyan-women-and-enforced-male-guardianship.

Lederach, J. P. (1997). *Building peace: Sustainable reconciliation in divided societies*. United States Institute of Peace Studies.

Lewis, D. (2010). The failure of a Liberal peace: Sri Lanka's counter-insurgency in global perspective. *Conflict, Security & Development, 10*(5), 647–671.

Libyan Center for Freedom of Press. (2021). *Libya: Rights groups present a new draft law regulating civil work and call on Libyan civil society to advocate for its approval by the legislature*. https://defendercenter.org/5557.

Libyan Expertise Forum for Peace and Development. (2023, January 7). *A critical look at the role and the reality of civil society in Libya*.

Lindberg, S. I. (2006). Democracy and elections in Africa. In *Democracy and elections in Africa*. John Hopkins University Press.

Little, D. (Ed.). (2007). Peacemakers in action: Volume 1: Profiles of religion in conflict resolution. Cambridge University Press.

Manning, P., Tchilingirian, J., & Nedelcu, T. (2023). Transitional Justice networks and the role of local actors in Cambodia. *Journal of Peacebuilding and Development.* https://doi.org/10.1177/15423166231168549

Marchetti, R. (2018). *Government-NGO relationships in Africa, Asia, Europe and MENA*. Routledge.

Masabo, F. (2017). Role of civil society organizations in conflict and post-conflict situation in Rwanda. *Journal of African Conflicts and Peace Studies, 3*(2), 16–37.

Mercy Corps, & the Governance Network. (2011). *Beyound Gaddafi: Libya's governance context*. https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/202001/beyond_gaddafi_libyas_governance_context.pdf.

Natil, I. (2021). *Youth civic engagement and local peacebuilding in the Middle East and North Africa: Prospects and challenges for community development*. Routledge.

Natil, I., Pierobon, C., & Tauber, L. (2019). *The power of civil society in the Middle East and North Africa: Peace-building, change, and development*. Routledge.

Ntaka, B., & Csicsmann, L. (2021). Non-state armed groups and state-building in the Arab region: The case of post-Gaddafi Libya. *South African Journal of International Affairs, 28*(4), 629–649.

No Peace Without Justice. (2013). *Supporting trial monitoring in Libya A handbook for democratic transition through justice and accountability*. http://www.npwj.org/ICC/NPWJ-releases-Handbook-support-Trial-Monitoring-Libya.html.

Obeidi, A. (2001). *Political culture in Libya*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203037003

Obeidi, A. (2018). *Local reconciliation in Libya: An exploratory study on traditional reconciliation process and mechanisms since 2011*.

Obeidi, A. (2019). *Local reconciliations in Libya: A precarious balance sheet*.

Odak, S. (2021). *Religion, conflict, and peacebuilding: The role of religious leaders in Bosnia and Herzegovina*. Springer.

Paffenholz, T. (2010). *Civil society and peace building: A critical assessment*. Lynne Reinner.

Paffenholz, T., & Spurk, C. (2010). In T. Paffenholz (Ed.), *A comprehensive analytical framework.* (pp. 65–78). Lynne Rienner.

Paffenholz, T., Spurk, C., Belloni, R., Kurtenbach, S., & Orjuela, C. (2010). Enabling and disenabling factors for civil society peacebuilding. In T. Paffenholz (Ed.), *Civil society and peacebuilding: A critical assessment* (pp. 405–424). Lynne Rienner.

Raineri, L. (2019). Security and informality in Libya: Militarisation without military? *Conflict, Security and Development, 19*(6), 583–602.

Reilly, B. (2001). *Democracy in divided societies: Electoral engineering for conflict management*. Cambridge University Press.

Reilly, B. (2017). Key issues for post-conflict elections. *The RUSI Journal, 162*(5), 16–24.

Rizk, J. (2021). Exploring the nexus between armed groups and the trafficking and smuggling of human beings in the Central Sahel and Libya. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism.* https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2021.2002687

Salhi, M.. (2015). *Under two flags: The development of NGOs in Libya* [University of Exeter]. PhD thesis. https://ore.exeter.ac.UK/repository/bitstream/handle/10871/17254/ElSahliM.Pdf?Sequence=1

Shefik, S. (2018). Reimagining transitional justice through participatory art. *International Journal of Transitional Justice, 12*(2), 1–13.

Sougheh, H. H., & Nordin, R. (2019). The Libyan NTC law no.38 2012: A disguised amnesty. *Journal Undang-Undang Dan Masyarakat, 24*, 1–8.

Spurk, C. (2010). Understanding civil society. In T. Paffenholz (Ed.), *Civil society and peacebuilding: A critical assessment* (pp. 3–28). Rienner.

Stokke, E., & Wiebelhaus-Brahm, E. (2019). Syrian diaspora mobilization: Vertical coordination, patronage relations, and the challenges of fragmentation in the pursuit of transitional justice. *Ethnic and Racial Studies, 42*(11), 1930–1949.

Stokke, E., & Wiebelhaus-Brahm, E. (2022). Syrian diaspora mobilization for prospective transitional justice in the absence of transition. *Journal of Human Rights, 21*(4), 500–516.

Tenove, C. (2019). Networking justice: Digitally-enabled engagement in transitional justice by the Syrian diaspora. *Ethnic and Racial Studies, 42*(11), 1950–1969.

UNDP. (2015). *Benghazi civil society organizations: Survey report*.

Van Tongeren, P., Brenk, M., & Hellema, M. (Eds.). (2005). *People building peace II: Successful stories of civil society*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.

Volčič, Z., & Simić, O. (2013). Localizing transitional justice: Civil society practices and initiatives in the Balkans. In Z. Volcic & S. Olievera (Eds.), *Transitional justice and civil society in the Balkans* (pp. 1–16). Springer.

Volpi, F. (2006). Algeria's pseudo- democratic politics: Lessons for democratization in the Middle East. *Democratization, 13*(3), 442–455.

Wagner, W., & Dreef, S. (2014). Ethnic composition and electoral system design: Demographic context conditions for post-conflict elections. *Ethnopolitics, 13*(3), 288–307.

Wilkinson, S. I. (2004). *Votes and violence: Electoral competition and ethnic riots in India*. Cambridge University Press.

Wilson, N., & Corey, A.. (2019). *Libyan city, primed for war, answer mother's plea with peace pact*. Report, https://www.usip.org/blog/2019/11/libyan-city-primed-war-answers-mothUnitedStateInstituteofPeaceers-plea-peace-pact.

Woods, D. (1992). Civil Society in Europe and Africa: Limiting state power through a public sphere. *African Studies Review, 35*(2), 77–100.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

Chapter 11
Dynamics of Activism and Governance in Tindouf Refugee Camps: The Emergence of New Political Actors

Houssine Soussi

Abstract This chapter explores the dynamics of governance and activism in the Tindouf refugee camps, emphasizing the emergence of new political actors challenging the authority of the Polisario Front. It examines the sociopolitical transformations driven by internal dissidence and the Sahrawi diaspora, highlighting key movements like the Sahrawi Revolutionary Youth Movement, Khat al-Shahid, and the Sahrawi Initiative for Change. By addressing issues such as human rights violations, corruption, and governance failures, these actors advocate for democratic reform and alternative solutions, including the Moroccan autonomy plan. The findings underscore the potential for grassroots activism to catalyze governance reform and propose pathways toward conflict resolution and improved refugee welfare.

During the last decade, the refugee camps around Tindouf in southwestern Algeria have seen the emergence of protest movements and citizen initiatives launched either by youth activists such as the "Sahrawi Revolutionary Youth Movement," "Assomoud" (resistance), and the Forum Forsatin, or by former senior officials of the Polisario front such as "Khat al-Shahid" (Line of the Martyr), the "Sahrawi Initiative for Change," and "the Sahrawi Movement for Peace." These initiatives were launched on the one hand to confront the human rights violations perpetrated by the Polisario Front leaders against the sequestered population for nearly 48 years, by publicly denouncing the heinous and abominable crimes that have been perpetrated against innocent Sahrawis, and on the other hand to express their opposition to the bad governance of the political-economic system in place involved in "torture, violations of human rights, corruption, clientelism, tribalism, and for bargaining with the sufferings of the Sahrawi people" in relation to many cases of misappropriation of international aid discovered and denounced in 2015 by the European Union's anti-fraud office.

This chapter aims to study this new situation in the Tindouf camps, characterized by the burst in the political field of the Sahrawi separatist movement of new organizations at the margins of the official structures of the "government" of the Polisario

H. Soussi (✉)
University of Ibnou Zohr, Agadir, Morocco
e-mail: h.soussi@uiz.ac.ma

© The Author(s) 2026

M. Elayah (ed.), *Governance without Government in the MENA Region*,
Nonprofit and Civil Society Studies,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-03953-8_11

Front. This new surge, which is certainly a clear response to a situation of political vacuum and desperation, will eventually lead to the transformation of governance from a failing, illegitimate regime to new emerging actors. This study will particularly analyze how these complementary and/or alternative organizations are imposing themselves as important actors not only within the Tindouf refugee camps but also in the diaspora. It will also focus on how these new actors respond to the aspirations of citizens who yearn for more freedom on the one hand, but also demand that other options be considered, such as the Moroccan autonomy plan, among other political solutions to end this long-lasting conflict and eventually put an end to their suffering.

Keywords Tindouf refugee camps · Polisario Front · Sahrawi political activism · Governance reform · Moroccan autonomy plan

11.1 Introduction

The refugee camps in Tindouf, Algeria, have been home to Sahrawi refugees for over four decades. The camps were established in the wake of the conflict over Western Sahara, which has yet to be resolved. The camps are governed by the Polisario Front, which represents the Sahrawi people in negotiations with Morocco. However, over the past decade, the refugee camps of Tindouf have seen the emergence of protest movements and citizen initiatives launched either by young activists such as the "Sahrawi Revolutionary Youth Movement," "Assomoud" (resistance), and the Forum Forsatin; or by former senior Polisario Front officials such as "Khat al-Shahid" (Line of the Martyr), the "Sahrawi Initiative for Change," and "the Sahrawi Movement for Peace." These initiatives were launched on the one hand to confront the human rights violations perpetrated by the Polisario Front's leadership against the sequestered population for nearly 48 years by publicly denouncing "the heinous and abominable crimes that have been perpetrated against innocent Sahrawis living in the refugee camps" and on the other hand to express their opposition to the bad governance of the political-economic system in place involved in "corruption, clientelism, tribalism, and the bargaining of the suffering of the Sahrawi people" in view of the many cases of misappropriation of international aid discovered and denounced in 2015 by the anti-fraud office of the European Union.

This chapter proposes to study this new situation in the Tindouf refugees' camps characterized by the irruption into the political field of the Sahrawi separatist movement of new organizations on the margins of the official "government" structures of the SADR and Polisario Front. This new surge, which is certainly a clear response to a situation of political vacuum and despair, will ultimately lead to the transformation of governance from a failed illegitimate regime to new emerging actors. This chapter will analyze how these complementary and/or alternative organizations are emerging as important actors in the refugee camps of Tindouf but also in the diaspora. It will also explore the potential for collaboration and cooperation among these organizations and the existing governance structures. Additionally, the chapter will focus on how these new actors are responding to the aspirations of citizens of the camps who yearn for more freedom on the one hand, but who also demand to consider other options to resolve the long-lasting conflict of Western Sahara, such as the consideration of the Moroccan autonomy plan among other political solutions to end the conflict and ultimately put an end to their suffering.

The findings of this research will contribute to the growing body of literature on governance without government in refugee camps and shed light on the complexities of the conflict over Western Sahara. By analyzing the challenges to the authority of the Polisario Front from within the camps, this chapter will provide insights into the potential for democratic reform and human rights advocacy in the camps. Ultimately, this research aims to contribute to the search for a peaceful and just resolution to the conflict over Western Sahara.

To comprehensively investigate the evolving dynamics within the Tindouf refugee camps and the emergence of new political actors, this study employs a documentary analysis approach. The primary data sources for this research consist of reports from reputable international organizations such as UNHCR, WFP, and the UN, offering a valuable perspective on the humanitarian aspects of the camps. Additionally, a thorough examination of literature and media produced by the POLISARIO Front and other emerging organizations, including the “Sahrawi Revolutionary Youth Movement,” “Forsatin,” “Assomoud,” and the “Sahrawi Initiative for Change,” … has been conducted.

This methodological choice allows for a multifaceted understanding of the political landscape, encompassing both external observations and internal narratives. By triangulating information from diverse sources, the study aims to provide a nuanced analysis of the motivations, grievances, and strategies of the newly emergent political entities within the Tindouf refugee camps. The governance vacuum in the Tindouf refugee camps has spurred the emergence of alternative political actors and grassroots movements. These groups challenge the Polisario Front’s dominance and advocate for human rights, transparency, and inclusive governance amidst systemic corruption and repression. This chapter analyzes the political, social, and economic dynamics within the Tindouf camps and examines how emerging actors reshape governance structures. It also explores the implications of these developments for conflict resolution and refugee welfare.

Chapter Structure Section 11.2 provides an overview of governance challenges in the camps.

- Section 11.3 introduces key emerging movements and their grievances.
- Section 11.4 evaluates the impact of these movements on governance and refugee welfare.
- Section 11.5 presents policy recommendations for enhancing governance and conflict resolution.

11.2 Governance Without Government and Alternative Governance Structures in Refugee Camps

The concept of "governance without government" has received significant attention in political science and international relations literature. This concept describes the emergence of non-state actors and nonhierarchical structures that perform governance functions in the absence of a centralized government. In recent years, this concept has gained prominence as a means of analyzing and characterizing various forms of collective action that do not rely on state authority or intervention. Governance without government refers to "the processes and institutions, both formal and informal, that guide and restrain the collective activities of a group" (Rosenau & Czempiel, 1992). It encompasses a range of actors, mechanisms, and outcomes that operate at different levels and across different sectors.

One of the contexts where governance without government is particularly relevant is that of refugee camps. As places where people flee to escape conflict, persecution, violence, and natural disasters, refugee camps require effective governance structures to provide basic services, ensure safety, and protect the rights of the inhabitants. The latest statistics from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) indicate that there were 89.3 million forcibly displaced individuals worldwide, of which 27.1 million were refugees living in camps at the end of 2021 (UNHCR 2021). Accordingly, refugee camps pose significant challenges for governance, as they often lack effective legal frameworks, institutional capacities, and democratic accountability. Moreover, they involve multiple stakeholders with diverse interests and agendas, such as refugees themselves, host communities, humanitarian agencies, donors, governments, and non-state armed groups.

The governance of refugee camps has been a topic of great interest for researchers due to the unique challenges posed by these temporary settlements. The complex dynamics of power, politics, and economics in these settings have been the subject of many studies aimed at improving our understanding of how to govern refugee camps in a way that promotes the well-being and agency of the displaced populations. Hanafi (2010), for instance, conducted a study on the relationship between power, sovereignty, and space in Palestinian refugee camps located in the Arab East. The focus of the research was on the various modes of governance adopted within the camps. In this research, Hanafi defined the concept of "modes of governance" as the management of a camp in terms of its relationship with legal authorities and local municipalities of the host country, as well as the internal dynamics between groups within the camps, especially concerning conflict resolution for day-to-day problems. This concept pertains according to the author to administrative representation rather than political representation of camp dwellers. Through his research, Hanafi identified the need for social citizen participation, policy-making, and the creation of new institutions that could challenge the clientelism and patronage that had dominated camp politics for a long time. Moreover, David Bulley (2014) argued for the need to give greater attention to the role that community plays in the government of refugee camps as well as resistance to that government. According to him, refugee camps are not exceptional but are increasingly governed by similar security mechanisms in advanced liberal societies, and as a consequence, only the community has the capacity to overturn the camp as a spatial security technology, enabling a more politically optimal form of life for refugees with greater agency, meaning, and mobility gained through sharing a space of coexistence. Hanafi (2010) has also criticized the emphasis on security in refugee camps that had resulted in the confinement of distinctive urban areas to virtual or physical enclosures with military checkpoints. More recently, Bender (2021) argued that democratic rule should be preferred over any other governance structure in refugee camps. According to him, democracy leads to better outcomes than any other decision-making process, due to institutional feedback loops generating accountability of decision-makers and the ability to draw on the epistemic diversity of the refugee population. He notes that since refugees are subjected to rule by the political units that are refugee camps which function as separate economic, legal, and political systems, constituting distinct political units, the all-subjected principle can apply to empower them. However, Bender admits that while democratization does not guarantee the resolution of all issues, it can significantly improve the quality of life in refugee camps.

In another study, Oliver and Boyle (2020) analyzed the shifting policy landscape of UNHCR and what this means for how refugees are governed by humanitarian and state actors. Using Uganda as a site of analysis, the authors suggest that the linking of the more entrenched concept of self-reliance with resilience is another step forward in the entwining of UNHCR's traditional humanitarian mandate with the developmental goals promoted by other global aid organizations. Oliver and Boyle argue that the refugee policies of UNHCR and other recent initiatives by the international community appear to include some significant changes that may improve refugees' well-being and access to rights and protection and catalyze economic and social development for both refugees and host communities.

Furthermore, research has shown that alternative governance structures in refugee camps can have both positive and negative impacts. For example, a study of governance in the Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya by Hyndman (1997) found that traditional community structures provided important social and psychological support for refugees but also perpetuated patriarchal gender norms and limited the participation of women and marginalized groups. Similarly, a study of Rohingya refugee camps in Cox's Bazar district conducted by Khaled (2021) showed that the adoption of the "Do No Harm" principle as an analytical framework inadvertently harmed poorer hosts and negatively affected local capacities for peace. The study argued that humanitarian agencies must go beyond identifying unintended consequences and oversights in their interventions in refugee camps, and instead, they should actively accept responsibility for any harm caused and take necessary measures to mitigate or prevent harm in future interventions, guided by the Do No Harm principle.

Other scholarly literature on governance in refugee camps has identified and examined various types of alternative governance structures, including refugee self-governance, which explores how refugees organize themselves to manage their own affairs (Agier, 2008; Betts et al., 2017; Jacobsen, 2014; Loescher et al., 2008); host community governance, which investigates how local authorities and communities interact with refugees (Betts et al., 2014; Crisp et al., 2012; Milner, 2009); humanitarian governance, which pertains to how humanitarian agencies provide assistance and protection to refugees (Barnett & Weiss, 2008; Ferris, 2011; Sandvik, 2018); and hybrid governance, which scrutinizes the ways in which different actors collaborate or compete with one another (Menkhaus, 2007; Raeymaekers et al., 2008; Schomerus & Allen, 2010).

In addition to these researches, other studies have highlighted the adverse conditions prevailing in refugee camps (Crisp, 2000, 2003) which are rife with human rights violations, with refugees being subjected to various forms of abuse (Verdirame & Harrell-Bond, 2005; Hyndman, 1997). They are often threatened with violence and face severe restrictions on their rights to free movement, the right to work, as well as their freedom of expression and assembly.

Overall, these studies suggest that the governance of refugee camps is a complex and multifaceted issue that requires attention to the social, economic, and political dimensions of camp life. While spatial target policies and humanitarian aid are important, they are only temporary measures that do not address the underlying problems in refugee camps. Empowering refugees with greater agency and democratizing decision-making processes may lead to better outcomes for refugees living in camps. However, the success of governance structures in refugee camps depends on their ability to address the diverse needs and interests of refugees, including marginalized groups such as women and children. Furthermore, the involvement of host communities and local authorities in the governance of refugee camps is essential for promoting social cohesion and integration between refugees and their host communities. Indeed, the governance of refugee camps should be seen as a collective responsibility that involves a range of stakeholders, including international organizations, host governments, and refugees themselves. Only by working together can we ensure that refugee camps are places of safety, dignity, and hope for those who are forced to flee their homes.

11.3 Background on the Western Sahara Conflict and the Establishment of Refugee Camps in Tindouf

The conflict in Western Sahara is a long-standing dispute that stems from the colonial legacy and territorial disagreements during the accession to the independence of the Kingdom of Morocco in 1956 and Mauretania in 1960. In 1957, after the proclamation of Morocco's independence, a wave of insurrection swept through the Western Sahara. Under the impetus of certain cadres of the Moroccan National Liberation Army led by the Istiqlal Party, the Saharan Liberation Army, the Moroccan Liberation Army's southern branch, was created in the southern provinces of Morocco and attacked Spanish troops in the Sidi Ifni, Río de Oro, Tarfaya and Saguía el Hamra regions. These attacks provoked in February 1958 the

"Operation Ecouvillon" involving France and Spain and aiming to put an end to the insurrection. At the same time, King Mohamed V affirmed his will to pursue his action for the restitution of the Sahara to Morocco and declared in a speech delivered in M'Hamid El Ghizlane, in the presence of representatives of the tribes of the Moroccan Sahara "We solemnly proclaim that we will continue our action for the return of our Sahara within the framework of the respect of our historical rights and according to the will of its inhabitants" (Royal Speech, 1958). Few months later, Morocco dissolved the Southern Liberation Army and introduced the Sahara issue to the Fourth Committee (Special Political and Decolonization) of the United Nations (Chegraoui & Jallal, 2020).

In 1960, the United Nations (UN) adopted Resolution 1514, which acknowledged the right of people to self-determination. Similarly, in 1963, the charter of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) obliged its members to uphold the "integrity of colonial borders," which was rejected by Morocco. In 1966, the UN and OAU urged Spain, the colonial power, to withdraw from the region and allow for a self-determination process supervised by the UN and agreed by the anti-colonialist coalition that consisted of Morocco, Mauritania, and Algeria. Despite their call for Spain to respect the process and withdraw, General Franco's administration took steps to safeguard Spanish interests in the area. One such measure was granting the territory internal autonomy status in September 1973 and gradually implementing self-determination in a way that would preserve Spain's influence. However, on April 29, 1973, the POLISARIO (an abbreviation for Spanish Frente Popular de Liberación de Saguía el Hamra y Río de Oro) was founded in Zouerate, Mauritania, with the primary aim of ending Spanish control over Western Sahara (Chegraoui & Jallal, 2020).

The process of self-determination, which Spain had agreed to, was abruptly halted in 1974 when Morocco broke away from the anti-colonialist coalition and launched a diplomatic campaign against Spain alone. This move by Morocco came after it seized the opportunity presented by General Franco's illness. Hassan II, the King of Morocco, launched an initiative aimed at stopping Spanish decolonization through a referendum on self-determination.

In 1975, the status of Western Sahara was brought before the United Nations and the International Court of Justice. The UN fact-finding mission reported on October 15, 1975, that a majority of the territory's inhabitants favored independence. The ICJ issued a ruling on October 16, 1975, which acknowledged the historical ties between Western Sahara and Morocco but stated that these ties did not prevent the right to self-determination of peoples of the territory (ICJ, 1975). Nevertheless, on November 6, 1975, Morocco initiated the "Green March," a nonviolent demonstration in which around 350,000 Moroccans marched into the Saharan provinces to assert their country's claim to the territory. Spain then acquiesced and retreated from the area on November 8, 1975, allowing Morocco and Mauritania to partition the territory between them.

On November 14, 1975, just 6 days prior to General Franco's death, Spain signed a tripartite agreement in Madrid with Morocco and Mauritania that established a provisional administration of the area until its ultimate status was determined. After

Spain formally withdrew from the region on February 26, 1976, the Polisario Front announced the establishment of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) on February 27, 1976, as the government-in-exile of Western Sahara.

Afterward, the Sahrawi nationalists, with support from Algeria, initiated a guerrilla warfare campaign to liberate the region. Starting in 1976, the Sahrawi people began to converge on Tindouf, located on the Algerian border, resulting in 40,000 refugees by mid-1976, a number that rose to 80,000 by the end of 1977 (Martin, 2005). It has therefore been more than 40 years since part of the Sahrawi refugees has been in the Tindouf camps in southern Algeria.

After suffering defeats in battles with Polisario, Mauritania relinquished its claims to the territory and withdrew its forces in 1979 and signed a peace agreement with the Polisario Front, allowing Morocco to reintegrate these liberated territories. The Polisario Front responded with a long guerrilla war against Morocco.

After years of conflict and procrastination, Morocco and the Polisario Front agreed in 1988 to the United Nations Secretary-General's proposal for intervention to end the conflict over Western Sahara and to hold a referendum on self-determination. This led in 1991 to the creation of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) and eventually to a ceasefire agreement. However, the referendum was never implemented, and in 2000, the UN Secretary-General shifted towards a negotiated political settlement. Two plans proposed by James Baker failed, as they were rejected by one or both parties. In 2007, Morocco presented an autonomy plan for the territory, which was welcomed by the UN Security Council and the international community. The Moroccan autonomy plan for the Sahara is presented as a compromise in which Morocco maintains its territorial integrity while transferring some powers to the Saharawi population to govern themselves democratically. The plan establishes an autonomous region with its own administrative, legislative, and judicial powers, including the establishment of a local government led by a head of government appointed by the Moroccan King but elected by the regional Parliament.

For almost 30 years, the situation in Western Sahara remained the same until a group of the Polisario Front blocked the main land connection between Morocco and Mauritania in mid-October 2020, which became known as the Guerguerat crisis. Morocco appealed to the United Nations for a peaceful resolution of the conflict, but on November 13, they launched an operation to restore traffic and free movement of goods and people along the road in the buffer strip. The Polisario Front responded by announcing their unilateral withdrawal from the ceasefire.

In the wake of the Guerguerat crisis, US President Donald Trump issued a proclamation on December 4, recognizing Morocco's sovereignty over the entire territory of Western Sahara. The proclamation expressed support for "Morocco's autonomy plan as the only basis for a just and lasting solution to the Western Sahara dispute" and announced the opening of a consulate in the city of Dakhla to boost economic and business opportunities in the region (Soussi, Forthcoming).

In the meantime, the refugees, mostly women and children, have been living in refugee camps in Tindouf, since the early years of the conflict. These camps situated in southwestern Algeria, near the border of Morocco and Mauritania, are located in an environment that is considered one of the most severe in the world, characterized by extreme heat and scarce access to water and other resources (World Food Program, 2023). UNHCR has not been authorized to register the population, resulting in uncertainty about the precise number of people involved (UNHCR, 2017). Nonetheless, according to UNHCR's latest official planning figure, about 125,000 individuals receiving food and nutrition assistance and 90,000 vulnerable Sahrawi refugees live in five camps near Tindouf (UNHCR, 2018). Initially, the refugees resided in conventional tents known as *khaimas*. However, as time progressed, they started constructing lasting dwellings using adobe blocks (a blend of indigenous soil and water) and metal roofs (Eyt, 2019).

The governance of the Tindouf refugee camps is highly unusual and exceptional among all refugee camps globally as the host country, Algeria, has transferred its responsibility for managing the camps to the Polisario Front, relinquishing various powers such as administrative, judicial, police, military, political, and human rights protection (Human Rights Watch, 2008). As a result, the refugees have a certain level of autonomy from the host country. These responsibilities are now held by the administrative authorities of the Polisario Front, who provide essential services like education, healthcare, and food aid. However, the living conditions in the camps are challenging, and refugees have limited opportunities for education, employment, and self-determination. Currently, the primary United Nations agencies operating within the camps are UNHCR, WFP, and UNICEF. Additionally, various other organizations such as Handicap International (HI), Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, and Oxfam Solidarity are also working in the region (Eyt, 2019). These entities work collaboratively with local institutions in their respective areas of intervention.

However, the Tindouf refugee camps have stirred up controversy, with some observers alleging that the Polisario Front has used the camps as a way to maintain its hold on power and suppress dissent. As a result, various organizations have emerged within the camps in recent years to challenge the authority of the SADR and the Polisario Front, while advocating for democratic reform and human rights.

This historical context has shaped a governance model in Tindouf that, while initially centralized under the Polisario Front, has increasingly faced challenges to its legitimacy and control—a dynamic explored in the following section.

11.4 Legitimacy and Hybrid Governance in Tindouf Refugee Camps

The governance of the Tindouf refugee camps has long been characterized by a complex interplay of formal and informal authority structures. The Polisario Front, which claims to act as the "legitimate representative" of the "Sahrawi people," has maintained control over camp governance, exercising authority through the self-proclaimed Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR). However, over the past decade, the legitimacy of this governance model has come under increasing scrutiny, particularly as new political actors have emerged to challenge the Polisario's authority (Boukhars, 2012; Human Rights Watch, 2008).

Legitimacy in the context of Tindouf Camps can be examined through three key dimensions: (1) *Traditional legitimacy*, derived from the historical role of the Polisario Front in the Sahrawi nationalist movement; (2) *performance-based legitimacy*, which relates to the effectiveness of governance, service provision, and representation of the camp population's interests; and (3) *popular legitimacy*, reflecting the perception and acceptance of authority by the refugee population. Recent developments indicate a decline in these legitimacies with a focus in performance-based and popular legitimacy, as grievances over human rights violations, corruption, and governance failures (OLAF, 2007; UNHCR, 2005) have fueled widespread discontent (Dahmani, 2018; Harit, 2014).

These dynamics have led to the emergence of hybrid governance, a model in which authority is no longer centralized but rather distributed among multiple competing actors and which is characterized by the following:

- *The persistence of formal structures,* as the Polisario retains de jure control but struggles to enforce its monopoly (Boukhars, 2012).
- *The emergence of informal and parallel political movements*, as grassroots actors such as the Sahrawi Revolutionary Youth Movement, Khat al-Shahid, and the Sahrawi Initiative for Change, which challenge the status quo and propose alternative governance models and new political solutions to the conflict (Arif, 2022; El Katab & Mourad, 2019).
- *The role of external influences*, including the Sahrawi diaspora and international organizations, which exert pressure on governance practices and amplify the voices of emerging political actors (UNHCR, 2017; WFP, 2023).

The erosion of Polisario's legitimacy and the rise of hybrid governance have not occurred in a vacuum; they are directly tied to systemic failures in administration, human rights, and resource management, as detailed below.

11.5 The Limits of Polisario Front Governance

Since the establishment of the refugee camps in 1975, the Polisario Front's governance has been characterized by many disfunctions such as torture, prolonged detention without trial or charge (Human Rights Watch, 2008), forced labor, corruption, clientelism, and tribalism (Boukhars, 2012). The situation has deteriorated further over time, exacerbated by the massive inflow of international aid for Sahrawi refugees in the Tindouf camps located in southwestern Algeria.

Indeed, refugees living in the camps around Tindouf are recognized prima facie (i.e., without individual registration) by Algeria, the host state (UNHCR, 2017). The lack of registration of these refugee populations, in accordance with international humanitarian law, has been considered as an impediment to the 1951 Convention on

Refugees and their Rights, the registration of refugees being a statutory obligation of UNHCR, and an inalienable responsibility of the host country of these camps (UNHCR, 2017). Additionally, UNHCR has faced difficulties in accessing all refugee camps in Tindouf province, as well as detention centers, which also constitutes an impediment to the work of this organization in the refugee camps (UNHCR, 2017).

In addition to the violations of their fundamental rights for nearly 48 years, the populations of the Tindouf camps have been deprived, for several decades, of the humanitarian aid intended for them by international donors. Indeed, a report published by the European Union's Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) revealed "well-organized, years-long" embezzlement by the Polisario Front of humanitarian aid designated for Sahrawi refugees (OLAF, 2007). The results of the OLAF investigations support earlier accounts by both the European the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2005) and the World Food Program (2005), who have revealed numerous cases of the fraudulent and large-scale diversion of humanitarian aid intended for the populations of the camps (El Barakah, 2015). The aid is meant to be used to improve the living conditions of Sahrawi refugees in the Tindouf camps but has been systematically and organizedly diverted for personal use by some Polisario Front officials and Algerian authorities (OLAF, 2007; United Nations General Assembly, 2016).

The World Food Program and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees that the Polisario leadership routinely sells food aid intended for the refugees in the camps on the black market for their own personal enrichment.

This mismanagement of international aid has had dramatic consequences on the daily life of Sahrawi refugees in the Tindouf camps. Indeed, the funds intended for the improvement of infrastructure, health, and education have been diverted, leaving the Sahrawi refugees in a situation of extreme insecurity. In addition, following the publication of this report by the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF), the European Union has decided to "drastically" reduce the humanitarian aid allocated to the Tindouf camps (El Barakah, 2015).

Moreover, this situation has also led to the establishment of practices of clientelism and tribalism within the Polisario Front, which have favored certain groups at the expense of others (Kozlowski & Bousmid, 2022). These practices have led to a growing polarization of Sahrawi refugees in the camps, which are now divided between supporters of the Polisario Front and those who criticize it. This is the case of "young Sahrawis in the camps [who] are becoming increasingly disenchanted by the failure of the nationalist agenda and upset by the perceived corruption and clientelism of the Polisario elites (Boukhars, 2012).

11.6 Emerging Actors: Profiles and Claims

The governance of the Polisario Front in the refugee camps of Tindouf has been challenged both internally, within the camps and externally by the Sahraoui diaspora active in immigrant associations and youth groups. Within the camps, Sahrawi refugee activists have begun to criticize the dysfunctional political and economic system in place as a result of the absence of active involvement in political discourse and decision-making which has led to the emergence of new entities and protest movements at the periphery of the Polisario Front. One of the first dissident anti-Polisario movement is the *Khat al Shahid* (The Line of the Martyr) launched in 2004 by Mahjoub Salek, cofounder of the Polisario Front and disciples of El Ouali Mustafa Siyed, its first secretary general. Khat al Shahid was first presented as a reformist group within the Polisario front claiming that there had been widespread indignation in the camps in 2004, prior to the creation of the movement, due to the self-enrichment of leaders and the impoverishment of the people, which had resulted in the Sahrawi cause to lose credibility (Dahmani, 2018). The reformist movement also accused opportunistic leaders with a tribal mindset of profiting from the people's suffering. According to Salek, the founder of Khat al Shahid, his movement aimed to discredit the image of the Polisario leaders. He stated: "From now on, many Sahrawis consider these decision-makers as traders of their cause. We have shown the true face of the Front that clings to power to monetize human situations and divert funds allocated to refugees. They divert them to maintain their positions, but nothing more" (Dahmani, 2018). In June 2022, Mahjoub Salek addressed the UN Committee of 24 in New York, where he criticized the "absolutism" and "corruption" of the Polisario leaders. Salek also recounted his own experience of speaking out against abductions, imprisonment, and human rights violations based on tribal and racist grounds, which resulted in his own kidnapping. He expressed his dismay at the inhumane treatment he endured while imprisoned, saying that he was subjected to unspeakable forms of torture and abuse (Arif, 2022). In 2010, the Khat al Shahid movement issued an ultimatum to the Polisario Front, threatening to engage in direct negotiations with Morocco was ultimately carried out by the movement. Khat al Shahid is now urging the international community to provide encouragement and support to Morocco and to help implement what it believes to be the most feasible solution to the long-standing conflict—granting autonomy to the Sahrawi people, allowing them to govern their own affairs through elected institutions and to live in dignity under the rule of law. It believes that Morocco's autonomy plan will bring an end to the suffering of Sahrawi people living in camps and enable them to return to their homeland with pride, supported by international guarantees, to participate in the autonomy of the Sahara under the sovereignty of the Kingdom of Morocco (Arif, 2022).

Among the most prominent dissident groups in the Tindouf refugee camps is the *March fifth movement,* a grassroots initiative founded on March 5, 2011 amid the wave of Arab Spring protests. Founded by Sahrawi refugees—including Talab Bou Hamadi and Amrabih Ahmad Mahmud Ada—the movement operates without formal leadership, mobilizing activists to demand political reforms while nominally supporting the Polisario's independence goals. Its decentralized structure relies on committees to coordinate protests, distribute leaflets, and articulate grievances, such as corruption and exclusionary governance. The March fifth movement gained momentum during its initial year, organizing monthly demonstrations outside the SADR president's office on the fifth day of each month. These protests culminated in a prolonged sit-in from November 19, 2011, to January 9, 2012, timed to coincide with a Polisario Front General Popular Congress, highlighting calls for leadership changes under slogans like "The people want the reform of the regime."

Though largely tolerated, the movement faced subtle suppression, such as blocked access to UN officials and censorship in state media (Human Rights Watch, 2014). Its critiques of the SADR's stagnant governance, likened to Libya's discredited pre-revolution systems, underscore broader disillusionment with the Polisario's authoritarian tendencies. As a product of both local grievances and regional protest movements, the March fifth Movement exemplifies the growing demand for accountability within the camps, bridging the gap between reformist and revolutionary dissent.

The Sahara Initiative for Change (SIC) is another significant alternative to the Polisario Front that was created by cadres of the Polisario Front with the aim of promoting an exit from the situation of political and social stagnation in Saharawi society in the camps. In December 2015, Hadj Ahmed Barikallah, the founder of the initiative and a former Minister and Ambassador of the Polisario Front, decided to express his concerns through an open letter at the 14th Congress of the Polisario Front. As a result, the movement's leaders viewed him as a nuisance and marginalized him. Disillusioned and convinced that change was unlikely, Barikallah gave up and began to reflect on the future of the Sahrawi people. This led him to launch the Sahrawi Initiative for Change (SAI) in November 2017 with a group of military and civilian individuals, including former Polisario Front secretariat member Oulad Ould Moussa. During the preparation of the Polisario Front Congress in 2019, the Sahrawi Initiative for Change publicly condemned the crimes committed by its members. The movement stated in a release on its Facebook page that after hearing testimonies of compatriots who were victims of severe human rights violations by senior officials of the Polisario Front in the 1970s and 1980s, they could not do otherwise but publicly denounce the heinous and abominable crimes committed in the name of the cause against innocent Sahrawis (El Katab and Mourad, 2019).

After 3 years of reflection within the SIC, Hadj Ahmed Barikallah decided in April 2020 to chart a new political course with the creation of the *Sahrawi Movement for Peace* (MSP), an independent political entity which he sees as the only viable solution for the Sahrawi youth who lack direction.

Barikallah explained in an interview with the media *Yabiladi.com* that the Sahrawi Initiative for Change aimed to peacefully address the Polisario's internal issues and have a say in its decisions. However, the movement's efforts failed due to a lack of internal democracy and the dominance of tribal "Asabiyyah" (tribalism) and totalitarian culture. Over the course of nearly 3 years, the group attempted to initiate a dialogue to address the democratic shortcomings of the Polisario's one-party rule. They hoped that the political and social winds of change following the Arab Spring would prompt the Polisario to be more receptive to diverse perspectives. Unfortunately, their efforts proved to be futile, as the Polisario violently suppressed their activists and closed the doors on any chance for progress (Jaabouk, 2020).

As a consequence, Barikallah formed the MSP to challenge the authoritarian control of the Polisario Front and promote democratic reform and human rights in the refugee camps. In the movement's foundation manifesto we can read

> the endless exile, the humanitarian and social crisis, the deterioration of the living conditions of our people. To all of this we must add the testimonies of some survivors of the repression in Polisario prisons, which describe a past marked by brutality, torture and extra-judicial executions, in short, human rights violations that to this day the perpetrators continue to enjoy absolute impunity. These facts have ended up discrediting and delegitimizing the Polisario as the sole representative of the Saharawi people (Saharawis For Peace Foundation manifesto, 2020).

Accordingly, the movement seeks to offer an alternative to the current political structures in the region and aims to find a viable and lasting solution to the issue of Western Sahara. The MSP proponents have cited the exhaustion of the Polisario and its inability to rejuvenate itself or embrace new ideas or initiatives as the rationale for their endeavor. Despite previous efforts, they have encountered resistance and arrogance from an entrenched leadership that is accustomed to authoritarianism and a lack of democracy (Kabbaj, 2020). The Sahrawi Movement for Peace emerged due to the Polisario Front's unchanging state, lack of perspective, and belligerent attitudes towards the conflict. It proposes a peaceful resolution, which is in contrast to the Polisario Front's warmongering stance. Members of the movement come from the Sahrawi diaspora or were once part of the Front but left due to internal conflicts. They are committed to negotiating a workable solution to the Western Sahara problem and support the Moroccan autonomy plan, which they wish to discuss and modify on their terms without fully siding with the kingdom (Bousmid & Islah, 2022).

In an interview with *Jeune Afrique*, the MSP founder revealed that following his resignation in 2012, he became aware of the true nature of the power structure in place. Despite the supposed dissolution of the Polisario Front's "Executive Committee" in 1989, the same individuals have managed to retain their influence through the "Secretariat office." Those who oppose them are likely to be blacklisted and subjected to sanctions that may include imprisonment and torture. In the same interview, Barikallah also discovered that several individuals, including childhood friends he thought had died in combat, had actually perished in Polisario jails. He further revealed that sexual assaults regularly occur in the camps, with the abuse of power leading to rape and sexual violence being a common occurrence. The former minister and diplomat added that it is often joked that it is safer not to have a wife or daughter who is considered attractive (Bousmid & Islah, 2022).

Over the past decade, the refugee camps of Tindouf have seen the emergence of other protest movements and citizen initiatives launched by young activists such as the *Sahrawi Revolutionary Youth Movement*, the association *Assomoud* (resistance) and the Forum *FORSATIN* (www.forsatin.org). These initiatives are aimed at demanding the rights to freedom of expression and movement and dignified living conditions for those sequestered for nearly 48 years in the Tindouf camps, by publicly denouncing the heinous and abominable crimes that have been perpetrated against innocent Sahrawis and by demonstrating in the streets of the camps, or in front of the headquarters of the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees in Rabouni (Harit, 2014). While these internal opposition groups have not been able to challenge the authority of the Polisario Front and the SADR directly, they have nevertheless played an important role in shaping the political landscape and dissidence in the camps. FORSATIN, in particular, has been effective in raising awareness of human rights abuses and promoting greater accountability and transparency in the camps.

Additionally, the mobilization of the Sahrawi diaspora plays a crucial role in the emergence of new organizations alongside the Polisario Front. Over the years, groups such as the *Fórum Canario Saharaui* and the *Saguia el Hamra and Rio de Oro Youth Union*, in addition to other Sahrawi expatriates, have been increasingly involved in the protest movements and citizen initiatives launched in the Tindouf camps. They also support the demands of new organizations and citizen's initiatives that criticize the governance of the Polisario Front and call for political changes.

The Sahrawi diaspora is heavily concentrated in Europe, particularly in Spain (and the Canary Islands), France, and Belgium. These communities regularly organize demonstrations and events to raise public awareness of the plight of Sahrawi refugees and their grievances. They also leverage social media to disseminate information and testimonies regarding living conditions within the Tindouf camps and the activities of new organizations. The mobilization of the Sahrawi diaspora is often viewed as a counterbalance to the influence of the Polisario Front, which historically aligns with Algeria, the host country of the Tindouf refugee camps. Conversely, the Sahrawi diaspora is more diverse and at times more critical of the Polisario Front.

The emergence of grassroots dissent in the Tindouf camps has unfolded within a restrictive legal framework. The SADR constitution explicitly denies Sahrawis the right to form political groups until independence is achieved, mandating exclusive affiliation with the Polisario Front as the sole vehicle for self-determination (Article 31–32).

11.7 Implications and Discussion

Upon analysis, it is evident that the emergence of new structures and organizations within the refugee camps and the diaspora is a direct response to the Polisario Front's inability to effectively control and make decisions, resulting in the formation of alternative groups. These groups have come up where the Polisario Front and its affiliated organizations have failed to meet the expectations of the Sahrawi population of the refugee camps around Tindouf, who are seeking new avenues for their future. These new organizations and initiatives have had a significant impact on the living conditions of Sahrawi refugees, exposing human rights violations perpetrated by the Polisario Front and shedding light on issues like corruption, torture, human rights abuses, clientelism, tribalism, and misappropriation of international aid affecting the camps. They have helped mobilize the refugees to defend their rights and dignity by organizing various events, campaigns, and appeals for aid at the national and international levels. They have also proposed development and governance projects that cater to the needs of the refugees.

Similarly, in the diaspora, these new organizations have played a crucial role in mobilizing the Sahrawi community abroad to defend their rights by organizing events, conferences, and meetings such as *Malga Ahl Sahra* (Gathering of Saharan people), an International Conference for Peace and Security in the Sahara, held on September 22 and 23 in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria (Spain) and which aimed at raising international awareness about the plight of Sahrawi refugees in the Tindouf refugee camps. Due to the inability to actively participate in political discussions and decision-making, these new structures have emerged at the margin of the Polisario Front and maintain their independence.

However, the new organizations and initiatives face significant challenges within the camps such as repression, lack of resources, and fragmentation. They also face legitimacy challenges from the Polisario Front, which is considered the sole legitimate representative of the Sahrawi population in the camps and the host country authorities who wish to maintain the status quo. Despite these challenges, the emerging organizations offer opportunities to provide alternative and complementary voices for the inhabitants of the refugee camps, by reinforcing democracy and citizen participation and eventually by acting as a catalyst for finding innovative solutions to existing challenges and problems.

To sum up, the emergence of new organizations within the Tindouf refugee camps and diaspora has reshaped governance into a hybrid model, where the Polisario's formal authority coexists—and competes—with informal movements and external influences. This fragmentation reflects a legitimacy crisis: while traditional claims to representation persist, performance-based, and popular legitimacy have eroded due to corruption and repression (Boukhars, 2012; Dahmani, 2018). The resulting dynamism has enabled refugees to challenge monolithic narratives, but it also underscores the need for inclusive governance frameworks to reconcile competing claims to authority. As these actors amplify their demands for democratic reform and alternative political solutions—including serious consideration of Morocco's autonomy plan—the international community faces a critical dilemma: how to support Sahrawi refugees' right to self-determination while navigating the Polisario's entrenched opposition to any solution that challenges its claim as sole representative.

11.8 Conclusion

In this study, we explored the impact of emerging organizations on the governance of the Polisario Front in the Tindouf refugee camps in southwestern Algeria, as well as their role in the diaspora. We also examined the aspirations of Sahrawi refugees for political freedom and the consideration of new prospects for conflict resolution. Our findings reveal that the emergence of new organizations is a response to the political vacuum created by the failure of the Polisario Front to address the conflict. These organizations have exposed the dysfunctional governance of the Polisario Front, including corruption, human rights violations, tribalism, clientelism, and misuse of international aid. The study also showed that the new organizations have brought about significant improvements in the living conditions of refugees and have mobilized the diaspora and international community in support of their demands. Furthermore, the new organizations have highlighted the need for greater freedom and democracy and called for consideration of the autonomy plan proposed by Morocco as a solution to the long-standing conflict.

The emergence of alternative political actors in the Tindouf camps underscores the failures of existing governance structures. These movements highlight the potential for grassroots activism to drive democratic reform and conflict resolution. Addressing governance gaps requires collaborative efforts among grassroots organizations, international bodies, and regional stakeholders to promote transparency, accountability, and inclusion. Future Research Directions can deal with how can emerging actors sustain their impact amidst repression and resource constraints? And what role can the diaspora play in bridging gaps between camp residents and international advocacy efforts?

References

Agier, M. (2008). *Gérer les indésirables - Des camps de réfugiés au gouvernement humanitaire*. Flammarion.

Arif, H. (2022, June 15). *Sahara*. Un ancien du Polisario pour la souveraineté marocaine. L'Observateur.info. https://lobservateur.info/article/103121/actualites/sahara-un-ancien-du-polisario-pour-la-souverainete-marocaine

Barnett, M., & Weiss, T. G. (Eds.). (2008). *Humanitarianism in question: Politics, power, ethics* (1st ed.). Cornell University Press. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctt7v7ms

Bender, F. (2021). Should refugees govern refugee camps? *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*. https://doi.org/10.1080/13698230.2021.1941702

Betts, A., et al. (2014). *Refugee economies: Rethinking popular assumptions*. Refugee Studies Centre, Oxford. www.rsc.ox.ac.uk/refugeeeconomies

Betts, A., Omata, N., & Bloom, L. (2017). Thrive or survive? Explaining variation in economic outcomes for refugees. *Journal on Migration and Human Security, 5*(4), 716–743. https://doi.org/10.1177/233150241700500401

Boukhars, A. (2012, March 12). *Simmering discontent in the Western Sahara*. Carnegie Endowment. Retrieved June 12, 2023 from https://carnegieendowment.org/2012/03/12/simmering-discontent-in-western-sahara-pub-47461.

Bousmid, R., & Islah, F. (2022, November 28). Sahara occidental: «De Dakhla à Tindouf, comment je suis devenu séparatiste». *Jeune Afrique*. Retrieved from https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1395678/politique/sahara-occidental-de-dakhla-a-tindouf-comment-je-suis-devenu-separatiste/

Bulley, D. (2014). Inside the tent: Community and government in refugee camps. *Security Dialogue, 45*(1), 63–80. https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010613514788

Chegraoui, K., & Jallal, N. (2020). *Le Polisario: point d'histoire, plutôt un discours mémoriel*. Policy Center for the New South. Retrieved January 22, 2023, from https://www.policycenter.ma/publications/le-polisario-point-dhistoire-plutot-un-discours-memoriel

Crisp, J. (2000). A state of insecurity: The political economy of violence in Kenya's refugee camps. *African Affairs, 99*(397), 601–632. https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/99.397.601
Crisp, J. (2003). *No solution in sight: The problem of protracted refugee situations in Africa*. No. 68, Center for Comparative Immigration Studies, UC San Diego.
Crisp, J., et al. (2012). Displacement in urban areas: New challenges, new partnerships. *Disasters, 36*(1), S23–S42.
Dahmani, Y. (2018, May 21). *L'autre récit de Mahjoub Salek #6: «Les renseignements algériens m'ont fait quitter les camps de Tindouf»*. Yabiladi.com. Retrieved from https://www.yabiladi.com/articles/details/65113/l-autre-recit-mahjoub-salek-renseignements.html
El Barakah, T. (2015). *Embezzlement of humanitarian aid: EU to reduce its aid to Tindouf camps*. Morocco World News. Retrieved June 15, 2023, from https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2015/03/153535/embezzlement-humanitarian-aid-eu-reduce-aid-tindouf-camps
El-Katab, A., & Mourad, T. (2019, September 11). *Pour l'ISC, le changement c'est maintenant Les crimes du Polisario mis à nu à la veille de son pseudo-congrès*. Libération. Retrieved January 17, 2023, from https://www.libe.ma/Pour-l-ISC-le-changement-c-est-maintenant_a111571.html
Eyt, F. (2019). *Analyse & opportunités pour une approche résilience commune dans les camps de réfugiés Sahraouis en Algérie, WFP*. World Food Programme.
Ferris, E. (2011). Faith and humanitarianism: It's complicated. *Journal of Refugee Studies, 24*(3), 606–625. https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fer028
Hanafi, S. (2010). Framing Arab socio-political space: State governmentality, governance and non-institutional protestation. *Contemporary Arab Affairs, 3*(2), 148–162. https://doi.org/10.1080/17550912.2010.502726
Harit, F. (2014, July 22). *Camps de Tindouf: des jeunes veulent intensifier leur "lutte" contre le Polisario [Tindouf camps: youth want to intensify their "fight" against Polisario]*. Afrik.com. Retrieved March 6, 2023, from https://www.afrik.com/camps-de-tindouf-des-jeunes-veulent-intensifier-leur-lutte-contre-le-polisario
Human Rights Watch. (2008). *Human rights in Western Sahara and in the Tindouf refugee camps*.
Human Rights Watch. (2014). *Off the radar: Human rights in the Tindouf refugee camps*. Retrieved from https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/10/18/radar/human-rights-tindouf-refugee-camps
Hyndman, J. (1997). Refugee self-management and the question of governance. *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees, 16*(2), 16–22. https://doi.org/10.25071/1920-7336.21915
ICJ. (1975). *Advisory opinion on Western Sahara of 16 October 1975*. Retrieved January 16, 2023, from https://www.icj-cij.org/files/case-related/61/6196.pdf
Jaabouk, M. (2020, May 12). *Hach Ahmed: "Il est temps d'en finir avec le mythe du Polisario seul représentant légitime des Sahraouis" [Hach Ahmed: "It's time to end the myth of Polisario as the sole legitimate representative of Sahrawis"]*. Yabiladi.com. Retrieved March 6, 2023, from https://www.yabiladi.com/articles/details/93417/hach-ahmed-temps-d-en-finir.html
Jacobsen, K. (2014). Livelihoods and forced migration. In E. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, G. Loescher, K. Long, & N. Sigona (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of refugee and forced migration studies*. Oxford University Press.
Kabbaj, M. (2020, July 22). *À Tindouf, la contestation cible la direction du Polisario et de l'Algérie. Maroc Hebdo*. Retrieved March 5, 2023, from https://www.maroc-hebdo.press.ma/tindouf-contestation-polisario-algerie
Khaled, A. F. M. (2021). Do no harm in refugee humanitarian aid: The case of the Rohingya humanitarian response. *International Journal of Humanitarian Action, 6*, 7. https://doi.org/10.1186/s41018-021-00093-9
Kozlowski, N., & Bousmid, R. (2022, March 15). *Sahara: le Polisario déstabilisé par les conflits tribaux. Jeune Afrique*. Retrieved March 1, 2023, from https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1326912/politique/sahara-le-polisario-destabilise-par-les-conflits-tribaux/
Loescher, G., Betts, A., & Milner, J. (dir.). (2008). *The UNHCR, the politics and practice of refugee protection into the 21st century, Londres*. Routledge.

Martín, P. S. (2005). Nationalism, identity and citizenship in the Western Sahara. *The Journal of North African Studies, 10*, 565–592.

Menkhaus, K. (2007). The crisis in Somalia: Tragedy in five acts. *African Affairs, 106*(424), 357–390. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4496459

Milner, J. (2009). Refugees and the regional dynamics of peacebuilding. *Refugee Survey Quarterly, 28*(1), 13–30. http://www.jstor.org/stable/45054420

OLAF. (2007). *Final Investigation Report OF/2003/0521*. European Commission European Anti-Fraud Office. Retrieved June 15, 2023, from https://moroccoonthemove.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/OLAF-Report-English.pdf

Oliver, M., & Boyle, P. (2020). *Oñati Socio-Legal Series*.

Raeymaekers, T., Menkhaus, K., & Vlassenroot, K. (2008). State and non-state regulation in African protracted crises: Governance without government? *Afrika Focus, 21*(2), 7–21. https://doi.org/10.1163/2031356X-02102003

Rosenau, J. N., & Czempiel, E. O. (Eds.). (1992). *Governance without government: Order and change in world politics*. Cambridge University Press.

Saharawis for Peace Foundation manifesto. (2020). Retrieved March 3, 2023, from https://saharauisporlapaz.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/D%C3%A9claration-de-fondation-du-mouvement.pdf

Sandvik, K. B. (2018). A legal history: The emergence of the African resettlement candidate in international refugee management. In A. Garnier, L. Lyra Jubilut, & K. B. Sandvik (Eds.), *Refugee resettlement: Power, politics and humanitarian governance* (pp. 46–69). Berghahn Books.

Schomerus, M., & Allen, T. (2010). *Southern Sudan at odds with itself: Dynamics of conflict and predicaments of peace*.

UNHCR. (2005). *Inquiry report. INQ/04/005*. Retrieved June 15, 2023, from https://moroccoonthemove.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/UNHCR-Inquiry-Report-on-Diversion-of-Food-Aid-in-the-Tindouf-Camps-2005.pdf

UNHCR. (2017). *UNHCR submission for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights' Compilation Report on Algeria, to the Universal Periodic Review: 3rd Cycle, 27th Session*, May 2017. Retrieved from https://www.upr-info.org/sites/default/files/document/algeria/session_27_-_may_2017/unhcr_upr27_dza_e.pdf

UNHCR. (2018). *Sahrawi refugees in Tindouf*, Algeria: Total In-Camp Population, March 2018.

United Nations General Assembly. (2016, October 5). *Soixante et onzième session, 4e séance—Après-midi. CPSD/609. Le détournement de l'aide humanitaire destinée aux camps de Tindouf et la légitimité du Polisario pour représenter les Sahraouis au cœur des débats de la Quatrième Commission*. Retrieved June 15, 2023, from https://press.un.org/fr/2016/cpsd609.doc.htm

Verdirame, G., & Harrell-Bond, B. (2005). *Rights in exile: Janus-faced humanitarianism*. Berghahn Books.

World Food Programme. (2005). *Report of Inspections: WFP Algeria (3 to 17 March 2005)*. Retrieved June 15, 2023, from https://moroccoonthemove.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/World-Food-Programme-Inquiry-Report-on-Operations-in-Algeria-2005.pdf

World Food Programme. (2023). *Summary report on the evaluation of the interim country strategic plan for Algeria (2019–2022)*. Retrieved June 15, 2023, from https://executiveboard.wfp.org/document_download/WFP-0000145831

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

Chapter 12
Trapped in Governance Dilemmas: Civil Society Organizations in Conflict Areas: Insights from Palestine

Rashed Al Jayousi

Abstract The study of conflict areas has become increasingly relevant, especially concerning civil society organizations (CSOs) that confront a myriad of challenges in areas with limited statehood. This chapter delves into the intricate interplay of internal and external governance dynamics in CSOs, uncovering how each governance dynamic may lead to imbalances in stakeholder management, with accountability often favoring donors over other stakeholders. Surprisingly, this phenomenon of skewed accountability transcends beyond large non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and extends its influence even to the smaller CSOs, which are typically recognized for their strong social base. Drawing on structured questionnaires and in-depth interviews, our investigation reveals that both NGOs and smaller CSOs grapple with a significant reliance on donors, often leading to compromises that run counter to their founding principles. Our findings showcase the stark contrast between individuals benefiting from donor funds and those grappling with a dissonance between their ideals and compromised outputs. Amidst these complexities, the urgency to forge coalitions and networks emerges as a compelling strategy to defy existing paradigms and foster alternative pathways. This chapter calls for strategic approaches to strike a balance between embracing necessary donor dependence and preserving the authenticity and core values of civil society.

Keywords CSOs · Governance · Palestine · Conflict · Limited statehood · Internal and external governance

12.1 Introduction

Governance is not confined to governments or elected representatives; rather, it involves societal actors and private entities who work together to identify, solve, and manage current and emerging issues (Kooiman, 1993; Rhodes, 1997). This is

R. Al Jayousi (✉)
Graduate School of Economics and Management, Tohoku University, Sendai, Japan

© The Author(s) 2026

M. Elayah (ed.), *Governance without Government in the MENA Region*,
Nonprofit and Civil Society Studies,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-03953-8_12

especially relevant when governments are unable to provide basic services and public goods due to historical legacies, disasters, conflicts, economic factors, or other extreme circumstances. In these cases, civil society organizations (CSOs) and other local and international non-state actors play an active role in addressing the needs of their constituents through service provision and policy dialogue. As a result, CSOs often assume a governing role in such extreme contexts, which is frequently the case for developing countries.

This chapter aims to investigate the governance of CSOs in conflict-affected areas. Conflict zones provide an ideal context for examining how CSOs govern in areas with limited sovereignty (Arda & Banerjee, 2021). CSOs in developing countries are considered a major component of development policy, as civil society is used to promote development (Hulme et al., 1997). They are perceived as less complex and more transparent than government organizations, as well as more connected to the public and better equipped to address developmental needs (Lewis, 2014; Edwards, 2014; Howell & Pearce, 2001). However, CSOs have been criticized for "losing their roots" by responding to governments and donors rather than their constituents, becoming more reliant on aid (Hulme et al., 1997; Atia & Herrold, 2018). They are also accused of being ideological weapons to promote neoliberalism as a form of new cultural and economic colonialism (Ismail & Kamat, 2018; Choudry & Kapoor, 2013). Consequently, CSOs have become more market-driven and prioritize technical solutions (Srinivas, 2009), leading to the depoliticization of CSOs and neutralization of dissent and resistance (Tartir & Seidel, 2018), contributing to the fragmentation of social issues and social change actors (Zencirci & Herrold, 2022), and lacking legitimacy and accountability (Brown, 2008). As a result, CSOs that are aid-dependent are viewed as a tool of governance, with donors utilizing them for their objectives and exercising power (Atia & Herrold, 2018). While this chapter recognizes such criticisms, CSOs are crucial actors in governance and achieving social change, particularly in fragile states and conflict zones, as well as significant market actors in economic markets (Salamon et al., 1999).

While prior research has primarily focused on how donors and patronage systems have influenced the working dynamics of CSOs, these organizations face a plethora of additional challenges when operating in conflict zones. For instance, they must navigate complex relationships with inflexible and hostile governments, whether at the country or occupying power level, as well as informal practices within their ranks. Despite some research in this area, there remains a significant lack of understanding regarding how other formal and informal actors, aside from donors, shape the governance of CSOs in conflict areas and how the context of conflict affects these governing structures. Furthermore, little attention has been paid to how both external and internal governance of CSOs interact with the broader phenomenon outside the organization. Scholars concerned with nonprofit and governance also had a similar argument calling for a broader scope of nonprofit literature to address the interaction between nonprofit internal governance and the wider society, where there is a need to conceptualize governance as a complex process that involves a range of actors (Ostrower & Stone, 2006).

For that, the purpose of this chapter is to investigate CSOs governing structures in areas of conflict, where there is limited sovereignty and weak governance structures. By examining the internal and external governance of CSOs and the various actors involved, this chapter aims to investigate how these organizations can navigate governance challenges and improve their accountability. Therefore, the chapter seeks to address the following question: How do formal and informal actors impact the CSOs governance internally and externally while operating in conflict areas, and how can these organizations navigate governance challenges while remaining true to their core values and mission? To address this question, this chapter focuses on the case of Palestinian civil society organizations (PCSOs) and their unique challenges operating within the conflict setting of the Israeli occupation of Palestine in the West Bank and Gaza Strip (Gordon, 2008), as well as the permanent blockade on Gaza Strip since 2007, followed by five different wars. Contemporary PCSOs emerged in response to the need of the Palestinian people to preserve their society under occupation. Despite operating under extreme conditions, PCSOs have persevered in the face of challenges. Moreover, the evolving political scene of the last 30 years has brought emerging social and economic challenges upon the Palestinian people, including the arrival of the Palestinian Authority (PA) and failed negotiations with Israeli counterparts (Butt & Butt, 2016). Israel's presence in the region extends beyond acute violence and includes mechanisms of control, such as military barriers and checkpoints, house demolitions (Joronen & Griffiths, 2019), and permits that restrict and monitor the movement and activities of Palestinian citizens within their territories (Berda, 2017). The adverse effects caused by the Oslo Accords and settlements on the agricultural sector and the dispossession of Palestinians have also contributed to the challenges faced by PCSOs (UNCTAD, 2022). The animosity between the government and PCSOs has increased since the arrival of the PA in 1995, as many CSOs had to adjust their roles and give up power, leading to competition over funding provided by donors (Challand, 2008).

To examine PCSOs governance dimensions, the author used a mixed-methods approach, conducting 20 in-depth semi-structured interviews and administering 18 structured questionnaires to various PCSOs. This approach allowed for a concurrent triangulation of data using both qualitative and quantitative data. Interviewed PCSOs were classified into three groups, including community-based organizations (CBOs), nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and umbrella organizations. The collected data was analyzed through coding patterns that were generated into themes. In total, five themes were generated between internal and external governance, and for each theme, there is a list of codes used to generate the specific themes (refer to Table 12.2). This chapter contributes to existing governance literature on CSOs in conflict areas by providing key insights into the complex governance mechanisms and processes and the various actors that shape them. The findings suggest that the problems of governance in aid-driven CSOs are not solely caused by external actors but also by internal individuals within CSOs, as a weak predatory state and power dynamics contribute to the lack of effective and legitimate governance structures.

12.2 Literature Review

12.2.1 Governance, Accountability, and CSOs

Within CSO literature, the miscellaneous usage of the governance concept is being applied to address more than one phenomenon with two main strands of research standing out (Steen-Johnsen et al., 2011). The first is known as external governance and it is concerned with the processes a society is governed, especially non-state actors, such as CSOs, who are involved in these processes (Rhodes, 1997). While the second deals with the internal governance of the organization, it further examines how decision-making structures, accountability mechanisms, and leadership practices shape overall performance and strategic direction (BoD) (Ostrower & Stone, 2006). Steen-Johnsen et al. (2011) have argued that while these dimensions of governance may seem a dichotomy, they are rather intertwined and need to be analyzed together. As internal governance shapes the conditions for the organization's positions and actions within the external governance environment, there is a need to conceptualize CSO governance as an external–internal relationship. Such an approach helps underscore the mutual dependence between internal and external governance, as well as the inherent contradictions that arise from this interdependence. Thus, there is a need to conceptualize CSO governance as an external-internal relationship as such an approach will help underscore the mutual dependence on external and internal governance and the inherent contradictions of such a relationship (Steen-Johnsen et al., 2011).

It is crucial to note that accountability is not merely a component of governance but rather a mechanism for implementing organizational accountability. Different governance theories have implications for how we understand accountability differently (Coule, 2015). In conflict settings, most CSOs subscribe to resource dependence theory when it relates to accountability, where they aim to ensure stability and are more accountable to donors, as established by previous literature (Al Jayousi & Nishide, 2023). Ideally, through a stakeholder theory lens, it is expected that CSOs strive for accountability not only towards donors but also towards the social base they are serving, especially in conflict areas. Therefore, here, it is expected that CSOs' governance is focused on balancing the interests of the public, donors, government, and their mission, leading to policy dialogue and meeting the needs of their stakeholders.

12.2.2 CSOs vs NGOs: Understanding the Choice

CSOs in the Middle East and North Africa do not have a single common definition, and there has been much debate among Arabic scholars on how to define CSOs. In the case of CSOs operating in areas of conflict, Challand (2008) and Kamali (2001) offer a multi-criterion definition that is dynamic and ever evolving, depending on the context. This definition portrays civil society as a sphere or space within society that operates independently from the state, characterized by organized social groups and associations where individuals come together to pursue common interests, express views, and engage in collective action. Moreover, CSOs have an acceptance of basic rights, tolerance, and a commitment to non-violence as means of achieving goals.

Therefore, civil society encompasses various non-state actors, such as NGOs, community groups, religious organizations, grassroots movements, and many other organizations that fit within our earlier defined criterion. However, most research on CSOs and development or on NGOization differentiates between NGOs and smaller CSOs, like community-based organizations (CBOs) and grassroots organizations. It suggests that CBOs and grassroots are less influenced by donors and are more rooted in the social fabric, while NGOs are more susceptible to donor influence and exhibit characteristics of NGOization (Arda & Banerjee, 2021; Atia & Herrold, 2018).

While it is true that CBOs, grassroots, and other local organizations maintain a wider social base connection and often resist NGOization attempts, they should not be exempted from critique. The author argues that in the Palestinian context, CBOs and grassroots organizations are not fundamentally different from NGOs. They, too, are constrained by their role as service providers and depend on external funding. Recent studies have also shown that smaller CSOs in Turkey, Palestine, and Egypt have shown more resistance toward a project-based mindset, but they still adopt NGO-like behavior (Zencirci & Herrold, 2022). Smaller CSOs often identify themselves as NGOs and strive to expand their operations and secure more funding (Costantini et al., 2015).

12.2.3 Areas of Limited Statehood

Conflicts create conditions that make it difficult for a state to exercise authority, leading to the emergence of local power structures (Rotberg, 2004). States in a state of conflict act within areas of limited statehood, such as in the case of Palestine. In areas of limited statehood, a government lacks the sovereignty to implement rules and decisions, and they have no control over the means of violence (Risse, 2011). when the function of a state is limited, it is the ability govern local and international actors to step in to fill the gap left by the state. In the area of limited statehood, the governance of different actors is measured by its legitimacy and effectiveness, in which effectiveness is defined by the ability to provide collective goods or the ability to address the needs of society (Borzel et al., 2018). Social trust, legitimacy, and the design of governance institutions were found to be the key determinants of effective and legitimate governance (Risse & Stollenwerk, 2018). This legitimacy and effectiveness of CSOs governance are limited in areas of conflict as it is dominated by international actors that promote their form of global governance undermining local traditions and voices; thus, the moral legitimacy of CSOs cannot be measured through the norms of deliberative democratic process (Arda & Banerjee, 2021).

12.3 Methods and Data Analysis

12.3.1 Methodological Design

To conceptualize internal and external governance and the influence of both formal and informal actors, a concurrent triangulation design was adopted for the mixed methodology, where complementary but different datasets were gathered on the same topic (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). By adopting such a design, qualitative and quantitative data are collected and analyzed separately, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell & Clark, 2017). Then the two datasets were merged by merging the results through interpretation. Qualitative methodology is the most suitable when it comes to exploring the under-researched phenomenon. In addition, this paper uses a single case study approach to study the unique phenomenon of PCSOs within the context of the Israeli occupation of Palestine (Yin, 2018). Single case studies offer a valuable opportunity to be immersed in a specific phenomenon and extract any theoretical insights (Patton, 2014). The unique and extreme nature of this case due to protracted conflict may be in question as it may lack external validity. However, such uniqueness provides an opportunity to gain rich insights into complex social phenomena as it uncovers underlying factors and mechanisms and accounts for the human experience (Stake, 1995). The limitation of this design lies in its uniqueness, by being focused on a conflict setting; thus, the outcome of this paper cannot be generalized in the positivist sense. However, the author argues that some of the results can provide transferable insights that can be applied in other similar contexts, such as war-torn or fragile states (Denzin & Lincoln 2011).

12.3.2 A Classification of CSOs

This chapter aims to classify non-state, not-for-profit, nonviolent, and nonpartisan organizations pursuing objectives in any sector of society into three levels based on the size of the operation:

- Level 1: Community-based and grassroots organizations.
- Level 2: Established INGOs, NGOs, NPOs, think tanks, faith-based organizations, charitable societies, and research institutes.
- Level 3: NGO umbrella organizations composed of several member NGOs, focused on building thematic networks and territorial platforms to facilitate coordination and connection between different CSO actors for development.

This classification is not attempting to reflect reality. Such classification is only used to develop a better illustration of CSOs and acknowledge the distinct identity of different CSOs within the data analysis method.

12.3.3 Empirical Material

For the qualitative part of this, semi-structured interviews were used as “qualitative interviewing tends to be flexible, responding to the direction in which interviewees take the interview” (Bryman, 2012). In total, 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted. The language of the interview was chosen by the interviewee, and 19 out of the 20 interviewees chose Arabic and one chose English. Oral consent was obtained to record each interview and preserve the identity of the CSOs and interviewees. Their names were replaced with codenames as seen in Table 12.1. The average length of the interview was 45 minutes, with the shortest interview being 24 minutes and the longest being 84 minutes. The interview period lasted a little less than 2 months from 11th February 2022 to ninth April 2022. A total of 15 males and 5 females were interviewed. An interview guide was prepared in both Arabic and English to provide minimal structure to the discussion on external and governance dimensions of their organization. The guide would be sometimes shared with the interviewee before the interview. All interviews were recorded with the consent of the interviewee and then transcribed and translated to be used in the coding later in the data analysis phase alongside the interview notes (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Lastly, the author has working experience with CSOs, allowing interviews to be facilitated and the confidence of interviewees to be earned, facilitating new exploratory data.

In quantitative methodology, a structured questionnaire was developed and disseminated to the interviewees using email, comprising 37 questions that covered the internal and external governance of the interviewed organization, along with information about the respondents and their organization. The survey was made available in both Arabic and English languages, and the language was revised and translated by an accredited translator to ensure cultural appropriateness and accessibility to the target population. Guidelines suggested by Dillman et al. (2014) were followed to ensure the appropriateness of the questions, language, and wording used in the questionnaire to facilitate the respondents’ understanding and enable an accurate assessment of their attitudes and perceptions. The questionnaire had 18 respondents fill out the survey 20 (see Table 12.1), with two participants unable to complete it due to their organizations’ lack of registration as charitable organizations in the PA. This limitation is a challenge facing some CSOs as they do not want to be under the control of the state or donors.

The sampling criteria of CSOs were based on their level and the 12 different sectors identified by the international classification of nonprofit organizations (ICNPO) (Salamon & Anheier, 1996). The chapter employed a mixed purposive sampling approach using multiple criteria, including sector, level, and geographical area, to ensure a diverse sample of CSOs. The sample covered 6 geographical locations, represented the Palestinian diaspora, and included at least 1 CSO from each of the 12 sectors. Thus, mixed purposive sampling was used to recruit organizations that are actively involved and could provide a wealth of insights. Most of these organizations have been active for more than 20 years, are well-established, and are well-known in their respective sectors. Table 12.1 provides information on the sample of

Table 12.1 The sample of CSOs

CSO Codename	CSO Level	Sector	Data Collection Method	Main Office	Management Level
CSO-01	1	Youth	Interview and questionnaire	Jenin	Top management
CSO-02	1	Health and education	Interview and questionnaire	Jerusalem	Top management
CSO-03	1	Peace	Interview and questionnaire	Ramallah	Top management
CSO-04	1	Agriculture	Only interview	Hebron	Top management
CSO-05	1	Women	Interview and questionnaire	Hebron	Top management
CSO-06	1	Development and relief	Interview and questionnaire	Gaza	Top management
CSO-07	1	Relief and social service	Interview and questionnaire	Gaza	Top management
CSO-08	2	Research	Interview and questionnaire	Ramallah	Top management
CSO-09	2	Education	Interview and questionnaire	Ramallah	Top management
CSO-10	2	Women rights	Interview and questionnaire	Jerusalem	Top management
CSO-11	2	Law and security	Interview and questionnaire	Ramallah	Top management
CSO-12	2	Health	Interview and questionnaire	Jerusalem	Top management
CSO-13	2	Agriculture and development	Interview and questionnaire	Jerusalem	Top management
CSO-14	2	Human rights	Interview and questionnaire	Gaza	Top management
CSO-15	2	Environment, peace and development	Interview and questionnaire	Ramallah	Team management
CSO-16	2	Advocacy	Interview and questionnaire	Ramallah	Top management
CSO-17	2	Faith based, environment and development	Interview and questionnaire	Gaza	Top management
CSO-18	2	Relief and social service	Interview and questionnaire	Gaza	Team management
CSO-19	2	Think tank	Only interview	International	Team management
CSO-20	3	Network	Interview and questionnaire	Ramallah	Top management

CSOs in the chapter, including their level, codename, sector, data collection method used, main office location, and management level of the interviewee. The questions for the interviews were developed and tailored based on the sector and level of the CSOs, as well as the interviewee. For the structured part of the interview and the questionnaire questions related to internal governance, we were guided by Law No. 1 of 2000 Concerning Charitable Associations and Civil Society Organizations. For external governance, we used previous literature to develop questions that examine and measure accountability and relations towards stakeholders (Challand, 2008; Costantini et al., 2015), including the social base, donors, and the government. This approach facilitated the collection of unique perspectives and dimensions from each interview, contributing to the examination's inductive nature.

12.3.4 Data Analysis

The data analysis process is guided by the concurrent triangulation design that utilized thematic analysis as well as descriptive statistics to co-interpret the data. In this design, both qualitative and quantitative data were analyzed separately, and the results were merged through a co-interpretation of the data. In the analysis of the quantitative data, descriptive statistics were used to identify patterns or trends in data that are based on the calculated frequency of each answer choice. However, descriptive statistics as the name entails only describes data and is thus limited in its interpretation. However, when coupled with the thematic analysis of the qualitative data, it is possible to fully investigate the identified trends and patterns from the dataset. The thematic analysis was done through a rigorous five-phased iterative process. The first phase is based on deep immersion and critical engagement with data. This phase also known as data familiarization allowed the author to develop a deep and intimate knowledge of the collected transcribed interviews. In the second phase, initial patterning within the dataset was explored and codes were developed to capture meanings with the dataset. Codes are the building block of the analysis as it offers interpretations based on the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The third phase involves generating candidate themes built from different codes that share a similar meaning. In the fourth phase, themes are developed and reviewed to provide a validity check on the quality and scope of the candidate themes by going back to the second phase to avoid misremembering and decontextualization of codes (Braun & Clarke, 2021). In the last phase, themes are defined and named to outline the scope and the boundaries and the core concept of each theme. In the analysis, five main themes were developed that fall under the dimensions of governance, namely, external governance and internal governance (see Table 12.2). Under each theme, the cluster of codes used to develop each theme was shown. In the findings section, the scope of each theme and how external and internal governance interact through such themes will be explored.

12.4 Findings

In the analysis of the governance role of PCSOs, two key themes were identified to internal governance and three themes related to external governance based on codes of similar meaning. These themes provide a conceptual framework for

Table 12.2 Thematic analysis: codes and themes by governance dimensions

Dimensions of Governance	Codes	Themes
Internal Governance	Stagnant Leadership Phantom Boards: Absence of Active Governance Structures Exclusionary Practices and Power Imbalances Government Interference	Board and Leadership Effectiveness
	Dual Loyalties: Personal and Donor Driven Entrenched Networks and Patronage	Power Relations and Accountability
External Governance	Competition with the government for funding and resources Lack of clear governmental policy for development and oversight over CSOs	Government Relations
	Israeli Policy of Delegitimization and Defunding Increased Financial Controls Donor-Driven Aid and Conditional funding City NGOs vs Rural CSOs	Legitimacy and Sustainability
	Collaborative Aid Management Joint Action Networks: CSOs uniting to change power dynamics	Networking and Resilience

understanding the dimensions of PCSO governance. Specifically, the five main themes that emerged from the analysis were labeled as “board and leadership effectiveness,” “power relations and accountability” for internal governance, “government relations,” “legitimacy and sustainability,” and “networking and resilience” for external governance (see Table 12.2).

12.4.1 Internal Governance

Board and Leadership Effectiveness: Exclusion and Disconnection

Many PCSOs are facing a problem of stagnant leadership, where board members and top management positions have remained mostly unchanged since the organization’s foundation. The questionnaire revealed that 11 out of 18 PCSOs still have their founders on the board of directors, and 5 out of 18 are still in top management.

Only one organization saw a complete change in leadership. In addition, the data reveals that turnover in leadership occurs every 2–3 years when a new board member is elected for 12 organizations. Three organizations did not respond about their turnover rate, and only three organizations reported having new members elected every year. Leadership turnover is important for many organizations to ensure that leadership is always evolving and has new perspectives. The quantitative sample may be considered small to represent all CSOs. However, there was a consensus in the interviews that discussed the pointed problem of leadership as one respondent frames it.

> I believe organizations should cease private grouping and underhanded activities so that they can begin benefiting from the skill pool available. While our education system does not encourage leadership and pioneering, many young people possess good skills and have begun exploring innovative leadership projects in the last 4–5 years. However, these young people are not being employed in civil society due to the prevalence of corrupt CSOs Shlalieh. This is evidenced by the lack of transparency and accountability in these organizations. (Interview, CSO-08).

The word Shlalieh is an Arabic word referring to cronyism, a form of nepotism. Moreover, stagnant leadership negatively impacts the future of CSOs where there is no young blood that ensures the CSO's longevity and transfer of knowledge. Many youths are not being used by CSOs and are seen as a threat. Another interview highlighted the importance of giving a leadership role to youth.

> Another issue we face is that civil society is aging and needs the younger generation to step up. Currently, the youth are not policymakers but merely recipients. We must empower them and make them our partners in policymaking to create a brighter future for our state. No one is permanent, and therefore, we must transfer our valuable knowledge and capacities to the next generation, who possess the skills to deal with globalization and technology. (Interview, CSO-20).

One interviewee noted that most boards of directors consist of the minimum legal requirement of seven members and that many board members serve on multiple boards (Interview, CSO-10). This can lead to a lack of diversity and an exclusive board that stagnates over time. This situation should not be happening, as the General Assembly (GA) is responsible for overseeing the selection of board members. However, the top management of the CSO holds all the power when it comes to selecting members and excluding stakeholders from being part of the GA. One interviewee described the GA as "just a formality" (Interview, CSO-09), indicating a lack of transparency and accountability in the process. Moreover, the Palestinian Authority (PA), represented by the Ministry of Interior (MoI), which oversees all affairs related to CSOs, does not play an oversight role when it comes to internal governance. Still, MoI attempted to militarize CSO BoDs by trying to include security personnel in NGOs to exert control and interfere with their work (Interview, CSO-05). Nevertheless, CSOs were able to apply pressure on the PA through the support of donors and NGO networks, resulting in a backtrack from the MoI's initiative.

Power Relations and Accountability

During an interview, one of the participants used the term Dakakin sarcastically to describe some CSOs as shops in Arabic (Interview, CSO-19). This is directly related to dual loyalties, where many CSO founders create CSOs as shops to gain personal financial benefits by applying for project tenders given by donors. As donor aid has dropped in recent years, the number of active CSOs has also decreased. Donor aid reductions (OECD, 2020) have shrunk active CSOs from 3565 in 2017 to under 1000 in 2021, forcing survivors into project-based models (PCBS, 2017; PNGO, 2021). This project-based model has allowed CSOs to act as a supply-demand model, thereby losing their dependency on donors and their demands. This has resulted in a power dynamic that favors donor needs rather than market needs, as well as the financial and sustainability of CSOs. In many cases, the personal agenda of CSOs is also political, as is the case with many CSOs in Gaza. The main goal of some CSOs is to secure political mobilization for their party by providing public goods. As one interviewee pointed out,

> This question is quite political. You have to understand what civil society you are referring to. For example, the Zakka committee and other related civil society organizations related to Hamas used to claim that they played a major role in why Hamas was elected back in 2006 because these committees. At the end of the day, they are all civil society (Interview, CSO-19).

The dual loyalties of CSOs to both donors and personal agendas have led CSOs to be an apparatus to exercise power and exclude people and make a financial gain, hence losing their independence. All of this has led to certain informal actors, like individuals, maintaining power within CSOs in exchange for personal gain, which has entrenched networks and patronage towards donors and other political actors. This project-based mentality and dependence have led to a closed-door environment that limits opportunities for new social innovation ideas as well as actors.

12.4.2 External Governance

Government Relations

Government agencies in conflict contexts with limited sovereignty behave differently compared to other contexts, and this behavior reflects on their relations with the third sector. In these contexts, the relationship between CSOs and the government is often competitive and hostile. One respondent explains that this relationship is not one-sided, as CSOs feel the same way about the PA since its founding in 1995.

> Before the PA, CSOs were not independent bodies, as they were either governmental or semi-governmental. Each organization was essentially a ministry. After the PA was established, it took on the administrative role and CSOs became more like service providers. Before the PA, CSOs had a governance role and played an apolitical role, but this has changed. Today, many political figures have NGOs and come from civil society. The establishment of the PA created animosity between CSOs and the PA, which still exists today (Interview, CSO-09).

In this context, the government is a competitor of CSOs and does not act as a supporter. One interviewee said that the government is

> like any CSO, the government relies on donor support (Interview, CSO-11).

This sense of competition with the government is unique and harmful to CSOs which are vulnerable to the state that is trying to get more funding to sustain its existence. It is important to explore not only the role of international donors and their influence on CSOs but also the CSOs' interaction with a government in a conflict context as it is complex and may have significant implications.

CSOs criticize the PA for their lack of policy agenda for development, as well as an overall lack of oversight of CSOs. With the closure of the Ministry of Planning in 2019, there has been no national policy agenda or strategic plan for each sector that donors and CSOs could refer to implement projects. As a result, most projects are led by donor agendas rather than demand-driven ones. One interviewee described the situation as follows:

> In many instances, the donor asks for the strategic plan of the PA so the projects would be demand-driven rather than donor-driven. But the PA does not have a strategic plan. So, we do a needs assessment of the priorities of the universities, and we will adopt it (Interview, CSO-09).

In the interviews, there was general agreement that the Office of Financial and Administrative Control is not up to the task of conducting thorough and periodic financial and administrative audits on PCSOs. This lack of oversight has a significant impact on internal governance, especially since some CSOs tend to be financially corrupt.

Legitimacy and Sustainability

In the last few years, there have been attempts to limit the work of PCSOs and silence their voices by the Israeli occupation. One interviewee describes a strategy of delegitimization and defunding, where the Israeli government targets Palestinian organizations by labeling them as terrorists and questioning their political affiliations. This has led to restrictions on funding sources and negative public opinion (Interview, CSO-16). In October 2021, the Israeli defense ministry listed six human rights organizations in Palestine as terrorist organizations for prosecuting Israeli figureheads for war crimes in Gaza and the West Bank. The impact of this move has been draining on these organizations, as it has become the main topic of discussion, taking attention away from other human rights issues and draining their resources.

Another issue facing PCSOs is the restrictions on exports imposed by the Israeli army on agricultural products of Palestinian farmers, creating a marketing problem. In Gaza Strip, the devastation of wars has also destroyed many of the projects done by CSOs, such as water treatment and garbage recycling projects. CSOs are facing another challenge in the form of limited financial controls imposed by donors and banks, which claim to be preventing money laundering. CSOs are now required to submit annual and activity reports of their beneficiaries to the banks before they receive funds, leading to lengthy vetting processes that deter donors from investing in the area.

Unstable funding (83% of respondents) and conditional aid (50%) dominate challenges facing PCSOS, surpassing even Israeli occupation impacts. This is because some donors tie aid to a certain political objective, which can be problematic for CSOs. As one director of an NGO umbrella organization stated in their interview,

> The problem with conditional funds is that they require you to adopt their definition of terrorism. Their definition of terrorism makes it sound that all your history as a Palestinian is terrorism. That is why there is a boycott against USAID funding. (Interview, CSO-20).

There are also mentions of more donors imposing security checks and vetting procedures on PCSOs with the western concept of terrorism that limits the number of beneficiaries, especially in the Gaza Strip. This approach to conditional aid is seen as a power of exclusion, depoliticization, and enforcing foreign agendas that is very dangerous to the fabric of society, as previously stated in Challand (2008).

It is important to note that the issue of exclusion is not limited to conditional funding and competition among CSOs. It also extends to the divide between city-based NGOs and rural CSOs. Many level 1 organizations, such as community-based organizations and grassroots groups, located away from major cities like Jerusalem and Ramallah, face challenges in attracting donor attention and funding. As one participant noted,

> there is a difference between our budget and Ramallah NGOs although we operate in similar capacities. The reason being that they are closer to the donor, and they form a relationship and build trust (Interview, CSO-05).

Despite their strong connections to the local community, level 1 organizations often lack the resources and professional skills needed to secure funding. In contrast, level 2 NGOs, located in urban areas, have greater capacity in areas such as proposal writing and networking, which allows them to attract more donors even if they have weaker ties to the community. This disparity has been noted in previous literature and highlights the challenges faced by rural CSOs in accessing resources and support.

Networking and Resilience

Networking plays a crucial role in the strength and survival of PCSOs. According to the questionnaire, 15 out of 18 organizations reported being part of a thematic network. The establishment of NGO umbrella organizations by the PA has facilitated networking and protected the rights and space of CSOs. These umbrella organizations are governed democratically and have healthy internal governance structures. The director of the largest umbrella organization described the governance structure as different from ordinary organizations, with a general assembly consisting of 142 member organizations from both the Gaza Strip and the West Bank (Interview, CSO-20). The West Bank elects a coordinating committee, while Gaza elects its own, resulting in 18 GA members. The coordinating committees represent different member organizations, taking into consideration geographic and sectoral diversity. This ensures that all issues and policies are carried to the committees for discussion and action, opening the possibility for dialogue on new proposed laws or policies that are not yet implemented.

Ergo, NGO networks are critical for resisting the shrinking space and changing power dynamics against not only donor policies but also the PA's authoritarian power grab attempts. These networks act as a pressure group on the government and policymakers, engaging in policy dialogue and holding the government accountable. The healthy internal governance of NGO networks, coupled with their collaborative and pressure group roles, enhances engagement in governance and policy dialogue, enabling them to work towards their objectives effectively. Moreover, the issue of duplication of services among CSOs has been identified as a hindrance to the effectiveness of services. Interviews with CSOs have highlighted the need for aid coordination and collaboration to address this issue. Collaborative aid management, which involves different stakeholders working together to develop strategies and coordinate efforts, can improve aid coordination and ensure the effective and efficient use of resources.

12.4.3 Conceptualizing CSO Governance in Conflict Areas

As has been observed, PCSOs are caught in a cycle of dependence, unaccountability, and disconnection both internally and externally. This lack of accountability within CSOs leads to a lack of accountability towards the government and society, with the organization being answerable only to their entrenched networks and patrons. Additionally, the lack of oversight by the Palestinian Authority and the donor's exploitation of CSOs exacerbate this problem, leading to a situation where CSOs are not accountable to their constituents and dependent on their funders. This problem of unaccountability is also evident in the power dynamics of CSOs, both internally and externally. This cycle of unaccountability within the governance dimensions not only facilitates exclusion and disconnection from the social sphere but also marginalizes the community, including community-based organizations and smaller NGOs in rural areas. To address these challenges and improve the functioning of CSOs, it is suggested that CSOs utilize their networks and form larger umbrella organizations to change the power dynamics between external actors, donors, the state, and CSOs. By collaborating through working groups and databases, CSOs can address the real needs and problems of the Palestinian people without being hampered by external or internal agendas. This can also help to reduce the dependence on external funding and increase accountability to the organization's constituents.

12.5 Discussion

12.5.1 Governance in Areas of Limited Statehood

The struggles of Palestinian CSOs trapped between donor demands and grassroots legitimacy mirror broader dilemmas of governance in areas of limited statehood. Like other non-state actors operating in power vacuums, CSOs are forced to perform state-like functions while lacking formal authority, embodying the paradox of governance without government. Their daily reality reflects Stilz's core tension: maintaining rightful occupancy by serving local communities while adhering to external frameworks of basic justice imposed by donors and fragmented institutions. When CSOs form survival networks to resist shrinking civic space, they inadvertently create emerging governscapes those fluid, decentralized zones where authority is constantly renegotiated. This is not just about NGO management; it is a live demonstration of how legitimacy functions when traditional state sovereignty collapses. The lesson cuts across armed groups and civil society alike: in conflict zones, power belongs to those who can simultaneously deliver services, navigate external pressures, and convince communities they belong.

12.5.2 Implications for Governance in Conflict Areas

The implications of this chapter contribute to existing governance literature on CSOs in conflict areas. The contribution builds on previous literature that advocates for a conceptualization of internal and external governance dimensions and their complex interaction with multiple actors. More specifically, governance in conflict areas extends beyond the state and the public to include political parties, the occupying state, and external donors representing the foreign agenda of their respective countries. Individual and informal actors within CSOs also exert influence on the governance structures of CSOs as they may engage in network-building and patronage-seeking behaviors with external actors to benefit and sustain their operations. By having a holistic view of CSO's governance in conflict areas, this chapter provides a nuanced insight into the complex governance mechanisms and processes and the various actors that shape them. This paper highlights that the phenomenon of aid-driven CSOs is not solely caused by external actors, but also by internal ones. The problems of governance are caused by the lack of power dynamics and a weak predatory state. To clarify, the conflict affecting internal governance is related to how donors and the weak PA have influenced the BoD. This influence is evident in entrenched networks, security vetting, and the appointment of specific board members, potentially jeopardizing the integrity of CSOs.

While this chapter focuses on Palestine, the author provides several key insights for CSOs operating in areas with limited statehood. First, CSOs need to navigate the intricate power dynamics at the local and international levels by building better relationships and cooperating with state agencies, as well as other local and smaller CSOs, to shift the current neoliberal aid paradigm. Second, effective and legitimate governance requires a participatory approach that builds public trust and encourages sustained engagement with CSOs. Legitimate and effective governance strengthens the stability and resilience of the governed society. Third, it is important to recognize that while CSOs are a tool for exercising power by external actors, individuals within CSOs may seek personal gain by building networks of patronage with external actors, whether formal or informal. It is important to emphasize that donors are not the cause but the instigators of aid-driven behavior and disconnection with the public as there are no mechanisms of oversight or accountability not only in areas of conflict but anywhere. To break the cycle of unaccountability and disconnection, it is necessary to focus on internal governance mechanisms that ensure dynamic leadership, active boards, and an inclusive general assemblies. Fourth, it is important to recognize that states in areas of conflict are similar to CSOs in that they also lack financial sustainability and face limitations in their ability to govern and provide oversight. To improve governance in such contexts, it is essential to support the state in developing stronger oversight mechanisms and policies that promote the accountability of CSOs without constraining their working space. Fifth, the dependence on donors in civil society has become an unavoidable reality in conflict areas where statehood is limited. While some individuals benefit, others are forced into a new paradigm that contradicts their ideals and negatively affects their output. To bring about change, there is a need to leverage coalitions and networks to create new realities and explore alternatives. Sixth, in conflict-affected areas, achieving financial sustainability seems challenging for many CSOs. Despite attempting financial innovation, it only covers a fraction of what donors can provide. To conclude, the following interview excerpt captures the essence of the paper.

References

Al Jayousi, R., & Nishide, Y. (2023). Beyond the "ngoization" of civil society: A framework for sustainable community led development in conflict settings. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations, 35*(7), 1–12.

Arda, L., & Banerjee, S. B. (2021). Governance in areas of limited statehood: The ngoization of Palestine. *Business & Society, 60*(7), 1675–1707.

Atia, M., & Herrold, C. E. (2018). Governing through patronage: The rise of ngos and the fall of civil society in Palestine and Morocco. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations, 29*, 1044–1054.

Berda, Y. (2017). *Living emergency: Israel's permit regime in the occupied west bank*. Stanford University Press.

Borzel, T. A., Risse, T., & Draude, A. (2018). *Governance in areas of limited statehood: Conceptual clarifications and major contributions of the handbook*. Oxford University Press.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. SAGE Publications.

Brown, L. (2008). *Creating credibility: Legitimacy and accountability for transnational civil society*. Kumarian Press.

Bryman, A. (2012). *Social research methods*. OUP Oxford.

Butt, K., & Butt, A. (2016). Blockade on Gaza strip: A living hell on earth. *Journal of Political Studies, 23*, 157.

Challand, B. (2008). *Palestinian civil society: Foreign donors and the power to promote and exclude. Routledge studies on the Arab-Israeli conflict*. Taylor & Francis.

Choudry, A., & Kapoor, D. (2013). *NGOization: Complicity, contradictions and prospects*. Blooms- bury Publishing.

Costantini, G., Salameh, E., & Issa, M. (2015). *Civil society facility south: Mapping study of civil society in Palestine-update 2015*. European Union report.

Coule, T. M. (2015). Nonprofit governance and accountability: Broadening the theoretical perspective. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly, 44*(1), 75–97.

Creswell, J. W., & Clark, V. L. P. (2017). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research*. Sage.

Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2017). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Sage.

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2011). *The Sage handbook of qualitative research*. Sage.

Dillman, D. A., Smyth, J. D., & Christian, L. M. (2014). *Internet, phone, mail, and mixed-mode surveys: The tailored design method*. Wiley.

Edwards, M. (2014). *Civil society*. Polity Press.

Gordon, N. (2008). *Israel s occupation*. University of California Press.

Howell, J., & Pearce, J. (2001). *Civil society & development: A critical exploration*. Lynne Rienner.

Hulme, D. M., Edwards, S., The Children Fund (Great Britain), & U. of Manchester. Institute for Development Policy, and Management. (1997). *NGOs, states and donors: Too close for comfort*? International political economy series. St. Martin's Press.

Ismail, F., & Kamat, S. (2018). Ngos, social movements and the neoliberal state: Incorporation, reinvention, critique. *Critical Sociology, 44*(4-5), 569–577.

Joronen, M., & Griffiths, M. (2019). The affective politics of precarity: Home demolitions in occupied Palestine. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space, 37*(3), 561–576.

Kamali, M. (2001). Civil society and Islam: A sociological perspective. *European Journal of Sociology/Archives Europeennes de Sociologie, 42*(3), 457–482.

Kooiman, J. (1993). *Findings, speculations and recommendations. Modern governance: New government-society interactions* (pp. 249-262).

Lewis, D. (2014). *Non-governmental organizations, management and development*. Taylor & Francis.

OECD. (2020). Dataset: Aid (oda) disbursements to countries and regions. International development statistics online databases (IDS online). Data extracted on 26 Dec 2020 02:33 UTC (GMT) from OECD.Stat.

Ostrower, F. & Stone, M. M. (2006). *26. Governance: Research trends, gaps, and future prospects, The nonprofit sector* (pp. 612-628). Yale University Press.

Patton, M. Q. (2014). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice*. Sage.

PCBS. (2017). *General census of population, housing, and establishments*. Establishments report. Retrieved February 9, 2021.

PNGO (2021). *Civil society index 2020. Political parties and trade unions 2019*. Technical report, The Palestinian NGO network, Ramallah.

Rhodes, R. A. W. (1997). *Understanding governance: Policy networks, governance, reflexivity and accountability*. Open University.

Risse, T. (2011). *Governance without a state?: Policies and politics in areas of limited statehood*. Columbia University Press.

Risse, T., & Stollenwerk, E. (2018). Legitimacy in areas of limited statehood. *Annual Review of Political Science, 21*, 403–418.

Rotberg, R. I. (2004). *State failure and state weakness in a time of terror*. Brookings Institution Press.

Rubin, H. J., & Rubin, I. S. (2005). Listening, hearing, and sharing social experiences. *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data, 2*, 1–14.

Salamon, L. M., & Anheier, H. K. (1996). *The international classification of nonprofit organizations: ICNPO-Revision 1*. Johns Hopkins University Institute for Policy Studies Baltimore.

Salamon, L. M., Anheier, H. K., List, R., Toepler, S., Sokolowski, S. W., et al. (Eds.). (1999). *Global civil society: Dimensions of the nonprofit sector*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Srinivas, N. (2009). Against NGOs?: A critical perspective on nongovernmental action. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly, 38*, 614–626.

Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Sage.

Steen-Johnsen, K., Eynaud, P., & Wijkstrom, F. (2011). On civil society governance: An emergent research field. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations, 22*(4), 555–565.

Tartir, A., & Seidel, T. (2018). *Palestine and rule of power: Local dissent vs. international governance. Middle East Today*. Springer International Publishing.

UNCTAD. (2022). *Developments in the economy of the occupied Palestinian territory*. Technical report UNCTAD/PRESS/IN/2022/2, United Nations Conference on trade and development, Geneva.

Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications*. Sage.

Zencirci, G., & Herrold, C. E. (2022). Project-think and the fragmentation and defragmentation of civil society in Egypt, Palestine, and Turkey. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly, 51*(3), 545–565.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

Chapter 13
Civil Society Organizations' Social Service Approaches in Iraq: Examining the Role of Human Rights

Ali Bakir Hamoudi

Abstract This chapter investigates the diverse social service approaches of civil society organizations (CSOs) in Iraq and their engagement with human rights principles. Drawing on survey data from 392 CSOs, it identifies five distinct approaches—ranging from diversified and hybrid models to simple subjective and objective strategies—shaped by funding sources, denominational affiliations, and strategic complexity. While many organizations adopt rights-based language, their practices often remain rooted in traditional needs-based models, reinforcing rather than transforming structural inequalities. The chapter argues that the binary of traditional versus modern CSOs is insufficient and calls for a more nuanced understanding of how CSOs operationalize social services amid shifting political and funding environments in Iraq's post-2003 context.

Keywords Civil society organizations · Human rights · Social service provision · Iraq · Needs-based vs. rights-based approaches · Strategic complexity

This chapter explores the diverse social service approaches of civil society organizations (CSOs) in Iraq, focusing on their relationship with human rights frameworks. Utilizing a recently administered survey of 392 organizations, the study identifies five distinct approaches: diversified, hybrid, simple objective, simple subjective, and varied subjective. These approaches highlight the interplay between funding sources, denominational profiles, and strategic complexity. The findings underscore that while many CSOs adopt rights-based language to secure funding, their practices often reinforce existing inequalities. The chapter concludes by advocating for policy reforms and capacity-building initiatives to enable CSOs to engage more effectively in transformative social service provision. Previous research finds that CSO social service approaches in MENA adopt either traditional charity-based approaches heavily influenced by religious traditions or more secular, human

A. B. Hamoudi (✉)
American University in Iraq, Baghdad, Iraq
e-mail: alibakir.ala@auib.edu.iq

© The Author(s) 2026

M. Elayah (ed.), *Governance without Government in the MENA Region*, Nonprofit and Civil Society Studies,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-03953-8_13

rights-based approaches influenced by international development. I examine the validity of this framework through an analysis of registered CSOs in Iraq by considering the different social service approaches they adopt. Utilizing recently administered survey data, I consider CSO social service approaches along two dimensions: how CSOs engage in social service provision, or their "social service engagement" frames, and the strategies they use to achieve their objectives. The analysis finds some support for the findings of previous research on CSOs in MENA in terms of the effects of funding sources and denominational profile on CSO social service approaches, but with additional nuance. These findings have important implications for the funding and promotion of CSO activity and how to navigate the difficult terrain of social service provision in MENA within a government without governance model.

13.1 Introduction

Iraq's civil society landscape is shaped by decades of conflict, shifting political dynamics, and a dual reliance on traditional charity models and international human rights frameworks. This chapter examines how these forces influence CSOs' social service strategies and their alignment with rights-based approaches. The study investigates how CSOs balance donor-driven agendas, community needs, and organizational missions. It categorizes their social service approaches and explores their implications for poverty alleviation and human rights advocacy.

Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in the MENA region are commonly categorized in a modern versus traditional dichotomy. These categorizations are heavily influenced by modernization theory and the view that societies move towards secular and technocratic models of development. Hamoudi et al. (2023) discusses the modern versus traditional dichotomy within the context of CSO social service provision in Iraq through the concepts of human rights-based versus needs-based approaches. However, the literature on MENA regional CSOs describes the differences between these two approaches beyond social service provision and suggests that there are fundamental differences in their organizational structures. For example, Kandil (2015) finds that traditional, needs-based CSOs form on the basis of religious charity whereas modern CSOs address poverty and marginalization in secular, technical, and multidimensional terms. Considering funding sources, Ibrahim (2008) comes to a similar conclusion. Funding institutions that adopt traditional views of philanthropy support religious-based models of charity giving, whereas modernizing and secular philanthropic institutions promote technical, comprehensive approaches. Examining religious-based welfare specifically, Jawad (2009) finds that religious welfare organizations generally view social service provision in terms of providing for those in need and do not address the structural causes of marginalization nor adopt human rights widely into their programs.

Arguably, the dichotomy between religious-traditional and secular-modern is a dividing line found in MENA vis-à-vis civil society more broadly. For example, Cavatorta and Elananza (2008) find that religious and secular civil society actors in MENA compete heavily with one another, effectively undermining their ability to bring about political and social change. Even so, there are spaces where actors from these two competing views cooperate. Furthermore, in many cases, the dividing line between secular and religious is not so clear. Describing the complicated relationship between the two views, Jawad (2009) finds several examples where actors in religious organizations view their activities and motivations in secular terms.

Expanding beyond the MENA context, studies find that religious actors adopt rights-based language and initiatives without adopting particularly secular worldviews. At the same time, human rights-based approaches have been framed in secular terms (Tomalin, 2006). Nonetheless, religious-based actors find an overlap between human rights dialogue and their own work. For example, Jawad (2009) finds that some religious welfare organizations adopt rights-based initiatives, while Ibrahim (2008) describes traditional philanthropic institutions transforming in the region to adopt rights-based approaches. Similarly, Ali (2018) finds denominational women's rights organizations in Iraq internalizing the concept of human rights in religious terms. These examples support Miller's (2010, 2017) thesis that religious actors may reject a secular conceptualization of human rights but adopt its underlying framework into their social service approaches.

Conversely, organizations may adopt rights-based rhetoric without adopting the underlying principles of social justice. Uvin (2007) describes CSOs relabeling their needs-based activities using the language of human rights. He argues that though this relabeling may be an important first step towards a more fundamental transformation, it serves to overlook the power imbalances which promote the status quo. Jawad (2009) describes a similar situation with religious welfare organizations in Lebanon in that they work to reinforce power imbalances while their commitment to "human rights remains rhetorical" (217). Jad (2004) comes to a similar conclusion about donor-funded Palestinian NGOs in that they adopt the rhetoric of international donors while reinforcing existing power structures and undermining grassroots initiatives aimed at achieving social transformation.

Overall, these findings suggest that a simple dichotomization of CSOs into traditional needs-based and modern rights-based may be insufficient to understand CSO social service provision in Iraq. Both religious and secular organizations may adopt rights-based rhetoric while rejecting its underlying principles. At the same time, they may reject rights-based rhetoric but embrace the underlying concepts and frameworks. For this reason, Miller (2017) suggests widening the spectrum beyond the binary: adoption versus rejection of rights-based approaches to include alternative actors, such as religious-based actors and political CSOs.

Considering the discussion above, this chapter explores the social service approaches of CSOs in Iraq and their relationship with the concept of human rights. Do we see CSOs in Iraq incorporating rights-based approaches to social service provision in ways that challenge social inequities or do these approaches mainly maintain the status quo. Can we see patterns of secular and modern CSOs adopting one type of approach and traditional, denominational CSOs adopting another? And if not, how do funding sources and denominational profile of CSOs interact with their approaches. Following the introduction above, this chapter is divided into five additional sections. Section 13.2 offers a background on recent changes in the CSO operating environment in Iraq post-2000. Section 13.3 outlines the methodological framework I use to determine CSO social service approaches. Section 13.4 discusses the different social service approaches CSOs adopt in Iraq. Section 13.5 examines the relationship of the different approaches to human rights, funding, and denominational profile, and finally Sect. 13.6 concludes by considering the research and policy implications of the findings.

13.2 CSO Operating Environment in Iraq

Some form of associational life was present in Iraq for much of its modern history (Asadi, 2016; Khamees & Abied, 2005; Majeed, 2017; Mustafa, 2008). However, associations stopped operating during the period of post-independence revolutions, beginning in 1958 (Asadi, 2016; Khamees & Abied, 2005; Majeed, 2017). From a legislative perspective, Iraqi legislation never legally prohibited the establishment of associations, though their activities were curtailed in practice (Abbas, 2013). Indeed, the Law of Associations of the year 2000 created significant barriers to associations' formation and operation by requiring them to uphold the Baathist regime's general—though undefined—values. Furthermore, it allowed direct government involvement in all their decision-making (Law of Associations, 2000).

For this reason, the post-2003 operating environment for CSOs in Iraq is considered categorically different than previous periods. Legal analysis on the extant Law of Nongovernmental Associations, enacted in 2011, suggests that the legislative environment is generally favorable to civil society development. For example, the International Centre for Not-for-Profit Law [ICNL] Civic Freedom Monitor report on Iraq (2023) states that the current law is a "significant improvement upon previous laws and regulations," and CSOs are free to gain funding from a variety of sources, including foreign funding (International Centre for Not-for-Profit Law [ICNL], 2023). Similarly, the government is prohibited from preventing or suspending CSOs' registration arbitrarily. Furthermore, CSOs may appeal any decisions in court (Abbas, 2013).

Recent scholarship on CSOs in Iraq describe a new sense of purpose among activists encouraging them to participate in civil society activities (Ali, 2018). At the same time, their activities are constrained due to the lack of security and a highly sectarian environment. Nonetheless, there has been a notable increase in CSOs since 2003 (Ali, 2018; Aljabiri, 2015). However, due to changes in legislation during this time, neither study could gain a firm grasp on the level of increase as CSO registers transferred between several jurisdictions. Nonetheless, as of 2021 there were over 4000 registered CSOs, a substantial increase from before 2003 when CSOs were effectively banned.

13.2.1 Human Rights and CSOs in Iraq

Kandil (2015) suggests that the concept of human rights-based social service provision is expanding in the MENA region. Nonetheless, she finds that rights-based CSOs are still limited in their ability to expand and operate due to funding limitations. As Hamoudi et al. (2023) find in the context of Iraq, the concept of human rights among registered CSOs has become widely adopted. However, there is limited knowledge as to whether the concept has been adopted within a wider program of rights-based social service provision or if it is limited to its language. Unlike many of the MENA countries examined in Kandil (2015), Iraq has a much more liberalized regulatory regime for civil society, most notably in CSOs' ability to receive funding from foreign sources. Such a liberalized regime leaves the potential for CSOs to adopt the language of foreign donors to attract funding while ignoring the underlying principles of human rights and social justice. On the other hand, it also provides the opportunity for CSOs to develop in capacity and strengthen their social service approaches.

13.2.2 CSO Social Service Approaches

Within the context of MENA, Jawad (2009) finds that religious-based organizations engaged in social service provision view specific categories of people as being disadvantaged. These are primarily households without an employable male breadwinner (orphans, children in separated families, widows, persons with disabilities, and older persons). These are the same categories of people who are "traditionally deemed as vulnerable" and are targeted in lieu of broader poverty alleviation initiatives (Jawad, 2009, p. 146). Social service providers' views on the family as the basic unit of society allows them to address social needs in this manner. For example, orphans and widows are deprived of the fundamental element that would allow them to integrate into the society, the traditional male breadwinner household, and therefore, social service providers have an imperative to target them to prevent them from being marginalized. However, as Jawad (2009) argues, the targeting of groups in this fashion leads to paternalistic relationships and reinforces structural inequalities.

In contrast to the category-based perception of social need, poverty is viewed among CSOs in strictly income-based terms (Jawad, 2002, 2009). Indeed, there are multiple and contradictory definitions of poverty among these actors, but in an operational sense, poverty is primarily conceptualized in relation to unemployment and income. CSO social service providers view income status, as well as the ability to pay for children's education, health, and nutritional needs, to determine if potential recipients meet the requirements to receive services. Moreover, CSO social service providers in Lebanon view poverty as widespread and relate the structural causes of unemployment to poor government policies. For these reasons, they view poverty alleviation initiatives as beyond the scope of their missions (Jawad, 2009). As Jawad (2002) states, poverty reduction is not the aim of CSOs in Lebanon (Jawad, 2002, p. 325).

In the context of Iraq, there is limited analysis concerning how poverty and social services are conceptualized among welfare actors. Aljabiri and Jawad et al. (2019) find that social service providers in Iraq target widows and orphans in identical ways to those observed by Jawad in Lebanon. In this sense, they address social needs based on categories of people subjectively perceived to be disadvantaged based on the male breadwinner model. In contrast, the federal government's poverty reduction strategies target individuals based on objective estimated measurements of income (Ministry of Planning et al., 2018). In this sense, social service provision and poverty alleviation initiatives stem from different frames of reference based on subjective and objective measurements.

Indeed, the measurement of poverty through subjective and objective frames is a long-standing debate within contemporary social policy literature (Baulch, 1996; Ejrnaes, 2020; Fahey, 2010). Subjective measurements tend to focus on how the individual views his/her own financial well-being irrespective of their actual income (Mahmood et al., 2019). A historical analysis of the concept of poverty in MENA suggests that a similar debate existed among historical theorists in the region (Mattson, 2003). Objective measures of poverty relied solely on the individual's income, whereas subjective measures were based on the community's views of the individual's status. In this sense, subjective frames in MENA conceptualize poverty differently than what is found in the contemporary literature by relying on the community's perceptions of the individual's needs and not the individual's own self-perception. As Mattson suggests, subjective definitions produced by theorists of the time allowed for the development of a comprehensive and multidimensional understanding of deprivation. At the same time, they provided the opportunity for structural inequalities to persist based on societal views on who should have what.

13.3 Developing CSO Social Service Approach Categories

To develop a categorization of CSO social service approaches in Iraq, I use a recently administered electronic survey sent to all registered CSOs in Iraq. The survey questionnaire was sent to all officially registered CSOs with valid contact information (N = 4327) via email and SMS between May and October 2021. Hamoudi et al. (2023) find that over two thirds of CSOs are registered as providing some form of social service with another third engaged in alternative activities such as health and education, environment and agriculture, arts and culture, and democracy promotion (Fig. 13.1). All registered CSOs were included in the questionnaire irrespective of their officially declared service type for two reasons. Firstly, previous studies show that CSOs engage in activities beyond what they officially register, and their activities are not easily classified (Kandil, 2015). Secondly, the analysis examines CSO relationship to social service provision. On this basis, including a range of

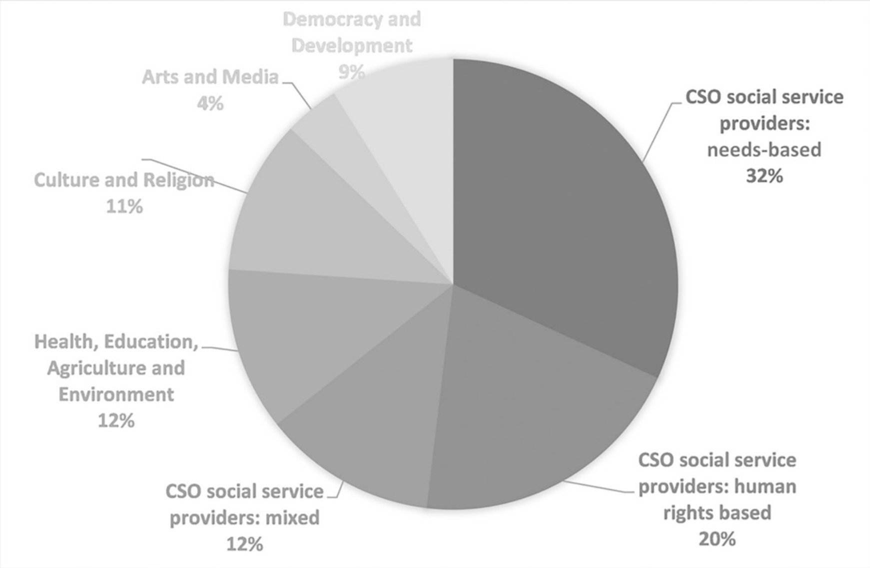

Fig. 13.1 Legally registered civil society organizations (CSOs) by activity type, 2020 (Hamoudi et al., 2023). Source, NGO Directorate, Federal Government of Iraq $N = 4555$

CSOs from those which social service provision is their primary activity to those which do not engage in social service provision at all allows for a fuller understanding of the CSO landscape in Iraq. In total, there were 392 respondents to the survey proportionate to the CSO register in terms of geographic location and service type.

On one level, CSOs are categorized based on their engagement in social services and whether they engage in social services, poverty alleviation, both, or neither. I label CSOs that engage in social services alone as subjective, those that engage in poverty alleviation alone as objective, and those that engage in both activities as hybrid. On a second level, CSOs are categorized according to the complexity of their strategies: simple, complicated, complex, and mixed. I explain these labels and the differences between them below.

13.3.1 Social Service Engagement

CSOs in Iraq engage in multiple activities, and two of their main activities are social services and poverty alleviation. Above, I argue that within the context MENA both activities address the concept of poverty and marginalization, but through different lenses. The concept of poverty alleviation uses objective measurements to define poverty and determine who is affected by it, while the concept of social services recognizes marginalization as the underlying cause of poverty and identifies disadvantaged groups based on subjective measures. Based on this discussion, I divide

Table 13.1 Social service engagement categories by percentage of CSOs

	Hybrid	Subjective	Objective	Neither
Description	Reports engaging in social service provision and poverty alleviation activities	Reports engaging in social service provision only	Reports engaging in poverty alleviation only	Does not report engaging in social service provision or poverty alleviation activities
Percentage of CSOs (%)	27.3	25.8	9.2	37.8

Source, Survey
N = 392

CSO social service activities into one of four categories: (1) subjective (social services alone), (2) objective (poverty alleviation alone), (3) hybrid (both social services and poverty alleviation), or (4) neither.

Over 35% of CSOs do not engage in poverty alleviation nor social services. Moreover, there is a lower percentage of CSOs (9%) that engage in poverty alleviation as opposed to social services (26%) (Table 13.1). These findings support Jawad's (2009) analysis that the concept of poverty alleviation as a field of activity is not widely adopted among CSOs in MENA. Certainly, some CSOs may engage in social service provision outside the realm of anti-poverty frameworks, such as providing accessible facilities in public spaces or mental support services for vulnerable groups, irrespective of their income status. Nonetheless, the large percentage of CSOs engaged solely in social services suggests that many CSOs reject objective poverty frames. Furthermore, the survey includes respondents from a wider range of actors than the religious welfare organizations found in Jawad (2009). As such, many respondents report engaging in both objective and subjective frames (27%) (Table 13.1). The high percentage of CSOs utilizing hybrid frames of activity suggests the possibility that CSOs in Iraq are adopting multidimensional poverty frameworks.

13.3.2 Strategic Complexity

CSOs in Iraq achieve their objectives through a set of strategies with varying degrees of complexity. Here, the concept of strategic complexity relates to the causal logic of interventions and not their operational complexity. In this sense, a strategy is considered less complex if the cause and effect of intervention to achievement of objective is understood to be linear (Ebrahim, 2019). For example, needs-based interventions have linear causal logics in that the intervention (providing the hungry with food) leads directly to the achievement of an objective (satiating hunger). On the other hand, skills training has slightly more complicated logic, in that teaching a hungry person to fish, for example, may ultimately lead to satiating hunger, but through more complex mechanisms. Advocacy work to end hunger and producing studies examining the causes of hunger and policy studies examining what might end it would be considered to have complex causal logic. Certainly, both these strategies may have profound effects on ending hunger sustainably, but the causal pathway by which this is achieved is not so clear.

Kandil (2015) describes the process of CSO modernization in MENA in similar terms of complexity. She describes CSOs as falling on a continuum of advancement. Traditional charity organizations that provide simple cash transfers can be found on the first level. On the second level, social welfare organizations provide social services. The third level includes development organizations that employ skills training and empowerment programs. Finally, the continuum concludes with human rights organizations that use advocacy to effect structural change and social transformation. Arguably, Kandil's view of CSO development suggests that CSOs only realize their full potential by abandoning social service provision and adopting purely political functions. Certainly, the underlying assumptions in this conceptualization of civil society's advancement warrant thorough interrogation.[1]

Nonetheless, Kandil's description of a continuum illustrates the relationship between strategic complexity and CSOs' operationalization of anti-poverty initiatives. CSOs which use linear logic address the instances of poverty irrespective of its structural causes. Complicated logics focus on human agency, capacity building, and individual/community empowerment to overcome the causes of poverty. Finally, CSOs with complex strategies view poverty in relational terms to address the structural and societal causes of disadvantage. Similarly, Jawad (2009) describes the differences in how social actors' address social needs whether based on outcomes or relational processes. In this sense, providers that address outcomes use simple causal logics, whereas those that address the relational processes of poverty and marginalization adopt more complex logics.[2] Ebrahim (2019) examines strategic complexity in the context of performance measurement and disentangles it into a continuum of two separate factors. As I am concerned with the practice of social service approaches, I use a simplified version of the concept based solely on the causal logic described above. Adopting the categories put forth by Rogers (2009), simple, complicated,[3] and complex, I examine CSO strategies in the context of these three categories of complexity.

For the purposes of the survey, strategies are defined as the means by which CSOs achieve their objectives. The respondents are given five separate options: (1) cash transfers, (2) service provision, (3) skills training, (4) research, and (5) advocacy. The options presented strongly relate to a social service provision mission and may be perceived as irrelevant to CSOs not engaged in social service activities. For

[1] In Hamoudi (forthcoming), I argue that civil society expands beyond its political functions.

[2] Certainly, I do not claim that CSOs which adopt simple strategies do not recognize the structural causes of poverty and exclusion, only that they do not address them.

[3] Rogers (2009) discusses complicated CSOs in the context of using multiple components "as part of a larger causal package" (p. 218). I use complicated here in that the causal chain stresses the importance of individual and group empowerment to overcome disadvantage and does not address the larger structural causes.

Fig. 13.2 Strategies of CSOs by percentages. Source, Survey $N = 392$

this reason, CSO respondents could respond that they do not employ any of these strategies. Nonetheless, all but four respondent CSOs identified at least one of these options as their strategy.

By far, the most common strategy reported among CSOs is skills training (Fig. 13.2). Over 75% of CSOs use skills training to achieve their objectives. As such, there is an indication that CSOs in Iraq have widely adopted the concept of capacity building and perceive their objectives within this framework. Following skills training, cash transfers and service provision are the most common strategies, with 40% or more of CSOs employing either. Finally, advocacy and research are the least common strategies. Nonetheless, over 30% of CSOs identify using them as strategies. Furthermore, most CSOs use multiple strategies. On average, CSO respondents report using two strategies, and most CSOs employ two strategies or more (Table 13.2).

Based on the discussion above and the findings within the survey, I separate CSO strategies into four categories: simple, complicated, complex, and mixed. Cash transfers and service provision use linear causal logics and therefore I categorize them as simple. Skills training uses complicated logic which I label complicated. Research and advocacy use complex causal logics and are categorized as complex.

Concerning the CSOs that use multiple strategies (70% of CSOs), I adapt Kandil's (2015) theoretical framework of a continuum and place CSOs accordingly. I categorize CSOs that employ strategies from both ends of the continuum as mixed. Though CSOs conceivably use mixed strategies as part of a comprehensive development program, similar to Kandil's third level of advancement, the use of widely differing strategies without a definitive understanding how these strategies interact warrants further investigation. For this reason, I categorize them separately to examine the differences in their social service approaches more extensively. CSOs that

Table 13.2 Number of strategies CSOs employ by percentage of CSOs

Mean number of strategies	None of the above	Single strategy	Multiple strategies
2.3	1%	29%	70%

Source, Survey
N = 392

Table 13.3 Strategy complexity categories by percentage of CSOs

	Simple	Complicated	Complex	Mixed	Not applicable
Description	(1) Cash transfers (2) Service provision (3) Cash transfers, service provision and skills-training combined	(1) Skills-training (only)	(1) Advocacy (2) Research (3) Advocacy, research and skills-training (combined)	Complex and simple strategies combined	Responded none of the above to the selected strategies
Percentage of CSOs	36.5%	18.6%	22.2%	21.7%	1.0%

Source, Survey
N = 392

use complicated and complex strategies are categorized as complex, and those that use complicated and simple strategies are categorized as simple. Considering Kandil's continuum of strategic complexity, CSOs using simple and complicated strategies or complicated and complex categories would fall in-between either category. Furthermore, over 70% of CSO respondents engage in skills training. To develop parsimonious categories with sufficient variation, I set a definitional boundary of complicated at skills training only. Furthermore, the major concern of this study relates to the differences between CSOs that employ advocacy and research in their social service approaches as opposed to those that employ cash transfers and service provision. Finally, four CSOs report not employing any of the strategies above are given not applicable values as this small number of respondents is insufficient for creating a meaningful category. Table 13.2 offers a description for each of the categories.

Based on the categories above, CSOs in Iraq most commonly employ simple strategies (>35%). CSOs, internationally, face pressures to adopt simple strategies to demonstrate the results of their activities through simple measures of outputs (Ebrahim, 2019). Likewise, CSOs in MENA are found to adopt simple strategies due to funding concerns and the inability to sustain comprehensive programs (Jawad, 2009; Kandil, 2015). Nonetheless, a notable percentage of CSOs in Iraq (~22%) utilize complex strategies (Table 13.3).

13.3.3 Relationship Between Social Service Engagement and Strategic Complexity

There is strong support for a relationship between social service engagement and strategic complexity. Chi-square analysis allows me to reject the null hypothesis of independence at a highly significant level ($p < 0.001$) (Eq. 1). As illustrated in Fig. 13.3, CSOs that engage in objective frames more commonly adopt simple strategies. As argued in Jawad et al. (2019), poverty alleviation frameworks within MENA countries use strategies that address the instances of poverty. Cash transfers with simple measurable outcomes are the most widely adopted strategies (Jawad et al., 2019). Likewise, the analysis in this chapter finds that CSOs in Iraq dedicated to poverty alleviation adopt similar strategies.

Conversely, CSOs engaging in subjective frames far more commonly use complicated and complex strategies. This could be an indication that CSOs within this framework are less concerned with short-term outcomes and more concerned with the long-term structural impacts of the services they offer. Alternatively, subjective CSOs may have different funding sources than CSOs using an objective framework, and therefore, they do not experience the same funding pressures to produce measurable outcomes. I explore this possibility further in Sect. 13.5.1 below.

In terms of hybrid CSOs, these CSOs more commonly adopt mixed strategies suggesting that, in general, these CSOs take more diversified approaches. The social policy environment in Iraq may drive CSOs with complex strategies to incorporate simple strategies within their missions to address the immediate needs of their service recipients. Indeed, Jawad (2009) finds that CSOs which incorporate complex strategies without addressing recipients' immediate needs lose popularity among constituents. Finally, for the CSOs that do not engage in social service provision or poverty alleviation, they adopt a variety of strategies likely corresponding to the

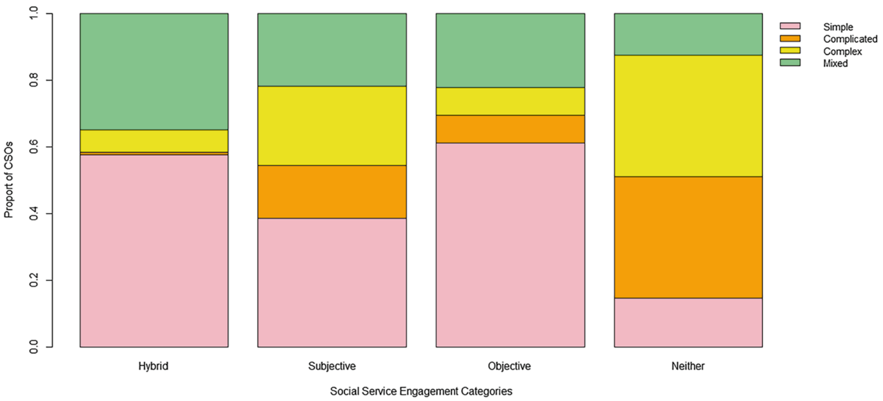

Fig. 13.3 Strategic complexity categories as a proportion of all CSOs within each social service engagement category. $N = 388$ Source, Survey

activities in which they engage, though they are more commonly complicated and complex.

Eq 1.$X^2 = (9, 388) = 124.8, p < 0.001$.

13.4 CSO Social Service Approaches

The survey findings provide a clear indication that CSOs in Iraq take a variety of social service approaches. Firstly, survey results offer further support for the findings of Hamoudi et al. (2023) concerning the official register. Returning to Fig. 13.1 above, Hamoudi et al. find that there are several CSOs that do not provide social services and other CSOs using mixed approaches. The survey findings confirm these differences. In addition, I have found that CSOs which focus primarily on social services use various approaches beyond a rights-based versus needs-based dichotomy. Instead, there are divergent relationships between CSO activities and employed strategies. On the basis of these relationships, I have identified five main social service approaches that CSOs in Iraq adopt[4] (Table 13.4). These are as follows:

Table 13.4 Social service approaches based on the social service engagement and strategic complexity categories and numbers of CSO respondents in each category

Approach	Social service engagement	Strategic complexity	Number of CSOs
Diversified	Hybrid: Objective (poverty alleviation) and subjective (social service provision)	Mixed: Complex (advocacy/research) and simple (cash transfers/service provision)	37
Simple hybrid	Hybrid: Objective (poverty alleviation) and subjective (social service provision)	Simple (cash transfers/service provision)	61
Simple objective	Objective (poverty alleviation only)	Simple (cash transfers/service provision)	22
Simple subjective	Subjective (social service provision only)	Simple (cash transfers/service provision)	49
Varied subjective	Subjective (social service provision only)	Complicated, complex or mixed	62
Outliers	Hybrid or objective	For hybrid: Complicated and complex For objective: Complicated, complex or mixed	23
Non-providers	NA	Simple, complicated, complex, mixed or none of the above	148

Source, survey
$N = 392$

[4] Besides these five categories are a set of outliers and CSOs that do not engage in social services.

1. A diversified approach, using mixed strategies and hybrid frames of social service engagement.
2. A simple hybrid approach, using a simple strategy with both subjective and objective frames.
3. A simple objective approach.
4. A simple subjective approach.
5. A varied subjective approach using complex, complicated, or mixed strategies.

A comparison between the categories identified by Hamoudi et al. (2023) in the official register (Fig. 13.1) and the five approaches mentioned above (Fig. 13.4) suggests the survey results provide increased detail to what is found in the CSO register. In this manner, the five social service approaches which signify 61% of the CSO survey population overlap with the different social service categories identified by Hamoudi et al. (2023), which signify 64% of the CSO register population. The five approaches overlap with the needs-based, human rights-based, and mixed approaches. However, because the CSO register does not offer specific details about the different social services that CSOs provide, Hamoudi et al. use estimates based on information found in CSO Facebook pages and websites. On the other hand, the survey results provide further detail concerning the specific approaches that different CSOs adopt.

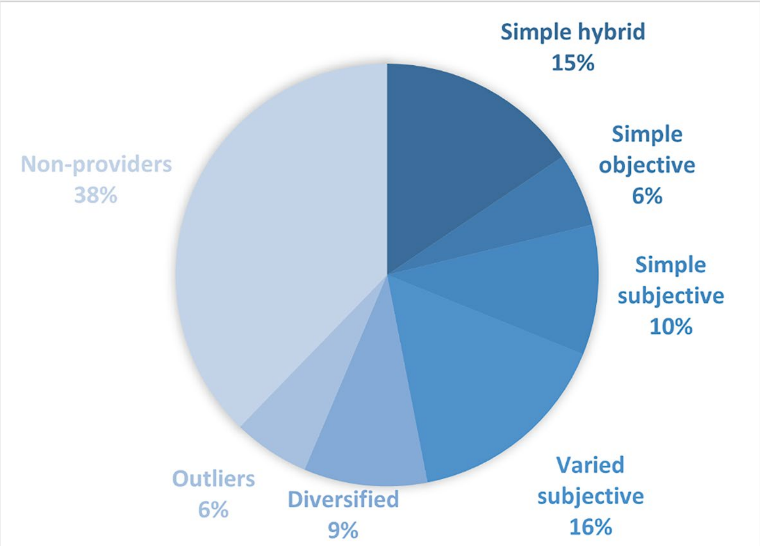

Fig. 13.4 Percentages of social service approaches among CSO respondents. Source, survey $N = 392$

13.5 Human Rights and CSO Social Service Approaches

Kandil (2015) places a great deal of emphasis on the adoption of human rights as a product of advancement for CSOs in MENA. Based on this analysis, major changes in the international development agenda with the adoption of the sustainable development goals profoundly affected civil society in MENA. Modernized CSOs adopt mixed to complex strategies to advocate for legal and societal change and address the underlying structural causes of disadvantaged groups' marginalization. However, due to the limited capacity of CSOs to adopt these approaches, they do so to varying degrees of success. According to Kandil (2015), modern CSOs view social and economic development in terms of rights and not needs. Though Hamoudi et al. (2023) examine Kandil's hypothesis in the context of CSOs in Iraq, they are not able to fully explore how CSOs in Iraq may be adopting human rights in the context of these approaches beyond how they register with official sources. With more detailed survey data, the analysis in this chapter can arrive at a more comprehensive understanding.

Certainly, there is support for a relationship between human rights activities and the use of complex and mixed strategies (Table 13.5). CSOs that use complex strategies more commonly engage in human rights activities than not. At the same time, CSOs that use mixed strategies and engage in hybrid social service provision engage in human rights activities in the highest proportions. These findings indicate that, in general, CSOs with diversified approaches engage in social service activities and human rights activities in tandem, more than they indicate a dichotomy between modern approaches which adopt human rights and traditional approaches that do not.

However, Table 13.5 also shows that beyond CSO respondents' tendency to diversify, certain CSOs are less likely to engage in human rights activities. Interestingly, objective CSOs are more likely to engage in human rights activities while subjective CSOs are not. The simple subjective category of CSOs, which provides cash and in-kind transfers while subjectively targeting specific disadvantaged groups, is the least likely to adopt human rights into their activities. On the other hand, CSOs with multifaceted approaches are the most likely to adopt human rights. At the same time, notable proportions of CSOs from each of the categories report engaging in human rights activities.

Altogether, the Cramer's V measurement shows that CSOs' social service approaches are more associated with CSOs' human rights activities than strategic complexity or social service engagement. Nonetheless, strategic complexity also has a strong association to CSOs' engagement with human rights. In this sense, the data supports the notion that CSOs with complex strategies are more likely to engage in human rights activities. At the same time, since most CSOs in Iraq report engaging in human rights, classifying CSOs in Iraq on a human rights-based versus needs-based basis may not be the most relevant categorization. Instead, CSOs take different social service approaches which are associated with the adoption of human rights to varying degrees.

Table 13.5 Chi-square test of independence examining the relationship of social service engagement, strategic complexity, and social service approach categories with human rights activities

Variable	Category	Human rights activity (proportions of CSOs)	No human rights activity (proportions of CSOs)	Chi-Square results	Cramer's V
Social service engagement	Hybrid	0.67	0.33	$X^2 = (3, 392) = 18.99$, $p < 0.001$	0.22
	Subjective	0.51	0.49		
	Objective	0.61	0.39		
	Neither	0.41	0.59		
Strategic complexity	Simple	0.43	0.57	$X^2 = (3, 388) = 43.95$, $p < 0.001$	0.33
	Complicated	0.30	0.70		
	Complex	0.64	0.36		
	Mixed	0.76	0.24		
Social service approach	Diversified	0.86	0.14	$X^2 = (6, 392) = 52.50$, $p < 0.001$	0.37
	Simple hybrid	0.51	0.49		
	Simple objective	0.41	0.59		
	Simple subjective	0.33	0.67		
	Varied subjective	0.63	0.37		
	Outlier	0.96	0.04		
	Non-provider	0.41	0.59		

Source, Survey
$N = 392$

13.5.1 Revenue Sources

As discussed in the introduction of this chapter, previous studies in MENA suggest that CSO social service approaches' relationship to human rights is strongly associated with its revenue sources. Social service approaches that adopt human rights are mainly funded by international donors whereas religious-based funding primarily funds needs-based approaches. The survey results show that CSO service approaches in Iraq also differ according to their revenue sources. However, once again, the analysis shows additional nuance. Most notably, diversified CSOs can be seen to have the most diversified sources of revenue, with notable proportions of CSOs from this category receiving funds from various sources. The categories with simple strategies (simple hybrid, simple objective, and simple subjective) have the highest proportions of CSOs receiving funding from individual donors. Finally, the two subjective categories (simple subjective and varied subjective) have higher proportions of CSOs receiving funding from membership dues, whereas simple objective

CSOs have lower proportions of CSOs receiving funding from membership dues and no funding from service fees and business enterprise (Fig. 13.5).

Furthermore, Tables 13.6 and 13.7 offer further support for the visual differences cited above. On average, hybrid CSOs and those with mixed strategies have higher numbers of revenue sources than the general respondent pool. Higher proportions of CSOs with simple strategies gain funding from individual donors and religious sources (Table 13.7). In contrast, higher proportions of CSOs with complex

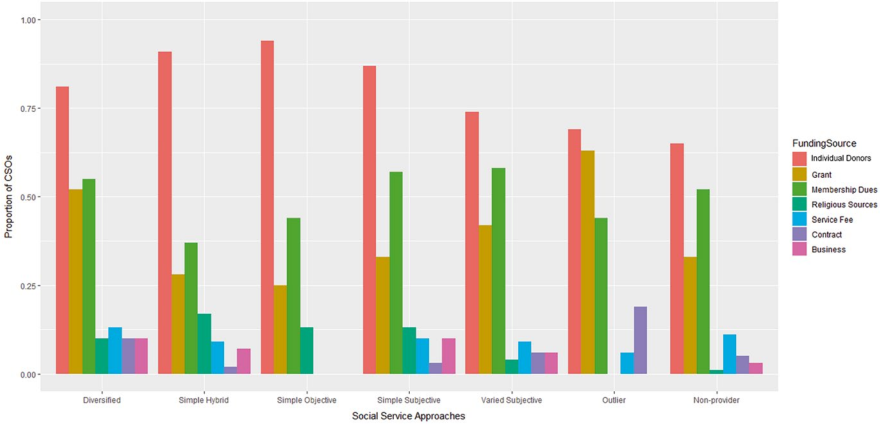

Fig. 13.5 Reported revenue sources of CSOs as a proportion of all CSOs within each social service approach category. There are 80 nonrespondents to this portion of the survey Source, Survey $N = 312$

Table 13.6 Comparison of means between engagement categories and the respondent pool for revenue source

Engagement Category / *Revenue Source*	Respondent Pool ($N = 312$)	Hybrid ($N = 90$)	Subjective ($N = 83$)	Objective ($N = 27$)	Neither ($N = 112$)
Donation	0.76	0.86 (2.09)**	0.78 (0.39)	0.85 (1.21)	0.65 (−2.17)**
Grant	0.37	0.39 (0.40)	0.39 (0.33)	0.37 (0.05)	0.33 (−67)
Membership dues	0.50	0.44 (−0.98)	0.58 (1.22)	0.41 (−0.95)	0.52 (0.27)
Religious sources	0.07	0.13 (1.70)*	0.07 (0.16)	0.07 (0.13)	0.01 (−3.48)***
Service fees	0.10	0.10 (0.11)	0.10 (0.01)	0.04 (−1.45)	0.11 (0.33)
Contracts	0.05	0.06 (0.04)	0.05 (−0.23)	0.07 (0.37)	0.05 (−0.04)
Business	0.05	0.08 (0.85)	0.07 (0.67)	Null	0.03 (−1.24)
Number of revenue sources	1.9	2.1 (1.28)	2.0 (1.13)	1.9 (−0.46)	1.7 (−2.15)**

Comparison is calculated by using Welch's two-sided *t*-test. *t*-values are in parentheses. There are 80 nonrespondents to this portion of the survey
Source, Survey
* $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Table 13.7 Comparison of means between strategy complexity categories and the respondent pool for revenue sources

Strategy Category / *Revenue Source*	Respondent Pool ($N = 312$)	Simple ($N = 115$)	Complicated ($N = 60$)	Complex ($N = 67$)	Mixed ($N = 70$)
Donation	0.76	0.90 (3.86)***	0.58 (−2.61)**	0.62 (−2.12)**	0.81 (0.97)
Grant	0.37	0.29 (−1.56)	0.23 (−2.15)**	0.52 (2.33)**	0.46 (1.39)
Membership dues	0.50	0.44 (−1.10)	0.48 (−0.28)	0.56 (0.95)	0.56 (0.82)
Religious sources	0.07	0.13 (1.82)*	Null	0.01 (−2.54)**	0.07 (0.12)
Service fees	0.10	0.09 (−0.29)	0.08 (−0.32)	0.12 (0.54)	0.10 (0.10)
Contracts	0.05	0.03 (−1.44)	0.02 (−1.80)*	0.07 (0.57)	0.11 (1.48)
Business	0.05	0.06 (0.37)	0.08 (−0.84)	0.01 (−1.87)*	0.04 (−0.31)
Number of revenue sources	1.9	2.0 (0.54)	1.5 (−4.28)***	2.0 (0.30)	2.2 (1.77)*

Comparison is calculated by using Welch's two-sided t-test. t-values are in parentheses. There are 80 nonrespondents to this portion of the survey
Source, Survey
* $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

strategies receive funding from grants which are primarily from international and nongovernment organizations[5] and lower proportions receive funding from individual donors and religious sources. Finally, there is an indication that subjective CSOs, on average, more commonly rely on membership dues as a funding source as compared to other CSOs. This is especially notable when they are compared to objective CSOs which less commonly rely on membership dues, service fees, and business enterprise activities (Table 13.6, highlighted).

These findings indicate a number of important implications concerning the effects revenue sources have on CSO social service approaches. Firstly, CSOs with more diverse strategies and forms of engagement have more diverse revenue sources. Survey results find that diversified CSOs also have larger revenue sizes on average. Such diversification suggests that with increased funding and more diversified funding sources, CSOs have a greater capacity to carry out broader missions. At the same, funding pressures may create bias against more specialized approaches (Frumkin & Keating, 2011). CSOs' pursuit of funding can create pressures to attract a diverse array of funders through engaging in activities far beyond the scope of their missions, even if CSOs wish to adopt more specialized approaches. To gain clearer insights into the relationship between CSOs' diversified approaches and revenue sources, further inquiry should consider how CSOs' pursuit of more funding sources leads to goal displacement (Froelich, 1999). Moreover, it should consider to what extent these changes are strategic advancements in CSOs' capacity to find funding to pursue and advance their missions and to what extent they indicate limitations in CSOs' abilities to sustain their missions due to the lack of stable funding.

[5] Survey results show that grants in Iraq are overwhelmingly provided by international organisations and NGOs with less than 3% of CSO respondents reporting receiving grants from the Federal or regional governments and 5% from private sources such as corporations and foundations.

Concerning CSOs with simple strategies, these CSOs receive funding from individual donors and religious sources more than the respondent population. On the one hand, such a finding suggests that CSOs which use simple causal logics and can more easily demonstrate the outcomes of their projects more commonly attract funding from individuals and religiously based funding. On the other hand, these findings offer support for Ibrahim (2008) which suggests that religiously based philanthropists fund projects using traditional charity-based models that are mostly in the form of cash transfers. These projects can be contrasted with modern philanthropic models which support advocacy and social change. As can be seen with CSOs in Iraq, there seems to be an association between religious funding/individual donations and simple strategies. Likewise, there is an alternative association between international grant funding and complex strategies, providing additional support for previous research in MENA countries. Whether funders and philanthropists are driving these differences or if different CSOs attract different types of funding is not entirely clear from the survey data. However, these differences have important implications for how funding interrelates to CSO social service provision in Iraq.

Finally, as suggested in Sect. 13.3.3 above, there is an indication that subjective CSOs have more internally independent revenue sources as compared to objective CSOs. In this sense, the majority of subjective CSOs receive funding from their membership dues. In contrast, a smaller proportion of objective CSOs receive funds from membership dues and service fees and no funding from business enterprise activities. As such, subjective CSOs can utilize more complex strategies as long as their members are willing to continue supporting such activities. Objective CSOs, on the other hand, may find increased pressure to demonstrate the immediate outcomes of their activities to individual donors, leading to an increased emphasis on using simple strategies.

13.5.2 Denominational Profile

The formation of CSOs by Islamic movements is well-documented in MENA (Benthall & Bellion-Jordan, 2003; Clark, 2004; Jawad, 2009) and Iraq (Ali, 2018; Aljabiri & Jawad, 2019). However, a common assumption among researchers is that CSOs use of religious terminology and symbolism is a sign of the CSOs' denominational profile. However, the dividing line between denominational and nondenominational for the staff and management of CSOs is not clearly demarcated. For example, Jawad (2009) describes CSO staff oscillating between denominational and nondenominational motivations when describing their activities.

Interestingly, the survey used in the analysis of this chapter finds that CSO respondents in Iraq rarely self-identify as being denominational. There is a possibility that a high number of denominational CSOs chose not to participate which would potentially bias the results of the survey. However, an examination of a selection of the survey participants' websites and Facebook pages show that they use religious symbols and engage in denominational activities and yet still identify as

Table 13.8 Self-reported denominational profile by percentage of CSOs

Denominational	Secular	Nondenominational
6%	38%	56%

Author
Source, Survey
$N = 357$

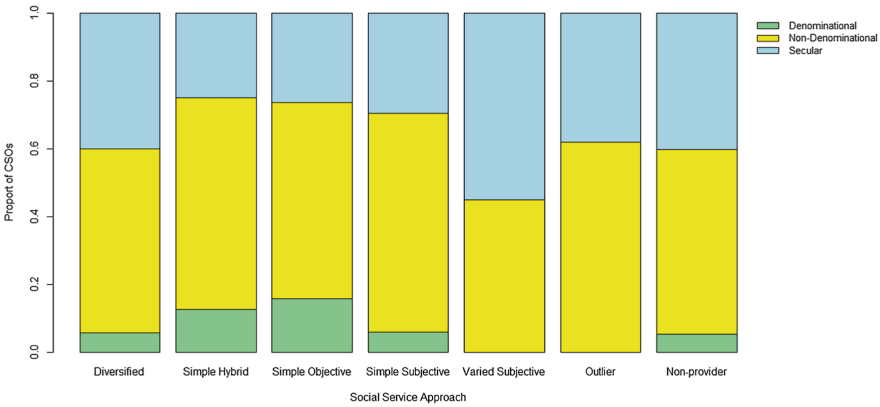

Fig. 13.6 Denominational profile as a proportion of all CSOs within each social service approach category. There are 35 nonrespondents to this portion of the survey. $N = 357$

nondenominational. Over a third of survey respondents self-identify as secular organizations (Table 13.8`). Nonetheless, over half the participants do not identify as denominational or secular. I label these CSOs nondenominational.

Due to the limited number of CSOs identified as denominational, there are not many notable differences in relation to social service categories (Fig. 13.6) Nonetheless, there is an indication that the simple hybrid and simple objective categories have higher proportions of denominational CSOs whereas the varied subjective category and outliers have no CSOs declared being denominational. Furthermore, Table 13.9 shows that subjective CSOs have a smaller proportion of denominational CSOs. Likewise, Table 13.10 shows that CSOs with complex strategies have a significantly lower proportion of denominational CSOs whereas those with simple strategies have a higher proportion of denominational CSOs.

Concerning strategies, these findings provide further support to the analysis concerning funding from religious sources in Sect. 13.5.1 above. The denominational profile of CSOs is associated with specific strategies. CSOs that adopt simple strategies such as cash and in-kind transfers more commonly self-declare as being denominational CSOs. Those that utilize complex strategies such as advocacy and research are rarely declared being denominational. Indeed, as discussed above, previous research in MENA finds similar results concerning the positive relationship between CSOs' denominational profile and simple strategies. However, why denominational CSOs may have an adverse relationship with complex strategies is not entirely clear. Perhaps, similar to the findings of Aljabiri and Jawad et al. (2019), denominational CSOs do not want to give the impression that they have political

Table 13.9 Comparison of means between social service engagement categories and the respondent pool for denominational profile

Engagement category / *Profile*	Respondent pool ($N = 357$)	Hybrid ($N = 99$)	Subjective ($N = 92$)	Objective ($N = 32$)	Neither ($N = 134$)
Denominational	0.06	0.09 (1.02)	0.02 (−1.88)*	0.09 (0.65)	0.05 (−0.29)
Nondenominational	0.56	0.62 (1.05)	0.52 (−0.61)	0.53 (−0.28)	0.54 (−0.25)
Secular	0.38	0.29 (−1.72)*	0.46 (1.25)	0.38 (−0.10)	0.40 (0.39)

Comparison is calculated by using Welch's two-sided *t*-test. *t*-values are in parentheses. There are 35 nonrespondents to this portion of the survey

Source, Survey

* $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Table 13.10 Comparison of means between strategy complexity categories and the respondent pool for denominational profile

Strategy Category / *Profile*	Respondent Pool ($N = 357$)	Simple ($N = 128$)	Complicated ($N = 64$)	Complex ($N = 84$)	Mixed ($N = 81$)
Denominational	0.06	0.11 (1.66)*	0.06 (0.11)	0.01 (−2.72)***	0.02 (−1.60)
Nondenominational	0.56	0.59 (0.56)	0.59 (0.54)	0.52 (−0.55)	0.52 (−0.63)
Secular	0.38	0.30 (−1.64)	0.34 (−0.61)	0.46 (1.33)	0.47 (1.19)

Comparison is calculated by using Welch's two-sided *t*-test. *t*-values are in parentheses. There are 35 nonrespondents to this portion of the survey

Source, Survey

* $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

motivations and, therefore, they more commonly adopt apolitical service provision as a strategy.

Concerning subjective CSOs, contrary to expectations, these CSOs less commonly self-declare as being denominational. As discussed above, Jawad's (2009) analysis in the context of Lebanon finds that denominational CSOs adopt subjective frames of poverty by targeting specific categories of individuals that are determined to be in need. These determinations are to a large extent based on the male breadwinner model of service provision. In the context of Iraq, CSOs with hybrid and objective frames have higher proportions of denominational CSOs. In one sense, this may be an indication of the transformation in donor agendas. As the sustainable development goals are more directed towards social inclusion and combating the marginalization of specific groups through the provision of social services, denominational CSOs depart from these secular donor agendas and adopt alternative strategies. An additional explanation is that many denominational CSOs in Iraq adopt what Jawad (2009) terms "poverty as oppression and disempowerment" (p. 149). In this conceptualization of poverty, all people who are not from an oppressive class are equally impoverished. As such, these CSOs do not provide services to specific disadvantaged groups. Instead, they address poverty through a denominational conceptualization of universal rights.

13.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined different CSO social service approaches in Iraq and their relationship to human rights. Following the findings of Hamoudi et al. (2023), I have found that human rights as a concept has been widely adopted by CSOs in Iraq. At the same time, certain types of CSOs more commonly engage in human rights activities. On the one hand, there is a strong association between the adoption of multifaceted approaches and human rights activities. Likewise, CSOs that utilize advocacy, research, and skills training more commonly engage in human rights than CSOs which utilize cash transfers and service provision in their approaches.

At the same time, the relationship between CSOs engaging in human rights activities and adopting a human rights-based approach to social service provision is not entirely straightforward. Large proportions of CSOs that engage in human rights activities utilize simple strategies that address the instances of poverty through cash transfers and service provision. Likewise, CSOs that do not engage in human rights activities utilize more complex approaches to social service provision through advocacy, research, and skills training for the recipients of their services. As such, contrary to the framework proposed by Kandil (2015) concerning CSO development in MENA, the adoption of human rights may not be the best indicator for the type of approach CSOs adopt in Iraq, and researchers of CSOs in MENA should consider more nuanced approaches. Furthermore, how CSOs internalize the concept the human rights in relation to a transformative social justice framework within the local context requires additional in-depth analysis.

On this basis, the analysis in this chapter finds that CSOs in Iraq do not follow a clear traditional versus modern dichotomy. Indeed, many of the findings in the survey data support previous analyses concerning the funding sources and denominational profile of CSOs with rights-based versus needs-based approaches. CSOs in Iraq with funding from individual donors and religious sources more commonly utilize cash transfers and service provision and hardly engage in advocacy and research. Conversely, CSOs with funding from international sources in the form of grants more commonly engage in advocacy and research. Conceivably, the financial stability that comes from international grant funding allows CSOs to pursue transformative missions. Likewise, pressures to attract individual donations may encourage CSOs to adopt simple approaches, reinforcing the structural inequalities that are already present in unstable societies. However, the relationship between funding sources and CSO approaches is not entirely straightforward. To what extent do these specific funders and patrons promote and stipulate specific approaches and to what extent do CSOs take these approaches to attract these funding sources? Said differently, are the funders driving the divergence in CSO social service approaches or are CSOs acting strategically within their missions to gain additional funding?

CSOs in Iraq adopt diverse approaches to social service provision, shaped by funding constraints, denominational influences, and strategic priorities. Balancing donor-driven agendas with community needs remains a significant challenge. However, considering many countries in the MENA region are moving towards a governance without government model, increased understanding of how CSOs navigate the difficult terrain of social service provision is an important first step in supporting CSOs as critical actors in challenging the structural causes of disadvantage that their recipient communities encounter. Strengthening CSOs' governance and funding stability can enable them to adopt more transformative approaches, aligning their activities with human rights principles and social justice. As redistribution is a primary function of governments, how CSOs can promote the fair redistribution of resources is an essential question for researchers to pursue in a governance without government paradigm. Ultimately, the frame of analysis suggested in this chapter is meant to move this research agenda forward.

References

Abbas, R. O. (2013). التنظيم القانوني لمؤسسات المجتمع المدني [Legal regulations of civil society organizations]. (Unpublished master's thesis). Nahrain University, Baghdad.

Ali, Z. (2018). *Women and gender in Iraq: Between nation-building and fragmentation*. Cambridge University Press.

Aljabiri, J. (2015). *The new political settlement in Iraq: An examination of the role of Shi'a NGOs*. (Unpublished PhD thesis). University of Bath.

Aljabiri, J., & Jawad, R. (2019). Social protection, political mobilization and Islamic NGOs in Iraq post-2003. In R. Jawad, N. Jones, & M. Masskoub (Eds.), *Social policy in the Middle East and North Africa: The new social protection paradigm and universal coverage*. Edward Elgar Publishing.

Asadi, R. (2016). الحريات السياسية في العراق نشوء المجتمع المدني العراق [political freedoms in Iraq: The emergence of civil society, Iraq]. *Journal of Al-Qadisiya in Arts and Educational Sciences, 16*(2), 155–164. https://www.iasj.net/iasj/article/119084

Baulch, B. (1996). Neglected trade-offs in poverty measurement. *IDS Bulletin, 27*(1), 36–42. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1759-5436.1996.mp27001004.x

Benthall, J. & Bellion-Jourdan, J. (2003). The Charitable Crescent: The Politics of Aid in the Muslim World. I.B. Tauris.

Cavatorta, F., & Elananza, A. (2008). Political opposition in civil society: An analysis of the interactions of secular and religious associations in Algeria and Jordan. *Government and Opposition, 43*(4), 561–578. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.2008.00263.x

Clark, J.A. (2004) Islam, Charity and Activism. Indiana University Press.

Ebrahim, A. (2019). *Measuring social change: Performance and accountability in a complex world*. Stanford University Press.

Ejrnæs, A. (2020). Relative deprivation and subjective social position. In B. Greve (Ed.), *Routledge international handbook of poverty Routledge*. Routledge.

Fahey, T. (2010). Poverty and the two concepts of relative deprivation. *UCD school of applied social science working paper series WP10*. Dublin: University College Dublin. Retrieved January 05, 2023, from https://www.ucd.ie/t4cms/wp15%20fahey.pdf

Froelich, K. A. (1999). Diversification of revenue strategies: Evolving resource dependence in nonprofit organizations. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly, 28*(3), 246–268. https://doi.org/10.1177/0899764099283002

Frumkin, P., & Keating, E. K. (2011). Diversification reconsidered: The risks and rewards of revenue concentration. *Journal of Social Entrepreneurship, 2*(2), 151–164. https://doi.org/10.1080/19420676.2011.614630

Hamoudi, A.B. (forthcoming). Re-examining violent non-state actors and their relationship to civil society from a Middle East and North Africa perspective. *International society for third sector research working paper series.*

Hamoudi, A. B., Köppe, S., & Winston, N. (2023). Poverty at a distance: Supply and demand side factors and the formation of civil society organizations in Iraq. *Journal of International Development (online first)*, 1–22. https://doi.org/10.1002/jid.3791

Ibrahim, B. L. (2008). Introduction: Arab philanthropy in transition. In B. L. Ibrahim & D. H. Sherif (Eds.), *From charity to social change: Trends in Arab philanthropy*. American University in Cairo Press.

International Centre for Not-for-Profit Law [ICNL]. (2023, May 17). "Iraq". *Civic freedom monitor.* ICNL. https://www.icnl.org/resources/civic-freedom-monitor/iraq

Jad, I. (2004). The NGO-isation of Arab women's movements. *IDS Bulletin, 35*, 34–42. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1759-5436.2004.tb00153.x

Jawad, R. (2002). A profile of social welfare in Lebanon: Assessing the implications for social development policy. *Global Social Policy, 2*(3), 319–342. https://doi.org/10.1177/14680181020020030501

Jawad, R. (2009). *Social welfare and religion in the Middle East: A Lebanese perspective*. Bristol University Press.

Jawad, R., Jones, N., & Messkoub, M. (2019). Theoretical and policy contexts of social policy in MENA. In R. Jawad, N. Jones, & M. Messkoub (Eds.), *Social policy in the Middle East and North Africa: The new social paradigm and universal coverage*. Edward Elgar Publishing.

Kandil, A. (2015).2015–2000 التحولات التي شاهدتها خارطة المنظمات الاهلية العربية [The observed transformations in the map of Arab NGOs from 2000–2015]. Arab Network for NGOs.

Khamees, K. M., & Abied, M. H. (2005). The relation of the state with civil society institutions. *Journal of International Studies, 27*, 95–114. https://www.iasj.net/iasj/article/60962

Law of Associations. (2000). No. 13. Dorar al-Iraq. http://wiki.dorar-aliraq.net/iraqilaws/law/11765.html

Mahmood, T., Yu, X., & Klasen, S. (2019). Do the poor really feel poor? Comparing objective poverty with subjective poverty in Pakistan. *Social Indicators Research, 142*, 543–580. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-018-1921-4

Majeed, M. H. (2017). The civil society movements in Karbala: A historic study. *Al-Ssebt Journal, 1*(4), 181–199. https://www.iasj.net/iasj/article/136168

Mattson, I. (2003). Status-based definitions of need in early Islamic zakat and maintenance Laws. In M. D. Bonner, M. Ener, & A. Singer (Eds.), *Poverty and charity in middle eastern contexts*. SUNY Press.

Miller, H. (2010). From 'rights-based' to 'rights-framed' approaches: A social constructionist view of human rights practice. *The International Journal of Human Rights, 14*(6), 915–931. https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2010.512136

Miller, H. (2017). Rejecting 'rights-based approaches' to development: Alternative engagements with human rights. *Journal of Human Rights., 16*(1), 61–78. https://doi.org/10.1080/14754835.2015.1103161

Ministry of Planning, Supreme Council for the Poverty Reduction Strategy & World Bank. (2018). 2022–2018 استراتيجية التخفيف من الفقر في العراق [The Poverty Reduction Strategy in Iraq, 2018–2022]. Ministry of Planning.

Mustafa, A. Y. (2008) المجتمع المدني المعاصر في العراق: إشكاليات بنوية وخيرات تمكينية [Modern Civil Society in Iraq: Structural Problematics and Empowerment Options]. Arab Forum for Alternatives.

Rogers, P. J. (2009). Matching impact evaluation design to the nature of the intervention and the purpose of the evaluation. *Journal of Development Effectiveness, 1*(3), 217–226. https://doi.org/10.1080/19439340903114636

Tomalin, E. (2006). Religion and a rights-based approach to development. *Progress in Development Studies, 6*(2), 93–108. https://doi.org/10.1191/1464993406ps130oa

Uvin, P. (2007). From the right to development to the rights-based approach: How 'human rights' entered development. *Development in Practice., 17*(4/5), 597–606. https://doi.org/10.1080/09614520701469617

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

Chapter 14
Conclusion

Moosa Elayah

14.1 Thematic Trends Across the Book

The governance landscape in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has undergone profound shifts, characterized by the emergence of hybrid governance models that blend the roles of state and non-state actors. These transformations challenge traditional notions of governance and reflect the unique sociopolitical dynamics of a region marked by conflict, cultural diversity, and historical legacies. Hybrid governance has become a defining feature of conflict-affected regions in MENA, where weak state institutions are complemented—or at times supplanted—by non-state actors. This framework blends formal authority with informal mechanisms to address governance vacuums. As Alaoui (2022) highlights, the evolution of governance structures in MENA often hinges on adaptive strategies that accommodate both state authority and grassroots initiatives. Such hybrid systems are not merely responses to state failure but reflect an ongoing negotiation of power and legitimacy between actors operating within fragmented political environments. In Iraq, for example, the coexistence of the central government, autonomous Kurdish entities, and armed non-state actors exemplifies the hybrid governance paradigm. Elayah and Lambert (2023) detail how these arrangements maintain a semblance of political order amidst persistent instability, underscoring the need for adaptable governance frameworks that incorporate local realities. Similarly, Libya's fragmented governance structures, as explored by Furness and Trautner (2020), illustrate how militias and transitional authorities navigate the complexities of power-sharing in the absence of strong state institutions.

Non-state actors (NSAs) in MENA, including civil society organizations (CSOs), armed groups, and diaspora think tanks, play diverse and often transformative roles

M. Elayah (✉)
Public Administration Doha Institute for Graduate Studies, Doha, Qatar
e-mail: moosa.elayah@dohainstitute.edu.qa

© The Author(s) 2026

M. Elayah (ed.), *Governance without Government in the MENA Region*,
Nonprofit and Civil Society Studies,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-03953-8_14

in governance. These entities address service delivery gaps, advocate for rights and inclusion, and shape policy discourses. Cruz-del Rosario et al. (2016) emphasize that the involvement of CSOs and grassroots movements often bridges the gap between state incapacity and societal needs, fostering community resilience. In Yemen, local organizations have become critical to humanitarian efforts, leveraging their proximity to affected communities to deliver aid and coordinate relief. The role of armed groups, while controversial, also highlights the duality of NSAs in governance. Groups like the Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs) in Iraq demonstrate how armed NSAs can simultaneously support and challenge state authority (Ehteshami et al., 2020). Diaspora think tanks, particularly those emerging from Syria, illustrate the intellectual contributions of NSAs. These entities, as Bhatnagar (2020) observes, not only provide nuanced policy recommendations but also influence global narratives on conflict resolution and reconstruction. Their expertise underscores the importance of local knowledge in crafting effective governance strategies.

The MENA region's governance challenges are deeply rooted in its diverse historical and political contexts. While shared challenges, such as state fragility and external interventions, bind the region, each country exhibits unique trajectories. Koch (2020) and Morillas et al. (2019) identify regional security dynamics as critical factors shaping governance in states like Iraq and Libya, where external actors play significant roles in reinforcing or destabilizing governance structures. In Libya, the interplay between militias and transitional authorities reveals the fragility of post-conflict governance and the importance of international coordination. Mason (2021) notes that without addressing the root causes of fragmentation, efforts to stabilize governance remain tenuous. Conversely, Iraq's Kurdistan Region exemplifies a more cohesive model of hybrid governance, where autonomy and centralized authority coexist within a negotiated framework (Elayah & Lambert, 2023). Despite these variations, the MENA region also shares common threads. As Bishara (2022) argues, the legacy of authoritarianism and the struggle for democratic governance are recurring themes that influence the trajectories of governance in countries like Tunisia, Egypt, and beyond. These shared experiences underscore the interconnectedness of governance challenges in MENA and the need for regional approaches that consider both local nuances and broader geopolitical factors.

14.2 Key Findings and Lessons Learned

The governance landscape in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region reflects the interplay between hybrid governance models and the evolving roles of non-state actors (NSAs). This dynamic framework demonstrates considerable strengths in addressing governance vacuums but also reveals persistent challenges. Innovative approaches provide valuable insights into how governance systems can adapt to the complexities of conflict-affected regions. Hybrid governance models have proven to be effective in bridging gaps where state institutions are weak or absent. By integrating diverse actors, these models create flexible and pragmatic solutions tailored to local needs. In Iraq, the partnership between the central government and armed groups like the Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs) exemplifies this adaptability. As Elayah and Lambert (2023) emphasize, these arrangements prevent a total collapse of governance by balancing formal authority with the operational capacity of non-state actors. In Libya, the fragmented governance system showcases the potential of hybrid models to provide temporary stability. While militias often compete for power, their collaboration with transitional authorities demonstrates the possibilities of negotiated governance in post-conflict scenarios (Furness & Trautner, 2020). These examples underscore the resilience of hybrid governance in addressing complex political realities across the MENA region.

Despite their adaptability, hybrid governance models face significant obstacles that limit their effectiveness. Donor dependency remains a critical issue for many civil society organizations (CSOs) and community-based initiatives (CBIs). In Palestine, for instance, donor-driven agendas often overshadow grassroots priorities, undermining the legitimacy and autonomy of CSOs (Cruz-del Rosario et al., 2016). Fragmented authority further complicates governance processes. In Libya, the coexistence of militias and transitional authorities creates an environment of instability and competition. This fragmentation hinders the development of cohesive policies and weakens the ability of governance structures to address pressing societal needs (Furness & Trautner, 2020). Inclusivity remains another challenge. Governance systems in the Tindouf refugee camps, for example, are dominated by political elites, leaving marginalized groups—especially youth—excluded from decision-making processes. Bhatnagar (2020) highlights the importance of creating participatory frameworks that empower diverse stakeholders and foster more equitable governance.

Amidst these challenges, innovative strategies have emerged that redefine governance in conflict-affected regions. In Yemen, the emphasis on local empowerment within humanitarian aid demonstrates the transformative potential of grassroots participation. By involving local organizations in decision-making and aid delivery, Yemen has created a more participatory and effective governance model. Ehteshami et al. (2020) argue that this approach leverages local knowledge to ensure aid aligns with community needs and priorities. Youth-led activism in the Tindouf refugee camps offers another compelling example of innovation. Grassroots movements advocating for democratic reform and human rights highlight the resilience and agency of marginalized groups. These movements, as Bishara (2022) observes, challenge entrenched power structures and promote accountability and transparency in governance. Syrian diasporas think tanks also illustrate the innovative capacity of NSAs. These organizations bridge the gap between local realities and global policymaking, influencing discussions on conflict resolution and reconstruction. As Bhatnagar (2020) notes, their intellectual contributions underscore the importance of localized expertise in shaping governance strategies.

14.3 Implications for Governance and Non-state Actors

The findings presented in this book underscore the transformative role of non-state actors (NSAs) in reshaping governance landscapes in fragile and conflict-affected regions. By examining the interplay between state and non-state actors across diverse contexts, the book highlights practical recommendations for policymakers and significant contributions to academic debates on governance and statehood. To address governance challenges effectively, policymakers must adopt strategies that recognize the essential contributions of NSAs while fostering inclusivity, accountability, and capacity-building measures. Civil society organizations (CSOs), armed groups, and other NSAs serve as pivotal actors in filling governance gaps, particularly in regions where state institutions are fragile or nonexistent. However, their integration into governance frameworks must be approached with intention and sensitivity to local dynamics.

Inclusivity is fundamental to sustainable governance. Policymakers should establish platforms where marginalized groups, including youth, women, and minority communities, can participate in decision-making processes. As evidenced by the humanitarian response in Yemen, the inclusion of local organizations in aid coordination fosters community ownership and enhances program effectiveness (Ehteshami et al., 2020). Similarly, youth-led movements in the Tindouf refugee camps demonstrate the potential of empowering younger generations to drive democratic reforms and accountability in governance systems (Bhatnagar, 2020). Accountability mechanisms are critical for ensuring that governance efforts are aligned with the needs of the communities they serve. Transparent funding structures, independent audits, and clear performance indicators can strengthen trust between NSAs and the populations they represent. As Cruz-del Rosario et al. (2016) argue, aligning donor priorities with grassroots needs reduces the risk of externally imposed agendas that may undermine local legitimacy. Capacity building is another priority area for policy intervention. Many NSAs operate with limited resources and institutional frameworks, which can constrain their effectiveness and resilience. Investments in training programs focused on governance, financial management, and strategic advocacy can enhance their operational capacity. For example, in Sudan, capacity-building initiatives have enabled community-based initiatives (CBIs) to overcome legal and institutional barriers, improving their ability to deliver essential services and advocate for systemic reforms (Elayah & Lambert, 2023). Policymakers must also navigate the complexities of hybrid governance models, which often involve sharing authority with armed groups and informal actors. These arrangements, as seen in Iraq and Libya, highlight the need for negotiated frameworks that balance the roles of state and non-state entities while ensuring long-term stability and legitimacy (Furness & Trautner, 2020).

This book contributes significantly to the evolving theoretical discourse on governance and statehood, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected regions. By challenging the state-centric models traditionally dominant in governance studies, it emphasizes the dynamic interplay between formal and informal actors. This perspective aligns with emerging scholarship that views governance as a spectrum of interactions rather than a binary distinction between state and non-state authority (Furness & Trautner, 2020). The concept of hybrid governance, which integrates state institutions with the operational capacities of NSAs, provides a nuanced framework for understanding governance in contexts where conventional models have failed. Case studies, such as the role of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs) and Libya's transitional authorities, offer empirical evidence of the adaptability and resilience of these models in maintaining stability and addressing societal needs (Elayah & Lambert, 2023).

The book also underscores the importance of contextualizing governance theories within the unique historical and sociopolitical realities of the MENA region. As Bishara (2022) observes, the legacy of colonialism, authoritarianism, and socioeconomic inequalities necessitates governance models that are both flexible and grounded in local realities. This book advances this discourse by bridging global theories with the lived experiences of communities in conflict-affected regions. In drawing on interdisciplinary perspectives and diverse case studies, this book enriches the academic understanding of governance and statehood in fragile contexts. It emphasizes the need for future research that explores the sustainability of hybrid governance models, the role of international actors in shaping local governance dynamics, and the long-term implications of non-state actor engagement in political and social systems.

The implications of this research are profound for both practitioners and scholars. Policymakers must embrace inclusive and adaptive governance strategies that leverage the strengths of NSAs while addressing their challenges. Academics, in turn, are encouraged to continue exploring the intersections of governance, statehood, and non-state actor dynamics, providing insights that can inform more effective and equitable governance solutions in fragile and conflict-affected regions.

14.4 Cross-Cutting Gaps, Tensions, and Policy Reflections

While this book highlights the adaptive capacity and innovative contributions of non-state actors (NSAs) across the MENA region, it also uncovers several persistent tensions and unresolved gaps that deserve critical reflection and deeper policy engagement. One of the most prominent challenges is the unevenness of legitimacy and capacity among NSAs. Some actors, such as community-based organizations and grassroots movements, have earned local trust through service provision and participatory engagement. Others, particularly armed groups, operate in more coercive or exclusionary ways, raising complex ethical and political questions about the long-term consequences of recognizing such entities as legitimate governance agents. Additionally, coordination failures between state institutions and NSAs appear across several case studies—especially in contexts like Libya and Palestine—where overlapping mandates, competition for resources, or donor-driven agendas have fragmented the governance landscape. These tensions are further exacerbated by the absence of shared accountability mechanisms and the lack of inclusive dialogue platforms that bring together diverse governance actors.

Another recurring concern is the limited space for marginalized voices, particularly women, youth, and stateless communities. Despite some promising initiatives, such as youth-led activism in the Tindouf refugee camps or localized humanitarian responses in Yemen, systemic exclusion remains entrenched. This underlines the need for stronger institutional mechanisms that guarantee political inclusion beyond symbolic participation.

From a policy perspective, these insights suggest that future governance support must go beyond technical capacity-building. It must also address the power asymmetries, ethical dilemmas, and historical grievances that shape local governance environments. Donors and international agencies must recalibrate their engagement strategies to empower locally rooted actors, not just through funding but through sustained partnerships that respect local agency and knowledge systems. Moreover, governance efforts must be embedded in long-term national strategies that transcend short-term crisis response. Policies that promote shared sovereignty arrangements—especially in hybrid governance settings—must be grounded in negotiated frameworks that define clear roles, responsibilities, and conflict resolution mechanisms between state and non-state actors. Finally, this volume calls for a more collaborative research agenda, one that bridges scholarship from political science, development studies, and peacebuilding, and includes voices from the Global South. Comparative studies, particularly between MENA and regions like sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, or Latin America, would enrich our understanding of how hybrid and decentralized governance systems emerge and evolve under different political, cultural, and historical conditions.

14.5 Future Directions

The findings presented in this book not only enhance our understanding of governance in conflict-affected regions but also pave the way for further research and practical interventions. As the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region continues to grapple with evolving political, social, and economic challenges, future studies and actions must focus on deepening our understanding of hybrid governance models, exploring global parallels, and implementing strategies that foster collaboration among stakeholders. Future research should prioritize examining the long-term implications of external interventions on local governance dynamics in conflict-affected regions. The role of international actors in shaping governance structures has often been a double-edged sword. On the one hand, foreign aid and diplomatic efforts have supported stabilization initiatives and capacity-building programs. On the other hand, external interventions can exacerbate dependency, distort local priorities, and undermine grassroots autonomy. In Yemen, for example, international humanitarian aid has been instrumental in addressing immediate crises but has also sidelined local organizations in decision-making processes (Ehteshami et al., 2020). Research should explore how such interventions can be designed to complement rather than overshadow local governance efforts.

The sustainability of hybrid governance models also warrants further investigation. While these models have proven effective in addressing governance vacuums, their long-term viability remains uncertain. In Iraq, the partnership between the central government and the Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs) has maintained relative stability, but questions linger about the durability of this arrangement and its implications for state sovereignty (Elayah & Lambert, 2023). Similarly, in Libya, the fragile coexistence of militias and transitional authorities raises concerns about the potential for enduring governance structures (Furness & Trautner, 2020). Future studies should focus on identifying the conditions under which hybrid models can evolve into stable and inclusive governance frameworks. The intersection of governance and environmental challenges is another area ripe for exploration. Climate change and resource scarcity are increasingly shaping governance dynamics in MENA. Understanding how hybrid governance models address these challenges—particularly in water-stressed regions like Jordan and conflict-ridden areas like Syria—can provide valuable insights for future governance strategies.

The lessons from MENA's governance experiences hold significant relevance for other conflict-affected regions around the world. Comparative research is essential to identify patterns, adapt successful practices, and contextualize challenges across different geopolitical landscapes. For instance, parallels can be drawn between the hybrid governance models in Iraq and the dynamics of governance in Afghanistan, where state institutions and tribal authorities coexist within a fragile political framework. Exploring these similarities can provide a broader understanding of how hybrid systems function under varying conditions. Similarly, the role of civil society organizations (CSOs) in bridging governance gaps in MENA can inform strategies in sub-Saharan Africa, where grassroots organizations often operate in the absence of strong state institutions. Cruz-del Rosario et al. (2016) highlight the potential of CSOs to foster community resilience, a concept that resonates across regions facing chronic instability. Comparative studies can also examine how diaspora networks influence governance in conflict zones, drawing lessons from Syrian think tanks for regions such as Central America or Southeast Asia. The influence of external actors in governance processes also presents a critical area for global comparison. In Palestine, donor-driven agendas often dictate governance priorities, creating tensions between local needs and external expectations. This dynamic mirrors challenges faced by CSOs in regions like South Asia, where international funding can inadvertently undermine local agency (Bishara, 2022). Comparative analyses of these experiences can guide policymakers and practitioners in designing more equitable and context-sensitive interventions.

To strengthen governance in conflict-affected regions, collaborative efforts among non-state actors (NSAs), state institutions, and international organizations are essential. Practical recommendations include fostering trust, building capacity, and promoting inclusivity in governance processes. One concrete step is the establishment of multi-stakeholder platforms that bring together state and non-state actors to collaborate on shared governance goals. These platforms can facilitate dialogue, coordinate resources, and address conflicts of interest. For example, in Sudan, collaborative frameworks involving community-based initiatives (CBIs) and government agencies have improved service delivery by leveraging the strengths of each actor (Elayah & Lambert, 2023). Expanding such frameworks to other regions can enhance the efficiency and legitimacy of governance systems. Capacity-building programs are equally important. Training initiatives for CSOs, local leaders, and government officials can improve their ability to navigate complex governance challenges. These programs should focus on areas such as financial management, advocacy, and conflict resolution, ensuring that all stakeholders are equipped to contribute effectively. In Yemen, capacity-building efforts have empowered local organizations to take on leadership roles in humanitarian aid, demonstrating the transformative potential of such interventions (Ehteshami et al., 2020).

Promoting inclusivity is another critical priority. Governance systems must ensure that marginalized groups, including women, youth, and minority communities, have meaningful opportunities to participate in decision-making processes. This can be achieved through targeted policies, such as quotas for underrepresented groups, and the creation of safe spaces for dialogue and advocacy. Youth-led movements in the Tindouf refugee camps, for instance, illustrate the importance of empowering younger generations to shape governance outcomes (Bhatnagar, 2020). Lastly, international organizations must adopt more flexible and context-sensitive approaches to governance support. This includes aligning funding mechanisms with local priorities, simplifying bureaucratic requirements, and fostering long-term partnerships with local actors. In Palestine, reducing the dependency on donor-driven agendas and strengthening the autonomy of local CSOs can enhance their legitimacy and effectiveness (Cruz-del Rosario et al., 2016).

The future of governance in conflict-affected regions hinges on the ability of stakeholders to adapt to changing dynamics, foster collaboration, and prioritize inclusivity. By focusing on research agendas, global comparisons, and practical interventions, the insights presented in this book can guide efforts to build more resilient and equitable governance systems.

14.6 Final Synthesis

This book has provided a comprehensive examination of the evolving nature of governance in conflict-affected regions, with a focus on the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Through detailed case studies and theoretical insights, it has illuminated the complex interplay between state institutions, non-state actors (NSAs), and international organizations in shaping governance landscapes. The contributions of this work lie not only in its empirical depth but also in its theoretical advancements, offering a nuanced understanding of hybrid governance models and their implications for stability, inclusivity, and resilience. At the heart of the book is the recognition that governance in fragile regions cannot be understood through a state-centric lens alone. Instead, it must be viewed as a dynamic spectrum of interactions between formal and informal actors. From the hybrid governance systems in Iraq and Libya to the critical role of CSOs and grassroots movements in Sudan and Yemen, the book underscores the diverse strategies employed to navigate governance vacuums. These strategies are not merely reactive but reflect the agency and adaptability of local actors in addressing the unique challenges of their contexts. Moreover, the book emphasizes the importance of NSAs in driving governance innovation. Diaspora think tanks in Syria, youth-led activism in the Tindouf refugee camps, and CBIs in Sudan highlight the potential of non-state actors to challenge entrenched power structures, advocate for human rights, and foster inclusive decision-making. These contributions underscore the necessity of integrating diverse voices into governance processes, ensuring that they are reflective of and responsive to local realities.

As the MENA region continues to grapple with persistent conflicts, environmental challenges, and sociopolitical transformations, the need for adaptive and context-specific governance strategies has never been greater. The insights presented in this book advocate for governance systems that are not only resilient but also rooted in the principles of inclusivity, transparency, and accountability. These systems must prioritize the empowerment of marginalized groups, the alignment of donor priorities with local needs, and the sustainable integration of NSAs into governance frameworks. Looking ahead, the lessons from MENA hold valuable implications for other conflict-affected regions around the world. The adaptability and ingenuity demonstrated by governance actors in MENA can inform global strategies for managing fragility, fostering stability, and promoting human rights. This book, therefore, serves as both a scholarly resource and a practical guide, offering a roadmap for understanding and addressing the complexities of governance in an increasingly interconnected and volatile world.

The book underscores the imperative of moving beyond static governance models to embrace dynamic, inclusive, and localized approaches. As conflict-affected regions navigate an uncertain future, the need for collaborative, context-sensitive strategies remain paramount. This work calls for continued research and action, ensuring that governance systems evolve to meet the challenges of an ever-changing global landscape.

References

Alaoui, H. (2022). *Pacted democracy in the Middle East: Tunisia and Egypt in comparative perspective*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Bhatnagar, S. (2020). *India's Pakistan policy: How think tanks are shaping foreign relations*. Taylor & Francis.

Bishara, A. (2022). *Egypt: Revolution*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Cruz-del Rosario, T., Dorsey, J. M., Rosario, T. C. D., & Dorsey, J. M. (2016). Nascent and latent: Differential roles of civil society in Southeast Asia and the MENA region. In *Comparative political transitions between Southeast Asia and the Middle East and North Africa* (pp. 21–54). Lost in Transition.

Ehteshami, A., Rasheed, A., & Beaujouan, J. (2020). *Islam, IS and the fragmented state: The challenges of political Islam in the MENA region*. Routledge.
Elayah, M. A., & Lambert, L. A. (Eds.). (2023). *Conflict and post-conflict governance in the Middle East and Africa*. Palgrave Macmillan.
Furness, M., & Trautner, B. (2020). Reconstituting social contracts in conflict-affected MENA countries: Whither Iraq and Libya? *World Development, 135*, 105085.
Koch, C. (2020). *The evolution of the regional security complex in the MENA region* (pp. 19–39). Springer International Publishing.
Mason, R. (Ed.). (2021). *New perspectives on Middle East politics: Economy, society, and international relations*. American University in Cairo Press.
Morillas, P., Rózsa, E. N., & Szalai, M. (2019). Global dynamics in the MENA region. *MENARA, 7*.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.