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Analysing security subcomplexes in a changing Middle East—the role of non-Arab state actors and non-state actors

Peter Seeberg¹

ABSTRACT This article presents a theoretical framework for a collection of articles (“special issue”), which aims at discussing the role of non-Arab state actors and non-state actors in a changing Middle East. The articles in the collection offer perspectives that have been overlooked in recent research, namely those focusing on the role of non-Arab state actors and non-state actors in connection with the changing security environment in the region. Furthermore, these articles discuss how changes in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region are appearing in different and shifting contexts in the creation of new local, sub-regional, or regional security subcomplexes in which Arab states, non-Arab states and non-state actors enter into new conflicts, alliances and other political relations with and against each other. The role of international actors interfering in the region is also analyzed in the context of the changing Middle East.

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Introduction

The articles appearing in this special issue take up perspectives that to some degree have been overlooked in recent research, namely those focused on the role of non-Arab state actors and non-state actors in connection with the changing security environment in the Middle East region. Where much of the research on the Arab uprisings in 2011 and onwards first of all have analysed the Arab states and their regional and international relations (Dalacoura, 2012; Sekkat, 2014; Al-Sumait *et al.*, 2015; Brownlee *et al.*, 2015; Butenschön, 2015; Heydemann, 2016; Seeberg, 2016a), this collection of articles takes its point of departure in the role of non-Arab states and non-state actors during the years after the revolts. The articles discuss the changing security environment in the Middle East region and analyses the role of Iran, Israel and Turkey as significant foreign policy and security actors in the Middle East. Located in geographical proximity to Iraq and Syria they are affected by the ongoing crisis there, at the same time as they in different ways contribute to the regional development (Aran, 2012; Phillips, 2012; Ehteshami *et al.*, 2013). Related to the complex role of the non-Arab states in the region, a number of important non-state actors are also influencing the recent turmoil in the Middle East. This is the case for well-known actors like Hezbollah and Hamas, but also for organizations that have more recently entered the political scene, like Islamic State (IS, or Da'esh) (Milton-Edwards, 2013; Juneau, 2015).

More than half a decade after the start of the Arab uprisings, the Middle East is in a state of turmoil. In some states political transformations are still unfolding, while in other states ongoing internal conflicts, if not wars, are taking place. The complex developments have resulted in reconfigurations of the balance of power and a negatively influenced security situation. The critical realities in several states in the region affect, as shown in the Routledge Handbook on the Arab Spring, the overall political conditions and create unstable security environments locally, in regional subsystems, and in the broader Middle East perspective (Sadiki, 2015).

The in many ways surprising developments in the Arab states have attracted much academic focus, partly because they demonstrate that the existing political order was after all less stable than the dominant narrative of authoritarian resilience had it. As emphasized by Fawaz Gerges, no single cause can explain the social eruptions that shook the Arab world in particular in early 2011. A complex set of drivers need to be brought forward to capture the overthrow of several of the authoritarian rulers (Gerges, 2014: 9–15). At the same time, phenomena such as social movements, the new and the old media, the role of the armies, and so forth, which influenced both the start and the outcome of the uprisings, need to be thoroughly analysed to understand the changing realities of the Middle East (Al-Sumait *et al.*, 2015; Seeberg, 2015a). The articles also discuss how changes in the Middle East region are appearing in different and shifting contexts in the creation of new local, sub-regional, or regional security complexes in which non-Arab states and non-state actors enter into new conflicts, alliances, and other political relations with and against each other. The articles discuss, from the perspectives of non-Arab state actors and non-state actors, challenges related to the understanding and analysis of how the ongoing transformation processes in the Middle East have affected existing security subcomplexes, thereby contributing to the discussions of possible changes in the existing state system in the Middle East and in particular in the Levant (Beck *et al.*, 2016a).

It is the ambition of this introductory article both to highlight the contributions of the collection and to explain the subjects addressed. This article briefly traces the history of the emergence of Middle Eastern security subcomplexes, taking its starting point

in the situation after World War II, where the wave of decolonisation contributed to the formation of the Middle East region. The Arab states developed into authoritarian regimes, which for decades seemed unmoveable, but as transformation processes appeared in connection with the Arab uprisings, a changing Middle East seemed to defy our perception of stability and resilience. This article shows that the non-Arab states and the non-state actors in the region are not passive bystanders while these historical processes take place. Rather they play important roles in the transitions and influence or intervene in the developments, directly or indirectly.

The emergence of Middle Eastern security subcomplexes. In order to discuss the specific role of the non-Arab actors and the non-state actors in connection with the ongoing transformations in a security perspective, this introduction will take its point of departure in the notion of regional security subcomplexes, coined by the so-called Copenhagen school. Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver describe in their seminal work *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* how a regional security complex appears in the Middle East in the years after World War II (Buzan and Wæver, 2003). They note how several of the recent conflicts have roots reaching back before the war, such as the fight for leadership between Arab states (Egypt, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Syria) and the Israel-Palestine conflict. Added to that, British and French influence via the mandate system is strongly felt, in the sense that “their military-political overlay dominated the region” (Buzan and Wæver, 2003). However, after 1945 and the wave of decolonization following the war, a critical mass of independent states generated the Middle Eastern regional security complex.

Gradually three subcomplexes emerged, two of which centred in the Mashreq and the Gulf, with a less significant one in the Maghreb. A defining aspect of the Mashreq subcomplex has without doubt been the conflict between the Palestinians and Israel, with its long row of wars involving Israel's neighbouring Arab states and also several significant non-state actors. As underlined by Shlaim (2014: 383), Palestine is for ordinary people in the Arab world not just a political issue, but an identity issue. The Palestinians are engaged in what perhaps can be seen as the last anticolonial struggle in the world, and the cause of Palestine “remains suffused in symbolism that transcends the narrow borders of its patrimony” (Shlaim, 2014: 384). In this sense the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has amplified and focused transnational dimensions of Arab nationalism, thereby contributing to the coherence of the Middle East as a regional security complex.

The coherence of the Middle East can be questioned, as it was in the well-known work *Middle East Dilemma* by Michael Hudson *et al.* analysing the (lack of) Arab integration. However, rather than only emphasizing disintegration, Hudson *et al.* mentioned some of the dimensions of the economic integration in parts of the Middle East, for instance the “logic of integration” attached to the economic development and social modernization of the states constituting the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which “generated a vast movement of labor and remittances across borders” (Hudson, 1999: 2). However, the very existence of factors like that does not, as pointed out by Valbjørn (2016), automatically lead to increased integration. Rather the significant internal migratory movements in the Middle East indirectly emphasize one of the important reasons for the lack of unity: the huge differences in GDP per capita between the rich Gulf states and the poor Arab states like Egypt, Morocco and Yemen (Zank, 2009).

The Gulf states, together with Iran and Iraq, constitute a security subcomplex formed after the British withdrawal in the early 1970s and based on a triangular rivalry between Iran, Iraq

and the GCC states led by Saudi Arabia (Buzan and Wæver, 2003: 191). The rivalry was sharpened in the late 1970s by the arrival of the new Shia Muslim regime in Teheran. Interestingly enough the religious regime established a strong alliance with secular Syria, which for a long time stemmed from a common interest in containing an aggressive Iraq. In response to the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and especially in order to strengthen themselves against any possible negative consequences of the 1980–1988 Iran–Iraq war, the Arab Gulf states launched the GCC in 1981 as what might be described as a defensive alliance (Ehteshami *et al.* 1991; Fawcett, 2005). Generally speaking the Middle East was never one regional community, but rather a system of sub-regional security complexes, only rarely having identical or even just common interests.

Turkey has become a significant actor in the Arab world, especially in recent years, where the AKP-led Turkish government pursued an activist policy vis-à-vis the Middle East (Park, 2014). In the wording of the Copenhagen school, Turkey can be perceived as an insulator, defined as a “location occupied by one or more units where larger regional security dynamics stand back to back” (Buzan and Wæver, 2003: 41). The notion of Turkey as an insulator is useful for the overall analysis of the foreign policy of Turkey, but in particular toward the Middle East, as will be seen later (Barrinha, 2013). The understanding of the Middle East as consisting of regional security subcomplexes supplemented by insulators should obviously not be perceived as a once and for all given and unchangeable analytical set of tools. The framework should rather contribute to perceiving a Middle East in transformation, where shifting alliances, regime changes and external influence form new challenges for our analytical instruments.

The transformation of the Middle East and the role of the non-Arab state actors. Since the start of the Arab revolts in late 2010 and the beginning of 2011, several states in the Arab world have been going through a transformation process that in some way or another has challenged the old order, the resilient authoritarian Middle Eastern states (Seeberg, 2015b). The process has been influenced by external actors and international actors (the United States, the EU), as well as regional state actors and non-state actors. Among the non-state actors, it is worth mentioning that tendencies toward a more active role for regional organizations like the League of Arab States (Arab League) seem to be a reality (Beck, 2015; Seeberg, 2015c). Added to that, non-Arab state actors have influenced the transformation processes. In the Mashreq security subcomplex, first of all Israel has played a role, in particular in relation to its Palestinian counterparts, the PNA and the Hamas, but also toward its Arab neighbouring states Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria (Allegra and Napolitano, 2011). This has been the case within the framework of the Mashreq subcomplex, but maybe more significantly in connection with the Gulf subcomplex, where Iran, Israel and Turkey have posed their own, different agendas.

The Islamic Republic of Iran pursues an ambitious foreign and security policy, via the Hezbollah focusing on the Mashreq security subcomplex and in an intense competition with Saudi Arabia (and to some degree Iraq) influencing the Gulf subcomplex (Maloney, 2015). In the former context, Iran has attempted to utilize its close connections to the Hezbollah to contest Israeli dominance and, again primarily via the Hezbollah, to participate in the civil war in Syria. The traditional alliance with Syria is thereby maintained, but also given new dimensions via the confrontations with the “new enemies,” Sunni Muslim IS. The competition with the GCC states, involving the Iranian nuclear issue, is *inter alia* about dominance in the Persian Gulf,

but has significant perspectives beyond the subcomplex-context. The nuclear issue plays into the Iran–Israel rivalry and involves important international dimensions, because of the years of confrontations between Iran and the UN in this respect. The nuclear question led to multi- and bilateral sanctions against Iran, not least severe sanctions from the United States and the EU, which without doubt created problems for the regime in Teheran and contributed to the decision to change signals from the side of Iran (Bazoobandi, 2015; Bergeijk, 2015).

By taking advantage of the widespread view in Iran that the sanctions were an expression of interference in Iranian internal affairs, Iran paradoxically (and successfully) practiced what Steven Heydemann and Reinoud Leenders has termed “recombinant authoritarianism”, understood as “systems of rule that possess the capacity to reorder and reconfigure instruments and strategies of governance, to reshape and recombine existing institutional, discursive, and regulatory arrangements to create recognizable but nonetheless distinctive solutions to shifting configurations of challenges” (Heydemann and Leenders, 2013: 7). In pursuing the same agenda Iran attempted to diversify its international links, albeit with only moderate success (Ehteshami *et al.*, 2013: 236). In the context of the Gulf subcomplex, the Islamic Republic is playing an important role in the sectarian confrontations internally in Iraq, where the Shia Muslims constitute the largest majority, but where the remnants of many years of Sunni political and economic dominance contribute to a highly fragile security environment, lately influenced very much by the IS as a significant player in the destabilizing internal conflicts in Iraq.

The article by Peter Seeberg in this collection analyses the complex relationship between the sanctions imposed on Iran and the political development over the recent years regarding the Levant and Gulf security subsystems—with a focus on EU–Iran relations (Seeberg, 2016b). What Thomas Juneau has referred to as Iran’s “strategic loneliness” (Juneau 2014) might be a reality, but still Iran has been able to pursue foreign and security policy interests—both in the Levant and in the Gulf. The article firstly discusses the significance of the sanctions in influencing the Iranian decisions on the nuclear issue; secondly, how the imposing of the sanctions affected European–Iranian relations; and, thirdly, the Iranian ability to pursue its policies in the two regional subcomplexes. To carry out the analysis the article describes phases in the sanctions against Iran from the establishment of the sanctions regime to the final agreement was reached in 2015. In the first phase the EU attempted, via a soft power strategy, to go after negotiated solutions. The strategy was successful; in the Paris-agreement Iran consented to freezing of enrichment in return for trade and technology benefits. After being elected in 2005 Mahmoud Ahmadinejad initiated a period of confrontation—announcing that Iran would start enriching its plutonium. The EU and the other international sanctioning states imposed additional sanctions. In this second phase, however, some states in the alliance against Iran’s nuclear policies expressed reservations regarding taking part in the oil embargo against Iran—so potential divisions between the sanctioning states were revealed. In a third phase the EU measures were tightened and included individual sanctions hitting Iranian officials responsible for human rights violations. In a fourth and last phase before the agreement of July 2015 an oil embargo was implemented, which seriously affected the Iranian economy and probably definitively convinced the Iranian regime that it would be wise to enter a deal with the sanctioning powers?

With the fifth phase, a post-agreement period was initiated, which in principle is still ongoing. It has, throughout the long process been the official Iranian position, that it never had plans of constructing nuclear weapons. Nevertheless both Israel and the

Gulf-states, and in particular Saudi-Arabia, have seen the Iranian nuclear policies as threatening. The issue has significant strategic implications. Israel has argued strongly against making agreements with Iran regarding the nuclear issue, fearing that a nuclear capability would add new dimensions to the encircling of Israel through the Iranian connections with Syria, Hezbollah and Hamas. Saudi-Arabia officially supported the negotiations in Vienna, but in reality the Saudis were sceptical, because they feared that an agreement would result in a situation, where Iran could maintain (parts of) their nuclear programme, thus having a strategic edge *vis-à-vis* Saudi-Arabia. The commonality of interest in re-establishing trade relations between Iran and the international actors in the West, in particular the United States and the EU, potentially might turn out to be a significant factor for future cooperation. Given a lifting of the oil-embargo Iran and the GCC-states compete in the strategically important global oil-market.

Summing up Seeberg demonstrates that the role of Iran in the Levant and the Gulf changed over the decade leading up to the agreement in Vienna. Iran used to be a strong actor in both subcomplexes, but gradually a relative weakening became a reality, especially in the context of the Gulf. In the Levant things are more complex. The emerging crisis in Syria (and the close relations between Syria and Iran) in the first place constituted an obstacle for improving Iran's relations with the EU. However, the arrival of the IS on the political and military scene added to the complexity—first of all because Iran and the EU have common interests in controlling and rolling back the IS, and in this perspective the continued Iranian support for the regime in Damascus might no longer, seen from Brussels, be that important.

As mentioned by Shlaim (2014: 385), both Israel and the US initially perceived the Arab revolts more as a problem than a prospect. The uprisings in some ways came as an unpleasant surprise for the Israeli leaders, who always reiterated that peace and security were dependent on Arab regime changes in a democratic direction. There was some speculation if the Camp David Accords of 1978–1979 would be in danger following the regime changes in Egypt since the fall of Hosni Mubarak, but after the coup in July 2013 that brought Abdul Fatah al-Sisi to power, the threat seems irrelevant. The Israeli reaction to the establishment of a Fatah–Hamas unity government in 2014 and the attempts from the Palestinian side to obtain recognition in the UN in 2015 emphasize that the conflict is still far from finding a solution. The type of warfare in connection with the Israeli action in Gaza in the summer of 2014, the so-called Operation Protective Edge, with several thousand killed and more than 10,000 wounded, leaves no doubt that Ze'ev Jabotinsky's "Iron Wall" doctrine from the 1920s (Shlaim, 2000) still forms the basis for the Israeli security strategy.

The article by Beck (2016) takes up this perspective by discussing how the Arab uprisings were perceived in Israel and how Israel—in terms of political communication and rhetoric—presented the political developments in the international public sphere. It is an important point in the article that there has been a discrepancy between the rhetoric by the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who portrayed the uprisings as anti-Israeli and the actual realities, where the revolts against the Arab leaders in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria and so on. despite some destabilizing potential hardly represented serious security threats for the Israeli state. It is the idea of the article to analyse and discuss how a wait and see approach at the level of *realpolitik* is contrasted by an official characterization of the Arab uprisings as constituting major security threats for Israel.

The article presents a theoretical framework, where neo-realism, institutionalism, liberalism and the securitization approach as invented by the Copenhagen School are applied.

Beck shows that from a neo-realist analytical perspective, the Arab uprisings did not trigger major changes in Israel's power position in the Middle East. And apart from some minor incidents at the Israeli border and at Israeli embassies abroad, Israel has not had to face significant threats. Furthermore Beck notices that the newcomer in the Levant, IS, having carried out attacks on Muslim Christians, Yazidis and Kurds, has not included Jewish Israel in its atrocities. The Institutional perspective of the analysis takes its starting point in that the Middle East region is characterized by a low level of regional coherence, not to say cooperation—and that Israel's integration into regional organizations and agreements is particularly low. However, experiences since 2011 related to the Arab uprisings do not indicate that any major agreement with neighbouring states (like for instance the Camp David accord with Egypt or the peace agreement of 1994 with Jordan) have been challenged following the uprisings. In recent years, as mentioned by Beck, Egypt under Abdel Fatah al-Sisi has even increased the cooperation with Israel—in order to put pressure on Hamas. Regarding the liberalist aspects of the analysis the classical democracy theorem does not really fit with the actual realities in the case of the Arab uprisings. Developments inherent in transformation processes during which regimes tend to resort to aggressive foreign policies, which enables them to distract from deficits in their performance in domestic politics, seems hardly to be a relevant perspective. Israel is therefore left with a pragmatic "wait and see" approach to the recent realities in the Middle East.

The analysis of Israel's role in connection with the Arab uprisings points to a paradox, where the calm wait and see policy contradicts the rhetoric of the Israeli leaders. The security dimension can help making sense of this contradiction. The concept of occupation provides the empirical link, which helps making the paradox understandable. According to Beck "Israel's response to the Arab uprisings: securitizing the "Arab Spring" contributed to Israel's ability to maintain its position as an integral member of the "civilized" (Western) community". Securitizing the Arab revolts contributes to legitimizing the extraordinary measures of occupation—and to counteract normative pressures on Israel's policies *vis-à-vis* its Palestinian neighbours in Gaza and the West Bank.

Turkey stands out in connection with the dynamics of the Mashreq and Gulf regional security subcomplexes as something of a special case. Turkey might, as explained by Ziya Öniş, have presented an over-ambitious foreign policy in connection with the challenges from the Arab world and Israel in the last 5 years. Turkish policies changed as a result of internal reconfigurations of power, where the AKP-led government has been successful in a gradual outmanoeuvring of the earlier, very powerful Turkish military and also the Kemalist bureaucracy (Ayoob, 2014). Instead the Middle East became the centre of attention: "With the rising tide of conservatism and a rediscovery of the Ottoman past in Turkish politics, it was perhaps inevitably that the Muslim in general and the Arab world in particular, would occupy centre stage in Turkish foreign policy" (Öniş, 2014: 207). Seen from the side of the Turkish insulator the Arab world, to paraphrase Buzan and Wæver, became part of the security dynamics standing back to back.

In the case of Syria, Turkey ended up on the opposite side to Iran. Whereas Iran stood by its historical alliance with the Syrian regime, Turkey, after some initial hesitation, took a firm stand together with the Syrian opposition—and even, after a while, established its own sanctions programme against Syria, similar to the United States and the EU (Seeberg, 2016a). Turkey thus intervened in the Mashreq security subcomplex, taking the same side as the international powers, the United States and the EU, and with similar means, all the while its more confrontational

policy against Israel became less problematic for the United States. In the case of Iran, Turkey decided to insist on Iran's right to use nuclear power for peaceful purposes. This was partly based on a pragmatic foreign policy viewpoint, taking care of Turkey's economic interests in trading with Iran, but also based on well-calculated statements catering for the "Arab Street", where for instance the then Prime Minister Abdullah Gül made this statement: "We are categorically opposed to the presence of weapons of mass destructions in our region ... we have always called for the establishment of a WMD free zone in the Middle East, including both Iran and Israel". (Ayoob, 2014: 414)

Taking his point of departure in the Copenhagen school concepts of regional security complexes and the role of insulators André Barrinha discusses "whether it is possible for Turkey to become an international power while remaining an insulator state", (Barrinha, 2013: 167)—and answers that this, rather than being a reality, seems more to be a project for a possible future. Turkey has ambitious plans about being one of the world's strongest economies, and being among the sixteen largest economies in the world, there is hardly doubt that Turkey has a huge potential. Its role as an insulator, however, is highly challenging, not least in security environments like the ones surrounding Turkey. Being in a geostrategic position like that, Turkey has to function in relation to the security dynamics present in both the Mashreq and the Gulf security subcomplexes—and at the same time take its relations to EU (and the United States) seriously. The Arab revolts have not made this an easier task and the confrontations, sometimes even very close to Turkish borders, between the IS, Kurdish Peshmerga militias, the PKK and other groups, including units from the Syrian army, only add to the foreign and security policy challenges facing Turkey (Lawson, 2016). There is hardly doubt that Turkey, as indicated by Özden Zeynep Oktav and Aycan Çelikaksoy, to some degree has felt isolated and betrayed by both the US and the EU, both pursuing a hesitant approach towards the crisis in Syria, both when it comes to military actions and helping taking care of the Syrian refugees, constituting logistic as well as security related problems for Turkey (Oktav and Çelikaksoy, 2015).

In his analysis of Turkey's domestic politics and Middle East policy Hale (2016) focuses on how Turkish foreign policy often has been affected by domestic divisions. Hale discusses three categories: first, historically determined cultural and ethnic cleavages, second, public opinion on foreign policy issues, and third, domestic policy considerations with foreign policy implications. Initially Hale characterizes significant traits of Turkish political culture, starting with Kemal Atatürk's reforms in the 1920s establishing Turkey as a secular state in Anatolia, being the central area in what used to be a multinational Islamic Ottoman empire. The empire included large parts of the Arab world and by cutting the link between the state and Islam, the new state was, in effect, aiming at ending main cultural and historical bonds between Turks and Arabs. According to Hale the official Turkish discourse sought to de-Arabise the Muslim culture and history—rather than excluding the Turks from it. Furthermore the Ottoman defeat in the First World War led to the understanding that Turkey should avoid involvement in the Arab region.

Hale points to a phenomenon labelled "neo-Ottomanism", which since the 1980s has helped to re-habilitate the Ottoman past, without saying much about its negative aspects. In two phases this new tendency became obvious, first in connection with the Cold War, where Turkey gradually aimed at developing closer relations to countries in its neighbourhood. These countries, primarily located in the Balkans and in the Middle East, used to be Ottoman territory. Secondly following the elections in November 2002 Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu

argued that Turkey should give up its defensive attitudes towards its surroundings and pursue a much more active foreign policy.

Davutoğlu rejected the label "neo-Ottomanism", but launched a policy, which in the years preceding the Arab uprisings, improved the Turkish relations to a number of states in the Arab region and to other actors in its surroundings. The emerging crisis in Syria, however, led to more complex foreign policy and in some cases to difficult challenges, not least because of the problematic relations between Turkey and the Kurdish organizations PKK and PYD, which particularly in the fight against IS became important actors. Furthermore the relations between Turkey and Russia suffered from the very different strategic positions *vis-à-vis* Syria. The general public in Turkey gradually became more critical against Turkey being too involved in the turmoil in the Middle East. Hale demonstrates how opinion polls became more negative than earlier under the AKP-dominated foreign policies and more specifically against participation in direct intervention in Syria, should that become a realistic perspective. The lack of public support for the foreign policy strategies has affected the Turkish leaders and contributed to a downgrading of the activist element in the policies. According to Hale "it was hard to escape the impression, that most of the Davutoğlu doctrine had been quietly dropped, in the face of the multitude of problems it faced, but without a clear replacement". The critical situation with the continued Syrian crisis and the difficulties in rolling back the IS in both Syria and Iraq, and added to that, the resulting huge number of Syrian refugees in Turkey, influenced the domestic political debates and strengthened the opposition in its criticism of the AKP leaders. The domestic political issues thus continued having a crucial effect on foreign relations—and vice versa: the in many ways problematic developments in the Levant played an important role in influencing Turkish politics.

The crisis in the Middle East and the role of the non-state actors. From 2014 and onwards the optimism attached to the Arab uprisings in the Middle East in early 2011 was replaced by a negative sentiment. The transformative logic that seemed to follow the changes from a relatively homogeneous Arab world characterized by conservative authoritarian regimes in different forms to a repoliticized Arab world in democratic progress developed into heterogeneous scenarios which leave behind an impression of crisis and anarchy. The authoritarian state in the region is certainly not dead; indeed in some states it is strengthened by rentier-state mechanisms and by fear of importing the chaos and anarchy in the states in turmoil (Anderson, 2014).

In this troubled reality, a number of important non-state actors are playing an increasingly significant role. Organizations like Hamas, Hezbollah, IS, Jabhat al-Nusra (from July 2016 Jabhat Fatah al-Sham), PKK, and PYD are all examples of strong and well-organized political entities that are taking part in the ongoing political and, in some cases, military developments and confrontations. The organizations have different goals and sometimes it may not be the ambition to capture the state as such, but to take part in the contestation for influence within given national borders. Sometimes the organizations have a partly transnational perspective, as it obviously is the case with the IS and the Hezbollah, as shown by Aran (2012). In other cases, they are specifically local and/or national, as in the case of religious-political parties or organizations like, for instance, the al-'Asir movement and the Anti-Sectarian Movement in Lebanon, as analysed by Meier (2015).

Some non-state actors are part of political and/or military alliances, as for instance Hezbollah, which has been a significant,

if not dominant, organization in Lebanon since the first half of the 1980s (Norton, 2007a, b). From the start, both Syria and Iran shared support for the Lebanese movement, but it soon became clear that Iran held the main responsibility for the development of the organization. The active alliances with significant state actors contribute to the relative isolation of Israel, and the necessity of bolstering the power of the Iran–Hezbollah–Syria axis, which is an important theme in Israeli foreign policy (Guzansky, 2014: 99). Hezbollah is not only a political party or a strong militia. The organization or movement also organizes a wide range of social activities of a semi-state character, runs a huge media conglomerate of which the satellite television station Al Manar may be the most significant element, and has over the last years invested its soldiers, military equipment, and political reputation in fighting for the Ba’athist regime in Damascus—to an increasing degree against another significant non-state actor, the IS (Al Jazeera, 2015).

The complex character of Hezbollah, with its political, social, military, and public sphere dimensions, can also be seen in connection with other organizations or movements. Hamas has been and still is part of the political leadership in the context of the Palestinian territories, Gaza and the West Bank. The history of Hamas is in some ways similar to that of Hezbollah. Hamas emerged out of the first Intifada and soon became a powerful movement within the Palestinian territories (Milton-Edwards and Farrell, 2010). Their violent campaigns against Israel have resulted in several hundred casualties, among whom have been Israeli soldiers, settlers, civilians, and sometimes tourists and immigrant workers. Hamas held the undisputed leadership of Gaza for years until this was handed over to the unity government in June 2014. Organizations like Hamas and Hezbollah play, with their complex structures and manifold societal functions, in some ways roles similar to states, and their political and social significance in the Mashreq subcomplex are considerable.

The formation of the unity government in Palestine in June 2014 was the wish of many ordinary Palestinians (Ibish, 2014). Nevertheless, its history became short as it only lasted 1 year. The wider phases planned, namely the holding of presidential and parliamentary elections 6 months after the signing of the unity government agreement, never became a reality. It seems that one of the effects of the Arab uprisings regarding the Palestinian leadership has been to strengthen tendencies toward reconciliation and the promotion of PLO reforms in the West Bank (Tuastad, 2013: 96). Furthermore, the Syrian crisis has challenged the Hamas leaders, who before the Arab uprisings moved to Damascus. This happened already in 1999, after the expulsion of Hamas’ leaders from their Amman offices. Bashar al-Assad, who came to power in 2000, allowed Hamas to carry out mobilization and propaganda campaigns in Palestinian camps in Syria, so initially the Hamas-Syria link was strengthened.

However, as the uprisings in Syria developed into a civil war, the relationship cooled down, not least when Hamas, as part of a gradual change of strategy in Syria, went through a “rapprochement with Egypt, Jordan and Qatar, which it had initiated in an attempt to find an alternative base for its leaders in case the strategic relationship with Syria were broken” (Napolitano, 2013: 76). This became something of a self-fulfilling prophecy. The relations between Syria and Hamas deteriorated resulting in Hamas leaving Damascus, as pointed at by Milton-Edwards (2013: 64). Meetings between Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran took place emphasizing the importance of the non-state actors in the Mashreq subcomplex, and in connection with this a relative weakening of Syria in the context of foreign and security policy occurred (Seeberg, 2013).

In a recent perspective the emergence of the radical Islamist organizations IS and Jabhat Fatah al-Sham is adding to the

weakening of the Syrian regime is. These organizations are taking part in the fighting in the Mashreq security subcomplex, first of all in Syria, but to some degree also in the Gulf subcomplex, mainly in Iraq, and in the Maghreb subcomplex, primarily in northern Libya (Buckley, 2012). IS considers itself to be a post-state entity, superseding Westphalian definitions of a state—by claiming to have established a trans-state caliphate in Syria and Iraq (Gunter, 2015: 102). Its efficiency and military capabilities taken into consideration, IS causes severe problems for the Syrian regime—and for the international actors, not least the United States. The United States is caught in a difficult position with its relations to several of the actors involved in the recent turmoil in the Levant and the Gulf subcomplexes. Partly for reasons of its close relations (via NATO) with Turkey, the United States has had some difficulties in appreciating the efforts by the PKK in fighting IS. It is part of the complicated story, that not only the Kurdish Peshmerga are fighting IS, but also the PKK and the PYD militants, blurring both the alliances and the contradictions between the non-Arab state actors, the non-state actors, and the international actors as well (Gunter, 2015).

It adds significantly to the complexity of the role of the non-state actors, as emphasized by Berti (2016), that “organizations like Hamas or Hezbollah operate simultaneously as sophisticated armed organizations, complex political entities and as highly developed social movement organizations involved in administering and delivering social services at the grassroots level”. The idea of her article is to analyse how some non-state actors (like the above-mentioned, but also IS) seem to develop alternative forms of governance, which even represent high degrees of autonomy from the state—and, as it for instance has been the case with Hezbollah in Lebanon, sometimes competing with it.

The article focuses on IS, Hezbollah and Hamas—obviously three different organizations, whose, as mentioned by Berti, diversity should not be under-stated. Where IS can be described as an anti-systemic actor pursuing a transnational (or post-national) agenda, Hezbollah is something completely different: a highly cohesive and institutionalized organization, which plays an important role in Lebanese politics, has an advanced and well-functioning network and a very strong military apparatus. Hamas represents, according to Berti, something in between, with its extra-institutional socio-political movement and a political party, which in reality rules in Gaza—and for many years has remained highly involved in Palestine’s political life. This is of course very different from the IS, which has proclaimed the Caliphate in areas in Iraq and Syria, with their own state institutions and managing of resources, security and delivery of social services. Berti makes the point, that regarding the three non-state armed groups analysed, many of their social, political governance related activities are not much different from those performed by “real” states. Furthermore she shows how what she calls “rebel governance” endows the organizations with some level of effective sovereignty, enforcing control over a specific territory and its population(s). Upholding this sovereignty requires a combination of coercion and co-optation, which is made possible through the provision of security, social service and more or less voluntary cooperation between the political leadership and the population in the given territory. The armed groups applies discursive and symbolic policies in order to create a kind of legitimacy, which emphasizes that “rebel governance” blurs the line between “state” and “non-state”. By analysing and discussing Hamas, Hezbollah and IS “the article deconstructs the main heuristic devices used to frame the debate on non-state armed groups”, thereby arguing “for the importance of coming to terms with the increasing complexity and diversity of these actors and for applying a more nuanced and holistic framework”.

Concluding remarks

In summary, it seems obvious that the ongoing political and social transformations in the Middle East regional security complex have changed the conditions for the non-Arab state actors Iran, Israel and Turkey, and the non-state actors Hamas, Hezbollah, IS and so on. in pursuing their foreign- and security-policy interests. At the same time, the opposite is the case: in complex dialectical processes the non-Arab state actors and non-state actors have played and play significant roles affecting in particular the Mashreq and Gulf security subcomplexes, thereby influencing the overall political development of the Middle East following the Arab uprisings in 2011. For the purpose of analysing both change and continuity in the Mashreq and Gulf regional security subcomplexes over the recent years, the non-Arab actors and the non-state actors are highly important, if not indispensable. By focusing on these specific dimensions of the complex Middle Eastern reality, this collection of articles hopes to present a significant contribution to our understanding of the region's recent development.

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Data availability

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