

Dealing with tools of political (dis)order

Coercive organisations in the Levant

CRU Report

Erwin van Veen
Feike Fliervoet



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Summary

Political orders that feature protracted sociopolitical contestation and violent conflict typically exhibit a range of 'coercive organisations' – actors with the capacity to exert large-scale violence for political purposes and control violence within their respective strongholds or constituencies. Contemporary intrastate conflicts feature at least five different types of coercive organisation, distinguished by their relation to the state and its government: governmental, quasi-governmental, hybrid, anti-regime and anti-state.

These coercive organisations are typically catalysts of violent conflict and manifestations of protracted political contestation, as well as core elements of both wartime and post-conflict political orders. As a result, they have significant influence over processes of state development. However, peacebuilding efforts often overlook this impact or consider it negatively, as they semi-automatically privilege coercive organisations representing 'the state'. Particularly in contexts of protracted and deep contestation over the nature of political order, such favouritism is unjustified. This is because the state is usually the subject of contestation and because coercive organisations supposedly representing the state often defend the interests of a government that does not necessarily protect state-critical parameters like citizenship, national identity or political and human rights.

To be effective in such contexts, external peacebuilding interventions must demonstrate greater awareness of the multiple roles that each type of coercive organisation plays in times of political crisis and conflict. They must also exercise greater caution in the use of labels such as 'state', 'paramilitary', 'militia', 'rebel' and 'terrorist'. Coercive organisations may be partisan, but they can also enjoy greater legitimacy than the state among several different constituencies. Consider, for instance, the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) in Syria. Coercive organisations can be violent, but they can also be effective vehicles of emancipation and representation. One can think of Hezbollah in Lebanon in this regard. Finally, coercive organisations can sustain political gridlock but also, paradoxically, clamour for progressive political change. Saraya al-Salam in Iraq offers an example.

More specifically, the research conducted for this report suggests that peacebuilding efforts must be based on four insights about the many coercive organisations that have acquired prominence as tools of political (dis)order in contemporary intrastate conflict:

- *Effective peacebuilding efforts must assess the demerits and merits of coercive organisations based on their interests, constituencies and behaviours in relation to the legitimacy of the political order they seek to realise.* Different types of coercive organisation have in common that they promote or resist political change(s) in line with the interests of those who create, run or support them. The protracted nature of the political crisis and/or conflict they originate from, or contribute to, indicates that none of these interests necessarily has greater legitimacy than others and/or should enjoy privileged status. This means that state-centric and state-privileged notions must be removed for analytical purposes and the peacebuilding potential of coercive organisations assessed based on local perceptions, legitimacy and constituency support for their behaviour.
- *Effective peacebuilding views the violence mobilised by coercive organisations as a manifestation rather than a cause of the breakdown of political order.* Coercive organisations demonstrate claims to power and resources of existing elites in relation to other existing elites, of emergent elites or of new social groups that (parts of) the ruling elite refuses to accommodate. Coercive organisations grow and emerge most easily in political orders with both formal and informal components of rule that are mired in deep political contestation and/or blockage because such orders are fragile and prone to fragmentation.
- *Effective peacebuilding influences coercive organisations on the basis of their behavioural incentives. These incentives are grounded in the domestic political economy interests of coercive organisations, the nature and level of foreign support they receive, and the expectations of their social constituencies.* Coercive organisations are not monolithic entities. Different interests, intentions and objectives compete for dominance *within* each organisation. How they balance out at a particular point in time informs organisational and leadership behaviour. This balance can be influenced, especially in the case of hybrid coercive organisations that simultaneously compete and cooperate with the government.
- *Specifically in regard to hybrid coercive organisations, effective peacebuilding requires that the aim of external interventions corresponds with the prevailing interaction dynamic between a particular hybrid coercive organisation and governmental coercive organisations.* Our research suggests four basic interaction dynamics: cooptation, accommodation, confrontation and gradual capture.
- If the primary interaction dynamic between a hybrid coercive organisation and governmental coercive organisations is *cooptation* of a / several hybrid coercive organisation(s) by the government, peacebuilding interventions must focus on inclusive statebuilding

- If the primary interaction dynamic between a hybrid coercive organisation and governmental coercive organisations is temporary *accommodation*, peacebuilding interventions must focus on preventing conflict
- If the primary interaction dynamic is *confrontation*, peacebuilding interventions must focus on shortening the duration of violent conflict
- If the primary interaction dynamic is *gradual capture* of the government by a / several hybrid coercive organisation(s), peacebuilding interventions must either engage in targeted statebuilding *or* focus on limiting aid and increasing diplomatic pressure – depending on whether the government is positively re-established or cannibalised.

Acknowledgements

This report is the product of years of applied analysis of the nature of 21st century conflict, literature study, political economy country analysis, a series of workshops in 2017–2018 and case studies of a number of quasi-governmental and hybrid coercive organisations by Clingendael researchers. In other words, the report has many contributors and emerges out of a longer period of reflection and experience.

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For all immediate intents and purposes, the report provides the conceptual anchor for Clingendael's Levant research programme, which focuses on the role of *hybrid coercive organisations* in contestations of political order in the Levant: <https://www.clingendael.org/research-program/levant>.

More broadly, the report contributes to our understanding of the emergence, development and persistence of coercive organisations – those of a hybrid nature in particular – as an element of contemporary intrastate conflict. Situated at the intersection of conflict studies and state formation theory, the report offers analysis of a key linkage between these processes in the context of the Levant.

The content of the report naturally remains the responsibility of its authors. We look forward to a productive debate on its strengths and weaknesses.

1 Introduction

A common feature of contemporary intrastate conflicts is that they are fought by a multitude of coercive organisations¹ with different loyalties, capabilities and objectives. In the Levant, for example, one can think of Iraq's Al-Hashd al-Sha'abi, an amalgam of over 50 coercive organisations that operate de jure inside the state and de facto partially outside of it.² One can also consider the dozens of foreign and Syrian militias loyal to President Assad, including the Shabiha (originally smuggling gangs), Syrian 'branches' of Iraq's Hashd or Afghan voluntary militias. In addition, there is the bewildering universe of hundreds of Syrian opposition groups ranging from the moderately conservative Free Syrian Army to the more radical Islamist Ahrar al-Sham and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. Then there are various manifestations of Kurdish militancy: the YPG (Syria) as popular militia; the Peshmerga (Iraq) as state-sanctioned armed factions of different Kurdish political parties; and the PKK (Turkey) as largely a guerrilla force. Finally, there are organisations – usually extremist in their orientation – that have come to operate globally, such as Al-Qaeda and Islamic State (IS). If one broadens the analytical net to include more minor organisations or to encompass the wider Middle East (e.g. Yemen, Libya or Egypt), there are many more examples of coercive organisations.³

This proliferation of coercive organisations, commonly restricted to the subset of 'armed groups', is not uniquely associated with the Arab uprisings. Consider, for example: the many paramilitary organisations of the Yugoslav wars (1991–1995); the numerous rebel and paramilitary organisations active during the two Congo wars (1996–1997 and 1998–2003) and in the eastern DRC today; the proliferation of coercive organisations in Somalia after the fall of the Barré regime in 1991; the mujahedeen and other armed factions in Afghanistan since 1979; and the longstanding presence of coercive organisations, including extremist and criminal groups, throughout the Sahel.⁴

1 Coercive organisations are actors with the institutional capacity to exert large-scale violence against outsiders for political purposes, and to control violence within their respective strongholds or constituencies. Adapted by the authors from: Boege, V., A. Brown, K. Clements and A. Nolan, *On Hybrid Political Orders and Emerging States: State Formation in the Context of 'Fragility'*, Berlin: Berghof, 2008.

2 See for example: ICG, *Iraq's paramilitary groups: The challenge of re-building a functional state*, Brussels: ICG, 2018; Ezzeddine, N. and E. van Veen, *Power in perspective: Four key insights into Iraq's al-Hashd al-Sha'abi*, The Hague: Clingendael, 2018.

3 By way of example: Lacher, W. and al-Idrissi, A., *Capital of militias: Tripoli's armed groups capture the Libyan state*, Geneva: Small Arms Survey, SANA briefing paper, 2018.

4 See also: World Bank Group (WBG) and United Nations (UN), *Pathways for peace: Inclusive approaches to preventing violent conflict*, Washington DC: WB, 2018.

Nevertheless, the existence and presence of such organisations has arguably become more visible and influential since 2011.

What the examples above highlight is that coercive organisations grow, emerge and proliferate more easily under conditions of severe political contestation. When a political order that features both formal and informal components of rule and faces disruption because of major internal and/or external challenges to its unaltered continuation – such as sustained civil protest, elite strife or foreign invasion – coercive organisations are likely to grow and proliferate either to defend the existing political order or to challenge it. Although coercive organisations themselves are not necessarily part of the initial challenge to a prevailing political order, they are often a mitigating response⁵ or an amplification⁶ of it. They are usually not created from scratch but based on pre-existing social structures and power relations that enable mobilisation under particular conditions.⁷

In short, coercive organisations emerge and thrive somewhere between sociopolitical contestation and violent conflict – when political order weakens without fully collapsing, opportunities for power acquisition and redistribution increase, and the need for self-protection grows. Once new coercive organisations are there, they become part of the conflict tapestry as well as the post-conflict political order, since they produce new sources of protection and/or violence that subsequently legitimise their permanence and encourage their growth.⁸ Cause and effect become hard to untangle: contemporary violent conflicts are protracted in part because coercive organisations proliferate easily under conditions of political disorder, while their existence tends to cause further destabilisation. For this reason, coercive organisations can be viewed as manifestations of severe contestation in political orders with formal and informal components of rule, as catalysts of violent conflict, and as elements of both wartime and post-conflict political orders.

5 The Syrian Shabiha mutated into their current form of pro-regime militia(s) from pre-existing smuggling networks in response to persistent mass protests threatening the survival of the Syrian regime.

6 The emergence of Iraq's Peshmerga, first as a guerrilla movement and later as a state-sanctioned force, increased the threat of Kurdish dissatisfaction with Iraq's political order, which originates from their persistent marginalisation.

7 Various authors suggest, directly or indirectly, key building blocks that are instrumental, essential, or both, to the creation of coercive organisations (the authors themselves tend to refer to 'armed groups') such as longstanding practices of domination and 'hidden transcripts' of resistance (Scott), organisational resources and repertoires of action, interpretative frames and political opportunity (Della Porta), identity boundaries, processes of brokerage and polarisation (Tilly). See: Scott, J., *Domination and the arts of resistance: Hidden transcripts*, New Haven: YUP, 1990; Della Porta, D., *Clandestine political violence*, CUP: Cambridge, 2013; Tilly, C., *The politics of collective violence*, Cambridge: CUP, 2003.

8 Della Porta, Tilly and Kalyvas consider violence to be an emergent phenomenon. In Della Porta's words: 'the choice to use violence develops in action'. Della Porta (2013), *op.cit.*

This report assesses how new coercive organisations arise, what (and whose) purpose they serve, how they develop and – key from a policy perspective – what influence they have on state development. To reduce state-centric bias in the analysis of violence, we use the term *coercive organisation*, which puts governmental and paramilitary (i.e., quasi-governmental) forces, as well as various types of organisation that oppose the government or state, on the same continuum as peer competitors. We consider coercive organisations as mechanisms to block changes in the existing political order that are not aligned with the interests of those forming such organisations – governmental actors or otherwise – and/or to effect changes in the political order that align with their interests. We focus our discussion on the Levant because of the proliferation of coercive organisations in Syria and Iraq since 2011 and because concrete cases help to connect conceptual discussions with reality.⁹

The report offers an empirical – rather than normative – framework to analyse the creation, development and role of coercive organisations in relation to state development. Coercive organisations are key tools in processes of contestation that seek to reconfigure political order. Greater awareness of their functionality can help make expectations, and the interventions they give rise to, more realistic about the kind of political order that might emerge and at what point in time.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 conceptualises the notion of a coercive organisation and develops a typology. Section 3 examines when coercive organisations emerge and to what purpose. Next, Section 4 analyses the factors driving the development of coercive organisations and identifies common dynamics between governmental and *hybrid* coercive organisations. By way of conclusion, Section 5 offers a few practical reflections on how policy interventions can better engage with hybrid coercive organisations.

9 We combine deductive thinking based on a literature review with inductive thinking based on case studies of selected quasi-governmental and hybrid coercive organisations in the Levant. See the annex for the methodology.

2 Coercive organisations in contemporary intrastate conflict

In much of the world, violence remains ubiquitous in processes of political contestation and state formation.¹⁰ Such violence takes many different forms and features different levels of intensity. Latin America, for example, has high levels of criminal and law-and-order violence, mostly committed by criminal networks and governmental coercive organisations with a mix of commercial and political objectives. In the Middle East and North Africa, there is a wider range of coercive organisations that use violence to pursue mostly political and religious ends.¹¹

In this report, we focus on the organisation of coercive capabilities to engage in collective violence to achieve political ends. We view violence as a tool in political contestation, one which is purposefully structured through the creation of different types of coercive organisation, including what are commonly referred to as ‘armed

10 While this report focuses on the political purposes and macro-dynamics of violence, its incidence also has important micro-dimensions in terms of how individuals and communities can go about their daily lives. Common micro dynamics include forced labour, violent land appropriation, sexual violence, abusive police behaviour and arbitrary detention. See: Haugen, G. and V. Boutros, *The locust effect: Why the end of poverty requires the end of violence*, Oxford: OUP, 2014. For example, the militarisation of Iraqi society in the Nineveh plains facilitates opportunistic accusations of support for Islamic State to appropriate coveted land and settle old grievances. See: <http://www.synaps.network/what-the-war-on-terror-looks-like> (accessed 3 August 2018).

11 Contrast for example, Arias, E. and D. Goldstein (eds.), *Violent democracies in Latin America*, London: Duke University Press, 2010 with Filiu, J-P, *Généraux, gangsters et jihadistes: Histoire de la contre-révolution arabe*, Paris: La Découverte, 2018. Key differences influencing type and nature of violence include resource availability (hydro-carbons in the Middle East; drug production in Latin America), geography (open terrain in the Middle East; mountain and jungle separation in Latin America); different levels of urbanisation (higher in Latin America); different dynamics of political mobilisation of socio-religious heterogeneity (much higher in the Middle East; lower in Latin America); as well as different histories (the struggle of left-wing rebellions to bring more equitable government about in Latin America; the persistence of autocratic regimes in the Middle East).

groups'.¹² Our analysis reveals that coercive organisations are relatively easy to create once political orders with both formal and informal components of rule face serious disruption. Such organisations subsequently serve as levers to reconfigure the pre-existing political order – both from within and outside the government – and must be accommodated in any 'new' political order that may emerge. Doing so, however, risks re-creating the conditions that led to their emergence.

The conundrum: state formation and 21st century conflict

The nature of political order in many countries remains fundamentally contested because of persistent sociopolitical marginalisation, economic inequalities, legacies of violence, or all three.¹³ Such cleavages tend to coincide with latent identity groups that can be mobilised politically once sufficient grievances have accumulated, interpretative frames developed and, possibly, external support solicited.¹⁴ In such contexts, certain types and manifestations of coercive organisation can function as part of larger sociopolitical platforms that have greater legitimacy among particular constituencies and/or capability than the government, with the latter often being the source of the problem.¹⁵ Consider Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Taliban in Afghanistan, the PKK in Turkey and Saraya al-Salam in Iraq. From this perspective, coercive organisations can be legitimate vehicles for sociopolitical emancipation, representation and even

12 All coercive organisations are shaped by their capacity to threaten and/or wield coercive force. They are called 'coercive organisations' because this capacity constitutes the core of their power and influence, not because they are necessarily committed to the security, or protection, of the population under their control. As argued by Price and Van Veen: 'competition between such powers can mean that security actors are more preoccupied with enforcing, challenging or benefiting from the current balance of power than they are with providing a safe environment.' Price, M. and van Veen, E., *From Entitlements to Power Structures: Improving analysis for community security programming*, The Hague: Clingendael, 2016.

13 WBG and UN (2018), *op.cit.*

14 See for example: Hashemi, N. and D. Postel, *Sectarianization: Mapping the new politics of the Middle East*, London: Hurst & Co, 2017.

15 For respective macro, meso and micro reviews of the often-problematic role of the government in processes of political contestation: Kössler, R., 'The modern nation state and regimes of violence: Reflections on the current situation', *Ritsumeikan Annual Review of International Studies*, Vol. 2, pp. 15-36, 2003; Berti, B., 'Rebel politics and the state: Between conflict and post-conflict, resistance and co-existence', *Civil Wars*, 18:2, pp. 118-136, 2016a; Price, M. and M. Warren, 'Reimagining SSR in contexts of security pluralism', *Stability: International Journal of Security & Development*, 6(1): 8, pp. 1-13, 2017. It must also be noted that what is locally seen as legitimate in terms of governance, or adequate in terms of governmental service provision, can be rather different from what international norms, treaties and conventions prescribe. See: McCullough, A., *The legitimacy of states and armed non-state actors*, Birmingham: GSDRC, 2015; Van Veen, E. and V. Dudouet, *Hitting the target, but missing the point? Assessing donor support for inclusive and legitimate politics in fragile societies*, Paris: OECD/INCAF, 2017.

modernisation.¹⁶ Compounding this persistent problem of political contestation is the fact that many post-colonial countries have a highly heterogeneous make-up due to the imposed and artificial nature of their borders. This facilitates the emergence of both competing identities and alternative power centres if no adequate mechanism is found to accommodate the wide and varied range of interests represented within those borders.¹⁷

Moreover, in a number of countries, although the government has nominal authority, it is not the decisive force behind processes of state formation.¹⁸ Tilly's original assertion that 'war made the state and the state made war' does not necessarily hold true beyond the confines of early-modern European history. For example, possibilities for resource generation and extraction (such as taxation) are no longer limited to, or even focused on, domestic populations because globalisation and technological change have enabled alternatives like easier access to foreign sponsors and markets, the use of international money transfers (formal and informal) and engagement with organised crime networks. Today, the ideas, legitimacy, funds, arms and recruits that provide the means to contest and shape a political order can be acquired through global marketplaces to an unprecedented degree.¹⁹ At the same time, the evolution of international law and crisis management has made the harsher outcomes of violent conflict less acceptable (e.g. conquest, elimination or dissolution). This means that power centres alternative to the government cannot necessarily be fought into submission and then bloodily subjugated without an international outcry or intervention out of concern for, for example, minority

16 Consider the arguments in: Malthaner, S., 'Violence, legitimacy and control: The microdynamics of support relationships between militant groups and their social environment', *Civil Wars*, 17:4, pp. 425-445, 2015; McCullough (2015), *op.cit.*

17 Tilly, C., *Coercion, capital and European states AD 990-1992*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1992; Taylor, B. and R. Botea, 'Tilly Tally: War-making and state-making in the contemporary third world', *International Studies Review*, 10, pp. 27-56, 2008; Meagher, K., 'The strength of weak states? Non-state security forces and hybrid governance in Africa', *Development and Change* 43(5): 1073-1101, 2012; Staniland (2012) 'States, Insurgents, and Wartime Political Orders,' *Perspectives on Politics* 10 (2): 243-264, p. 243.

18 Because the political order of many states remains unsettled, as evidenced by the repetitive nature of violent conflict, we speak of 'state formation'. We do so in full appreciation of the fact that the international boundaries of most states were established decades ago and international sovereignty conferred correspondingly. On this matter, see also: World Bank (2011), *op.cit.*; Kössler (2003), *op.cit.*

19 See for example the OECD's work on 'Global Factors Influencing the Risk of Conflict and Fragility, especially its 2012 paper series: <http://www.oecd.org/dac/conflict-fragility-resilience/cfr-publications.htm> (accessed 23 November 2018); Leenders and Mansour offer a provocative example by arguing that the Syrian regime of President Assad used the global UN-led humanitarian system to reinforce its claims to sovereignty and statehood once these had become entirely discredited within Syria itself. Leenders, R. and K. Mansour, 'Humanitarianism, state sovereignty, and authoritarian regime maintenance in the Syrian war', *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 133, No. 2, 2018.

groups or humanitarian imperatives, interrupting the process before it is completed.²⁰ This suggests that fragmentation of coercive capabilities, power and authority is both more easily initiated and more easily sustained.

The upshot of the preceding analysis is that coercive organisations are not simply aberrations but part of a peer group of actors, which often includes the government of the day. These peers compete for control over (part of) the state's authority under a set of 21st century conditions that make conflict easier to start but more difficult to end. Empirically speaking, under such conditions coercive organisations can represent a significant source of material and ideological strength. If continuous violence is to be avoided, they need to be accommodated in state formation processes, at least for some time and in limited form. More philosophically, given the unfinished business of state formation in many countries, one could defensibly suggest that the privileges that today's state-centric ordering of the world confers on many governments is a major cause of conflict. These government privileges do not reflect the empirical reality of much messier contestations of legitimacy, power and social allegiance in many countries and conflicts – in which coercive organisations play a major role.

Arguably, this is nowhere clearer than in the Levant since the Arab uprisings. The stormy events of 2011 turned the placid and ossified political orders of the Middle East into a cauldron of political contestation and disruption.²¹ In Syria, Yemen and Iraq, the political contestation that followed this disruption has led to large-scale violence. But the hitherto seemingly stable political orders of Turkey, Lebanon, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and various Gulf countries have also become more vulnerable – as recent protests, purges and crises have demonstrated. In response, their ruling elites are beefing up the status quo.²² Consider, for example, the new assertive foreign policy of the Saudis and Emiratis, which emphasises the nationalism and honour of their country at home (exemplified by the recent Saudi 'twitter spat' with Canada over imprisonment of a human rights activist), maintains their ruling families in power, and seeks to halt Iran's regional ascent.

20 This still happens in various forms, such as Israeli oppression of the Palestinians, the treatment of the Rohingya in Myanmar and Turkish suppression of Kurdish identity, but it has become more difficult.

21 The number of violent crises and armed conflicts in the region nearly tripled between 2000 and 2016 according to several datasets: Systemic Peace at <http://www.systemicpeace.org/regions/regtrends.htm#mde>; Uppsala Conflict Data Program at http://www.pcr.uu.se/research/ucdp/program_overview/ (both accessed 6 March 2017).

22 For a stimulating general reflection on political environments that are changing or transforming from one organising logic into another: Dahl, R., *Modern political analysis*, 5th edition, London: Prentice-Hall International, 1991; Huntington, S., *Political order in changing societies*, New Haven: YUP, 1968; O'Donnell, G. and P. Schmitter, *Transitions from authoritarian rule: Tentative conclusions about uncertain democracies*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2013.

It is in such situations of authoritarian entrenchment, revolutionary uprising and political fragmentation resulting in violence that coercive organisations thrive as protection mechanisms, extensions of authoritarian influence and vehicles for acquiring political power.²³ For example, the increase in regional geopolitical and identity competition has increased the incentives for the Levant's stronger authoritarian states to support hybrid, anti-regime and sometimes even anti-state coercive organisations in other states as proxies for their foreign policies. Effectively, this overlays the domestic interests of such coercive organisations with foreign ones, complicating conflict resolution and creating even greater ambiguities in terms of loyalty and hybridity. The mix of state weakness, revolutionary polarisation and growing sectarianism has also facilitated linkages between political groups, religious schools of thought and coercive organisations to create platforms that provide and protect – in place of the state.²⁴ Such platforms – like the Sadrists in Iraq – compete as well as work with the state, sometimes becoming part of it in the process by either capturing elements of it or by discharging some of its functions.

This is not to say that coercive organisations are necessarily progressive. Indeed, as regards the Syrian Arab Army, IS and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, the opposite is the case. But it does suggest that the intellectual and practical unwillingness to rethink how this gap between the normative conception and empirical reality of political contestation can be bridged is problematic from a peacebuilding perspective.

On the need to re-conceptualise armed groups as coercive organisations

In the literature on armed conflict, rebellion, proxy warfare and civil war, 'armed group', 'militia' and 'armed faction' are common labels attached to non-governmental entities capable of wielding some degree of coercive capability.²⁵ The term 'armed group',

23 Boege et al. (2009), *op.cit.*

24 For many individuals and groups, such platforms effectively shift the emphasis from their national identity – as defined by physical international boundaries – to their sub-national identity, as defined by ethno-sectarian boundaries. See: Migdal, J. (ed.), *Boundaries and belonging: States and societies in the struggle to shape identities and local practices*, Cambridge: CUP, 2004.

25 For insightful background on the nature of civil war in the context of poverty and 'the new wars': Cramer, C., *Civil war is not a stupid thing: Accounting for violence in developing countries*, London: Hurst & Company, 2011.

especially, is common in both academic parlance and policy discourse.²⁶ All these labels can be viewed as a legacy of the conceptualisation of civil war as violent conflict between the ruling government and one or more rebel groups seeking to overthrow it. But they all fail to reflect two important advancements in the recent literature on intrastate conflict and political (dis)order.²⁷

First, debate on the nature and governance of the state has come to consider hybrid political orders,²⁸ limited access orders²⁹ and areas of limited statehood³⁰ as prevalent – almost standard – forms of political organisation in much of those parts of the world that are characterised by conflict and fragility. While such orders are in part a consequence of a government not having a secure monopoly on violence, their causes go much further. They include different practices and expectations of governance and various democratisation trajectories, as well as the utility and durability of patronage and clientelist systems as mechanisms of politico-economic organisation. The result is that the government shares authority, legitimacy and capacity with other entities. In turn, this undermines both the *de jure* and the *de facto* claim that the government, seen as a unitary entity, represents the state.³¹ This makes the ‘state’ vs. ‘non-state’ dichotomy that the term ‘armed group’ implies inappropriate. It is normatively and practically prejudiced

26 Despite compelling arguments having been made to the contrary. See: Krause, K. and J. Milliken, ‘Introduction: The challenge of non-state armed groups’, *Contemporary Security Policy*, 30:2, 202-220, 2009; Berti, B., ‘What’s in a name? Re-conceptualizing non-state armed groups in the Middle East’, *Palgrave Communications*, online, 2016b.

27 Cunningham, D. E., K. Skrede Gleditsch and I. Salehyan, ‘It takes two: A dyadic analysis of civil war duration and outcome’, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 53:4, 570-597, 2009.

28 Boege et al. (2008), *op.cit.* Hybrid political orders are orders in which the exercise of public authority combines formal state elements with sub-state, traditional and private elements. As a result, power is less consolidated. This pattern is observable elsewhere, notably in Africa. For example: <https://www.idrc.ca/en/project/hybrid-security-arrangements-africa-exploring-implications-state-building> (accessed 2 March 2018).

29 North, D.C., J.J. Wallis, S.B. Webb and B.R. Weingast (eds), *In the Shadow of Violence: Politics, Economics, and the Problems of Development*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

30 Risse, T. (ed.), *Governance without a state? Policies and politics in areas of limited statehood*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2011; Staniland, P., ‘States, insurgents and wartime political orders’, *Perspectives on politics*, 10:2, 2012.

31 As will have become clear by now, we do not consider government and state as synonymous. We view ‘the government’ as the collection of individuals or groups that runs the state on a day-to-day basis, while ‘the state’ is the formal expression of ‘a people + a territory + an identity = a political community’ that benefits from international recognition. As a result, we disagree with Robert Dahl who argued that the denial of a government’s exclusive regulation of the legitimate use of force amounts to the dissolution of the state. While such a turn of events is likely to produce violent conflict and may topple the government, it does not necessarily lead to dissolution of the state. For instance, coercive organisations can oppose – even fight – the government but support the state. Dahl, R., *Modern political analysis*, 5th edition, Yale: Prentice Hall, 1991.

because the government often does not represent the state in contemporary intrastate conflicts.

In addition, research on fragmentation in civil wars has demonstrated that contemporary conflicts no longer tend to be fought by two easily distinguishable and clearly opposing warring parties, but instead feature a multitude of different organisations that fight one another as much as they fight their common enemy.³² Such conflicts involve actors that do not neatly fit either the state or the non-state category. For instance, 'non-state armed groups' can be used – even created – by a government to fight for the state and become part of it (e.g. the Al-Hashd al-Sha'abi in Iraq); they can be developed by a subnational government but fight in part against the national government (e.g. the Peshmerga in Iraq between 2015 and 2017 insofar as the disputed territories are concerned); or they can be formed outside of the government and fight against either the government (e.g. the Syrian opposition) or the state (e.g. IS). And what to make of an armed group like Hezbollah, which co-governs Lebanon as a political party and runs the south of the country, and which comes to the rescue of President Assad's regime while working with Syrian militias that used to run smuggling networks (the *Shabiha*)?³³

It is for these reasons that we use the term *coercive organisation* instead of *armed group* in the remainder of our analysis. Through this reconceptualisation we put all actors with the organisational capability to exert large-scale violence against 'outsiders' and to control violence within their respective strongholds and communities on an even normative keel. It considers various government-related coercive organisations and other armed groups as tools of political contestation on a single continuum. Using the term *coercive organisation* also implies that we focus our analysis on those entities that maintain an organisational structure over a sustained period of time, while excluding ad hoc coalitions, groups that only exist temporarily and warlords.

The corollary of this reconceptualisation is that considering non-state varieties of coercive organisation as atypical governance actors, treating them as inconvenient spoilers or excluding them as terrorist groups reflects the normative preferences and preferred outcomes of struggles for power more than their actual political significance, legitimacy or social support. Examples include Turkey's framing of the PKK, and Israeli labelling of Hamas and Hezbollah, as terrorist groups *only*. This is not just simply

32 For example: Bakke, K. M., K.G. Cunningham, and L.J. Seymour, 'A plague of initials: Fragmentation, cohesion, and infighting in civil wars', *Perspectives on Politics*, 10:2, 265-283, 2011; World Bank, *Conflict, security and development*, Washington DC: WB, World Development Report, 2011; Pearlman, W. and K. Gallagher Cunningham, 'Nonstate actors, fragmentation and conflict processes', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 56(1), 3-15, 2012.

33 For further reflections on the nature and development of Hezbollah: Berti (2016b), *op.cit.*; Daher, J., *The political-economy of the Party of God*, London: Pluto Press, 2016.

reductionist,³⁴ but also denies the importance of political rights and inclusion. In addition, it arguably promotes the continuation of violent conflict. Putting such blinders aside enables more neutral exploration of coercive organisations in terms of form and function.

A typology of coercive organisations

While some coercive organisations have clear and distinctive purposes that depend on the position, interests and power of their creators or sponsors, many pursue multiple objectives and maintain different allegiances at the same time, some of which may seem contradictory. This makes them hard to categorise. For example, Iraq's Peshmerga are at the same time militias that protect the personal and family interests of the ruling elites of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), armed factions of the main political parties of the KRI, forces of resistance against the Iraqi government, and official security forces sanctioned by that same government.³⁵

This observation notwithstanding, a simple typology of coercive organisations can provide us with the basic categories that can then be used to problematise and reflect on the use of any single one of them. Much of the variation in the form and function of coercive organisations can be captured by categorising them as peers based on their attitude towards the state and its government. This places coercive organisations along a continuum that ranges from full cooperation to full competition with the state and/or government. The first three types outlined below – governmental, quasi-governmental and hybrid coercive organisations – operate in whole or in part within the framework of government and state. While governmental coercive organisations are officially part of the state and typically serve the purpose of protecting and supporting the existing regime, quasi-governmental and (in part) hybrid coercive organisations also operate in support of the government (as well as its associated elites and coercive organisations), but they are not part of the state's institutional framework. They are contenders for political power within, essentially, the existing political order. Next, hybrid coercive organisations (in other part) and anti-regime coercive organisations accept the framework of the state but challenge the existing government. They seek to take over, replace or reconfigure the existing political order, but not the state. Finally, anti-state coercive organisations dispute government as well as state. They are existential threats to both, and this is one reason why they are resisted with determination. Table 1 below reflects this continuum.

34 See for example: Gunning, J., *Hamas in politics: Democracy, religion, violence*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2008; Berti (2016b), *op.cit.*; Geerdink, F., *Dit vuur dooft nooit: Een jaar bij de PKK* [This fire will never be extinguished: A year with the PKK], Houten: Spectrum, 2018.

35 Fliervoet, F., *Fighting for Kurdistan? The nature and function of Iraq's Peshmerga*, The Hague: Clingendael, 2018.

Table 1 A typology of coercive organisations

Type of coercive organisation	Examples	Nature	Purpose
1. Governmental coercive organisations	Organisations that are nationally and internationally recognised as official security forces – <i>Syrian Arab Army, Iraqi Security Forces</i>	Part of the state's coercive apparatus	Execute and enforce public authority; under direct command and control of the government of the day
2. Quasi-governmental coercive organisations	Paramilitaries, government-sponsored militias and regime-linked armed groups – <i>Shabiha (Syria), Basij militia (Iran)</i>	Extension of the state's coercive apparatus	Support governmental coercive organisations and/or advance governmental interests with plausible deniability; under (in)direct command and control of the government
3. Hybrid coercive organisations	Popular militias and armed wings of political parties – <i>Badr Corps or Saraya al-Salam (Iraq), Hezbollah (Lebanon)</i>	Both autonomous of, and linked with, the government and (quasi-) governmental coercive organisations	Cooperate and compete with the government depending on overlap of interests between these organisations, their broader political platforms (if any) and the government
4. Anti-regime coercive organisations	Rebel groups – <i>PKK (Turkey), Brigades of the Martyrs Al-Nasser Mohiuddin (Iran)</i>	Armed actors operating in opposition to the government, but recognising the state (in full or part)	Overthrow of the government and/or establishment of their own autonomous sphere (territorial or otherwise)
5. Anti-state coercive organisations	Radical groups that do not recognise the state as entity – <i>Islamic State, Al Qaeda</i>	Transnational groups with an ideology that transcends state boundaries	Dissolve one or several states to replace them with a more universal project and ideological identity
<p><i>Definition of coercive organisations:</i> Actors with the institutional capacity to exert violence on a large scale against outsiders for political purposes, and to control violence within their respective strongholds or constituencies.³⁶</p>			

36 Adapted by the authors from Boege *et al.* (2008), *op.cit.*

All coercive organisations share four characteristics: (i) they are willing and capable to use violence for pursuing their objectives; (ii) they are able to control a particular territory *and/or constituency* [*italics* added by the authors to reflect the non-territorial dimension of coercive organisations]; (iii) they possess a certain degree of autonomy with regard to politics, military operations, resources and infrastructure; and (iv) they are shaped through an organisational relationship or structure that exists over a specific period of time. See also: Schneckener, *Spoilers or Governance Actors? Engaging Armed Non-State Groups in Areas of Limited Statehood*, SFB-Governance Working Paper Series, No. 21, Research Center 700, Berlin, 2009.

Within this typology, hybrid coercive organisations deserve particular attention. They are situated in the middle of the continuum. What makes them of interest is that they simultaneously compete and cooperate with governmental agents in pursuit of the sociopolitical objectives of groups or constituencies that are part of the same state. Hybrid coercive organisations do not reject the state's authority as illegitimate in principle. Instead, they often operate within the generally accepted framework for political contestation and oftentimes (selectively) work closely with governmental or quasi-governmental coercive organisations. This sets them apart from anti-regime or anti-state coercive organisations, both of which operate fully in opposition to the government and its coercive apparatus. At the same time, hybrid coercive organisations also engage in competition for political power over (part of) the government and its institutions, including by means of coercive capabilities where this is useful.

Hybrid coercive organisations thus have an ambiguous relationship with the government that is neither fully autonomous nor fully dependent. This relationship is also dynamic in the sense that the degree of autonomy or dependency, as well as the ratio of competition versus cooperation, varies over time. We postulate that the relational ambiguity that results from such behavioural and institutional hybridity represents a rational, comprehensive and bet-hedging strategy in the struggle for power. It creates more flexibility and a greater scope of action to reconfigure a given political order in line with the interest of a hybrid coercive organisation. Prominent examples of strategically leveraging hybridity include the ascent of Hezbollah in the Lebanese political system, the Badr Corps in Iraq and the YPG in Syria.³⁷

37 While it is tempting to argue that the creation and maintenance of hybrid coercive organisations is mostly, or even exclusively, an Iranian strategy, the existence of Saraya al-Salam in Iraq, the YPG in Syria, several Government of National Accord-affiliated Libyan militias and the Peshmarga in Iraq suggests that this is too limited a view. For the Iranian argument see: Soufan, A., 'Qassem Soleimani and Iran's unique regional strategy', *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 11, Issue 10, November 2018.

3 When do coercive organisations emerge and what purpose do they serve?

Every state has a 'political order', or a system of rule, that is based on one or several sources of authority and that manifests itself through a set of governing practices.³⁸ While, as noted, the state remains the dominant principle of territorial organisation in the 21st century,³⁹ different states adopt different systems of rule, such as autocracy, oligarchy, polyarchy or democracy.⁴⁰ Each system of rule has a range of formal elements in turn, such as the branches of government, a number of security organisations and a range of economic arrangements. There is significant variety in what formal elements exist in a particular political order, how they are configured and what their operating modalities look like. 'Behind' these formal elements typically hides an even greater variety of governing practices, authority structures and power brokers in the form of patriarchal, neo-patrimonial, tribal, family, criminal, customary, sectarian, religious and commercial networks. These more informal elements of political order often strongly influence – or effectively run – the formal elements of political order.⁴¹

In consequence, it is not only the formal elements of political order that vary, but also the mix and level of alignment between formal and informal elements of political order, as well as the nature of the informal elements. In some states, informal components of political order have faded into the background. This is most clearly the case in mature

38 This interpretation builds on Huntington, S., *Political order in changing societies*, Yale: YUP, 2006.

39 Excepting, perhaps, the Vatican, which merges territorial with religious sovereignty on 44 hectares (but is for all intents and purposes treated as a mini-state), the state is today's only internationally accepted territorial form of political order. However, the incredible variety of temporal and spiritual forms of political organisation on a territorial, identity or sectoral basis that existed in Europe alone only a few centuries ago is easily gleaned from historical works such as: Ablaster, P. *A history of the low countries*, London: Palgrave, 2006; Wilson, P., *Heart of Europe: A history of the Holy Roman Empire*, Harvard: Belknap Press, 2016. For modern-day alternatives, see: Öcalan, A., *Democratic confederalism*, London: International Initiative Edition, 2011; Corboz, E., *Guardians of Shi'ism*, Edinburgh: EUP, 2016.

40 See for example: Lijphart, A., *Democracy in plural societies: A comparative exploration*, Yale: YUP, 1977; Dahl, R., *Polyarchy*, Yale: YUP, 1977.

41 Note that such elements are only 'informal' from the Weberian perspective of the formal state. While this view in itself can be problematic, it is not explored further in this contribution.

democracies, although even here, new informal sources of authority and influence assert themselves behind the formal elements of political order – for example, through interest groups based on class, wealth and education. At face value, informal components of political order also appear absent in autocracies – as monarchs, dictators, generals and despots bend the institutions and networks of power to their will through the formal structures of autocracy – but this is often not actually the case.⁴² While most autocracies project an outward appearance of dominance of formal elements of political order in the form of strong and centralised institutions, this is often based on complex domestic alliances between informal and intersecting networks of power and influence of a tribal, sectarian, professional, commercial and/or religious nature. Syria before 2011, with its significant informal economic and military networks, and Yemen, with its tribal, military and commercial networks, are good examples.⁴³

The political orders of many states feature a significant mix between formal and informal components of rule.⁴⁴ This is most evident in young states with recently (re)configured political orders that have not yet reached a durable equilibrium (e.g. in post-colonial states like Kenya, or in states that have recently seceded like Kosovo or South Sudan), in states that carry either a conflict legacy or feature an active conflict (e.g. Afghanistan, Iraq or Lebanon), or in states that face high levels of poverty, possess appreciable resources and feature significant socio-religious diversity (e.g. the DRC, Iraq or Chad).⁴⁵ Appreciable overlap between these categories of states compounds the problem.

In all these cases, informal elements of political order offer pathways for elites and special interest groups to infiltrate, capture and use formal elements of political order – and the public authority and legitimacy they confer – to their advantage. This is because such informal elements allow self-interests to be pursued more freely, create more possibilities to use threat and coercion with impunity and exhibit far less transparency. In extreme cases, the formal elements of political order matter only because of the international recognition and privileges they bestow on office holders that presumably

42 Thus, our argument and logic extend beyond the typical focus on fragile states that are considered weak in terms of having low administrative and coercive capabilities. See for instance: Fearon, J. and D. Laitin, 'Ethnicity, insurgency and civil war', *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 97, No. 1, pp. 75-90, 2003.

43 Van Dam, K., *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society Under Assad and the Ba'ath Party*, London: IB Taurus, 2011; Clark, V., *Yemen: Dancing on the head of snakes*, Yale: YUP, 2010.

44 See for example: Boege et al. (2008), *op. cit.*; North et al. (2013), *op. cit.*; Risse (2011), *op. cit.*; Staniland (2012), *op. cit.*

45 This is the case because particular social groups and their elites often manage to appropriate a significant part of national resources and benefit disproportionately from their revenues while marginalising other groups.

represent the state (e.g. Somalia, Afghanistan, the DRC and Yemen).⁴⁶ Political orders with dominant informal elements of rule also have a lower adaptive capability to changing circumstances in an orderly and peaceful manner. Whatever negotiated stability exists is more fragile and more temporary.⁴⁷

'Crisis vectors' (e.g. developments, trends, events or actions) of a domestic or foreign nature that negatively affect the ability of political institutions to smoothen processes of sociopolitical change and resolve disputes more or less peacefully have a more forceful impact on political orders with a mix of formal and informal components, or on political orders in which informal components dominate. As politics is an actor-based and relational activity of contestation over the ability to realise preferences through the exercise of public authority and the distribution of public resources, there are three primary ways in which such vectors can create disruption:

- *Type 1 disruption (intra-elite)*: Elements of the ruling elite become stronger, for example due to increased external support, superior organisation or greater control over resources.⁴⁸ They may subsequently seek to increase their weight in the political order they are a part of, thereby unsettling it. This amounts to disruption within the ruling elite. Examples are the ascent of the House of Saud's Sudairi line, in the person of Mohammed bin Salman, or the rise of Fatah to become the PLO's dominant faction.⁴⁹
- *Type 2 disruption (elite representation)*: New entrants or challengers emerge in the form of interest groups – typically represented by their leaders or elites – that seek to translate their social strength and demands into political influence.⁵⁰ This amounts

46 Phillips offers an interesting example of how international aid and legitimacy helped to keep President Saleh's dictatorship in Yemen in place for well over a decade: Phillips, S., *Yemen and the politics of permanent crisis*, London: IISS, Adelphi series, 2012.

47 The World Development Reports of 2011 and 2017 are interesting and relevant reads on these topics: World Development Report, *Conflict, security and development*, Washington DC: World Bank, 2011; World Development Report, *Governance and the law*, Washington DC: World Bank, 2017. See also: WBG and UN (2018), *op.cit.*; Booth, D., *Development as a collective action problem: Addressing the real challenges of African governance*, London: ODI, 2012. For a useful analysis of the consequences of mixing formal and informal elements of political order in the context of peace negotiations, elite bargaining and external intervention: Cheng, C., J. Goodhand and P. Meehan, *Securing and Sustaining Elite Bargains that Reduce Violent Conflict*, London: Stabilisation Unit, 2018.

48 Conversely, they can also become weaker, but this will automatically mean that other elite factions gain in relative strength.

49 On the Saudi example: Van den Berg, W., *Saudi Arabia's strategic stalemate: What next?*, The Hague: Clingendael, 2017.

50 This process aligns with Gramsci's notion of 'hegemonic consolidation'. See: Schwarzmantel, J., *Gramsci's prison notebooks*, London: Routledge, 2015.

to a popular disruption of the political order channelled through elite representation. An example is the rise of the *Mahrumin* and the creation in 1974 of the Higher Islamic Shi'a Council under Moussa al-Sadr to improve the socioeconomic condition and political representation of Lebanon's Shi'a.⁵¹

- *Type 3 disruption (popular)*: More rarely, popular dissatisfaction with the prevailing political order can burst through the surface and turn into protracted demonstrations, strikes, unrest or even revolution. Although they may seem spontaneous, such events are typically preceded by a long build-up period of frustration and grievance.⁵² They also suggest that alternative organisational and elite representational channels to express voice and discontent are not available. The popular will temporarily manifests itself on the street rather than through elites. The sustainability and impact of such disruption depends on factors such as their underlying structure of mobilisation, emergent leadership and the government's response. Examples include the recent demonstrations in southern Iraq around Basra, the Arab uprisings of 2011, and the Iranian revolution of 1979.⁵³

In all cases of disruption, the elites that run a given political order will respond to restore the status quo as rapidly as possible in a bid to safeguard their position, interests and material advantages. They have a great variety of strategies and resources at their disposal to accomplish this, ranging from cooptation to compromise and coercion. The mix of disruption and elite response is therefore not always violent. In fact, in many cases, disruptions of the political order are likely to be short given the greater (coercive) resources ruling elites can typically muster.⁵⁴

However, when the elites that run a political order are no longer able to contain and accommodate such disruption, pre-existing fissures that were hitherto contained are likely to widen. For the reasons discussed, this is more likely to happen in political orders with both formal and informal components of rule. It is in the context of such disruptions that existing and new coercive organisations acquire prominence in enabling elites to pursue their interests and/or social groups to provide security for their members.

51 It is important to note that these processes of Shi'a social mobilisation and 'political awakening' played an essential role in enabling the creation of Hezbollah in the early 1980s, even though the Lebanese civil war and substantial Iranian support were important solidifying factors. See: Daher, J., *The political-economy of the Party of God*, London: Pluto Press, 2016.

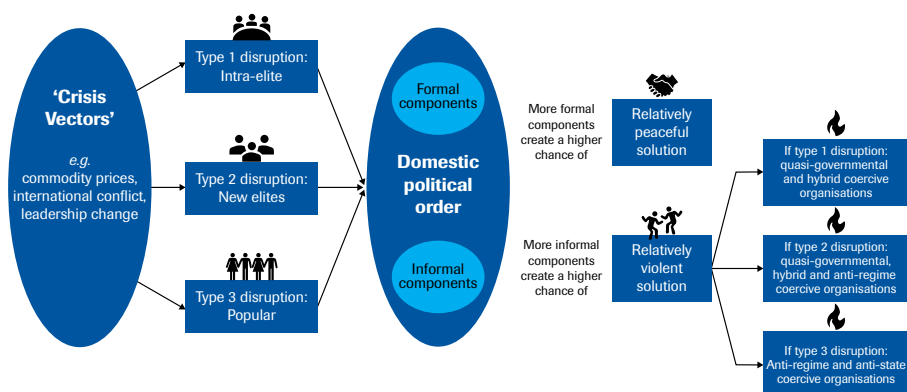
52 See: Scott (1990), *op.cit.*; Della Porta (2013), *op.cit.*

53 See for instance: Lynch, M., *The new Arab wars: Uprising and anarchy in the Middle East*, New York: Public Affairs, 2017; ICG, *How to cope with Iraq's summer brushfire?*, Brussels: ICG, Briefing No. 61, 2018.

54 Ahrendt, H., *On violence*, Stellar books, 2014; see also: Heydemann, S. and R. Leenders, 'Authoritarian learning and authoritarian resilience: Regime responses to the 'Arab Awakening'', *Globalizations*, Vol. 8, Issue 5, 2011.

Figure 1 brings together our thinking on different types of coercive organisation and types of disruption in the context of contemporary intrastate conflict. It enables us to explore essential linkages between these two categories.

Figure 1 Linking types of political disruption with types of coercive organisation



Most of Figure 1 reflects the discussion so far, but the final column requires an additional explanation. Essentially, we expect the nature of political disruption to have consequences for the initial type of coercive organisations that will emerge.

In the case of intra-elite disruption (Type 1), we expect both governmental, quasi-governmental and hybrid coercive organisations to emerge as essentially partisan capabilities to support respective sets of elite claims. In these cases, the argument is about the (re)distribution of power between the same select group of elite players. A good example is the conflict between Turkey’s AKP and the Gülen movement between 2012 and 2016, culminating in the coup attempt. Both sides effectively sought to mobilise parts of governmental coercive organisations to establish greater control. Another example is the warlordism of the Afghan civil war of the 1990s, in which different elites competed for territorial control through their own militias.⁵⁵

In the case of a dispute that centres on new claims made via elite representation (Type 2), we expect to see quasi-governmental, hybrid and anti-regime coercive organisations emerge as manifestations of a starker contrast (compared with a Type 1 disruption) between ruling elite resistance and organised popular protest. Using quasi-governmental coercive organisations enables the government to suppress popular protests while distancing itself from any responsibility. Hybrid coercive organisations

55 Giustozzi, A., *Empires of mud: War and warlords in Afghanistan*, London: Hurst & Company, 2012.

enable both status-quo elites and elites that represent revisionist popular demands to hedge their bets while competing for power, while anti-regime coercive organisations put outright pressure on the ruling elite to change its ways or make concessions. The argument is about accommodating hitherto excluded social groups or interests that are represented by their leadership. An initially peaceful example is Yemen's National Dialogue Conference in 2013–2014 (though its failure led to more of a Type 3 disruption). A less peaceful example is the mobilisation and strengthening of informal state coercive organisations in Iraq by Prime Minister Al-Maliki in 2010–2014 to suppress Sunni dissent.

Finally, in the case of a more prolonged popular disruption (Type 3), we can expect to see anti-regime and anti-state coercive organisations emerge since such disruptions indicate that other channels for protest are blocked, unavailable or dysfunctional. They highlight the existence of serious dissatisfaction with the existing political order and its ruling elites. More extreme anti-regime or anti-state coercive organisations do not emerge overnight, but we argue that if either Type 2 disruptions or popular protests fail to realise change, such organisations can ultimately emerge, depending on practices of repression, the presence of justificatory frames and the possibilities for social mobilisation.⁵⁶ The disruption is not about cooptation or accommodation by the system, but about its fundamental change. The rise of the PKK in 1978 is a good example of an anti-regime coercive organisation, emerging as it did after the Turkish state's sustained period of repression of Kurdish nationalism, interests and culture, including both judicial and forceful suppression of protests, political mobilisation and other types of more or less peaceful Kurdish protest.⁵⁷

56 Della Porta (2013), *op.cit.*; Scott (1990), *op.cit.*; Tilly (2003), *op.cit.*

57 Natali, D., *The Kurds and the state: Evolving national identity in Iraq, Turkey and Iran*, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2005.

4 Development trajectories of (hybrid) coercive organisations

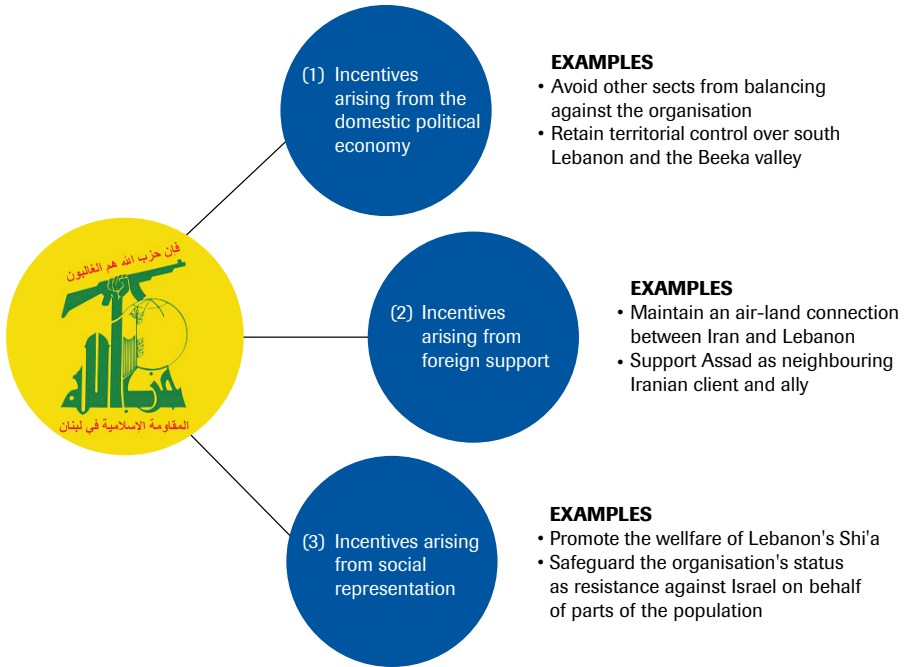
Once disruptions have led to violence and once violence has become protracted due to the inability of the ruling elite and its institutional machinery to contain it, the government loses legitimacy and capability. This creates opportunities for political entrepreneurs and ‘entrepreneurs of violence’, i.e. those who monetise coercive capabilities.⁵⁸ In short, coercive organisations as tools of political competition are a feature of political orders that undergo protracted and violent disruption. At this point, we can ask how coercive organisations, especially those of the hybrid variety, develop.

Our basic model, based on a review of existing literature and our own case work, is simple.⁵⁹ We posit that the behaviour and development of coercive organisations is simultaneously influenced by three sets of incentives: 1) those arising from the domestic political economy; 2) those created by foreign support; and 3) those arising from social representation and mobilisation (constituency). They are illustrated in Figure 2 and discussed below.

58 For example: Bates, R., *When things fall apart: State-failure in late-century Africa*, Cambridge: CUP, 2015.

59 Reference the annex for more detail; see also: Gunning (2008), *op.cit.* (on Hamas); Daher (2016), *op.cit.* (on Hezbollah); Lynch (2016), *op.cit.*; Hughes, G., *My enemy's enemy: Proxy warfare in international politics*, Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2014; Salehyan, I., ‘The delegation of war to rebel organisations’, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 54(30), 493-515, 2010; Szekely, O., ‘A friend in need: The impact of the Syrian civil war on Syria's clients (a principal-agent approach)’, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 12, 450-468, 2016; Della Porta (2016), *op.cit.*; Tilly, C., *Regimes and repertoires*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2006.

Figure 2 Incentives that influence the behaviour and development of coercive organisations exemplified by Hezbollah (illustrative)



First, incentives arising from the domestic political economy refer to the benefits that accrue to those who are politically or militarily in charge of a coercive organisation under the terms of the elite pact that brings selected elite groups together in a ruling coalition (i.e. that connects the key formal and informal elements of political order).⁶⁰ Such incentives are typically political, economic or religious in nature. For instance, during the Syrian civil war, the Syrian Kurds⁶¹ have managed to obtain control over the territory known as Rojava in north and northeast Syria. In part, this was possible due to their discipline and organisational strength, and in part due to the withdrawal of regime

60 Laws, E., *Political Settlements, Elite Pacts and Governments of National Unity: A conceptual study*, Birmingham: Development Leadership Program, Background Paper 10, 2012; Kelsall, T., *Thinking and working with political settlements*, London: ODI, 2016.

61 This mostly concerns the PYD (political party) and the YPG (its popular militia), although there are various other Kurdish factions, parties and militias active in the area.

forces early in the conflict.⁶² Its newfound autonomy gave the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) an unprecedented chance to apply Öcalan's political philosophy of 'democratic confederalism' in practice. This 'experiment' has the potential to reframe and strengthen the discourse about Kurdish autonomy/freedom by making it more compatible with existing national boundaries and nation-states.⁶³ In terms of incentives, it is likely that the ability to continue this governance experiment will be a key driver of PYD/YPG behaviour towards the Syrian regime during negotiations when modalities for the post-civil war governance of Syria will need to be agreed.⁶⁴

Other types of incentives that arise from the domestic political economy include material benefits such as corruption, smuggling, bureaucratic control (enabling e.g. payroll overstaffing and tender fixing), informal taxation, resource control and economic privileges. As coercive organisations often control territory and/or constituencies based on their ability to mobilise violence, they are typically able to either reap such benefits directly or to extract rents – in addition to protecting broader political and elite interests. This makes them both a guarantor and a key operational mechanism that keeps an elite deal functional. Such incentives can be mapped through detailed political economy analysis examining both the role of coercive capabilities in a given political order and the position of particular coercive organisations in its power dynamics.⁶⁵

Incentives arising from foreign support centre on the principal-agent relationship that many coercive organisations maintain with foreign sponsors. In keeping with our reconceptualisation of armed groups as coercive organisations, we argue that this is a phenomenon that benefits governmental and quasi-governmental coercive organisations (e.g. through military-to-military cooperation), as well as hybrid, anti-regime and anti-state coercive organisations (e.g. through proxy support). In the first case, the influence of the principal is channelled via formal mechanisms of state, but it is not necessarily less impactful.

62 The Syrian regime retained an administrative presence in major cities like Hasakah and Qamishli. It also continued to provide governance and economic functions. Gunes, C. and R. Lowe, *The impact of the Syrian civil war on Kurdish politics across the Middle East*, London: Chatham House, 2015; Van Dam (2017), *op.cit.*

63 Öcalan (2011), *op.cit.* This philosophy is not incompatible with continued territorial integrity of the Syrian state, a fact that was probably not lost on the Assad regime.

64 See also: Sary, G., *Kurdish self-governance in Syria: Survival and ambition*, London: Chatham House, 2016.

65 Political economy analysis can be defined as a field of study that is 'concerned with the interaction of political and economic processes in a society: the distribution of power and wealth between different groups and individuals, and the processes that create, sustain and transform these relationships over time'. See: DFID, *Political Economy Analysis How to Note*, London: DFID, 2009.

Foreign sponsors can provide many types of support to coercive organisations, including weapons, personnel, training, sanctuary and diplomatic backing.⁶⁶ The main challenge for governmental sponsors that provide support to coercive organisations outside their own borders is that the interests of principals and agents are rarely fully aligned. The attractiveness of providing such support thus depends on balancing the loss of foreign policy autonomy (by delegating the achievement of foreign policy objectives to 'proxies') against the greater effectiveness by which these foreign policies can be achieved.⁶⁷ The reality is that most contemporary conflicts feature significant levels of foreign support.

Concretely, this means that the behaviour and development of coercive organisations is influenced by the interests and objectives that a foreign sponsor seeks to advance. The extent to which foreign support will influence behaviour depends to a large degree on how dependent the coercive organisation is on its foreign patron. Existing literature suggests a rough 'dependency' gauge based on four factors: a) the internal cohesion of the principal and its corresponding level of control; b) whether there is a choice of principals, i.e. a measure of substitution; c) the material volume and relevance of foreign support; and d) the domestic power base of the coercive organisation that is being supported (this links back to the domestic political economy).⁶⁸ It is these factors that need to be mapped to understand the behavioural influence of foreign support.

Examples of foreign support abound in the Levant. For instance, Turkey sponsors an array of Free Syrian Army related groups in Afrin (Syria); Iran backs a range of groups across Lebanon (Hezbollah), Syria (e.g. Afghan pro-regime militias) and Iraq (e.g. Asaib ahl al-Haq); while the US supports the Kurdish YPG and the SDF (both Syria). An intriguing example of a shift of foreign patron is how Hamas exchanged the Syrian regime and Iran for Egypt and Qatar in 2012 after taking a stance in favour of the revolution against Assad. It was forced to restore ties with Iran after the coup in Egypt and the Egyptian crackdown on Gaza that resulted from the Sinai insurgency.

66 For a more detailed enumeration and analysis: Byman, D. et al., *Trends in outside support for insurgent movements*, Santa Monica: RAND, 2001; Hughes (2014), *op.cit.*

67 Salehyan (2010), *op.cit.* provides an excellent overview of when a foreign sponsor is likely to 'delegate war'. On the basis of his own analysis, Hughes (2014), *op.cit.* considers proxy warfare to be largely anti-strategic because of its many unintended and unexpected long-term consequences.

68 Szekely (2016), *op.cit.*; Hughes (2014), *op.cit.*; Byman et al. (2001), *op.cit.*

Finally, incentives arising from social representation, mobilisation and legitimacy relate to the constituency of a coercive organisation.⁶⁹ Individuals and societies have multiple identities with different levels of salience at particular points in time. A common characteristic of hybrid political orders is that some segments of a society – defined in class, religious, loyalty, tribal or other terms – are starkly privileged, while others are starkly marginalised. Often, this pattern is replicated within marginalised groups, which will have a privileged subgroup – usually its own elite – that is typically co-opted by elites of more privileged groups to keep its own constituency in check. The role of the Kurdish elites in post-2003 Iraq can in part be understood from this perspective.⁷⁰

Under conditions discussed elsewhere and largely outside the scope in this analysis,⁷¹ social groups or social segments can mobilise and articulate a shared identity, and develop agency.⁷² Common mobilisation pathways include elite and mass action.⁷³ The former sees elites frame, manipulate and highlight identities that mobilise constituencies to advance their own interests; the latter sees the mobilisation of masses that are fed up with relative neglect or repression in a bid to acquire greater status and/or resources.⁷⁴ Such mobilisation can tap into different societal grievances, vary in intensity across time and take both peaceful and violent forms. For example, the Muslim Brotherhood pursued a predominantly social countermobilisation strategy in Egypt prior to the Arab uprisings, which focused on service and governance provision at the grassroots level. Only gradually was this approach ‘upgraded’ in some places to include a more forceful discourse (counter-ideology) and political countermobilisation.⁷⁵

69 Governmental coercive organisations are no exception. When their constituency is more or less national, instead of consisting of a more limited group whose interests they safeguard more zealously (as is common), their legitimacy can be understood through, for example, perception surveys about popular trust in, access to and satisfaction with formal state coercive organisations. Illustrative is the work of International Alert on the Lebanese security forces: <https://www.international-alert.org/publications/citizens-perceptions-security-institutions-lebanon> (accessed 14 August 2018).

70 See for example: Hassan, K., *Kurdistan’s politicized society confronts a sultanistic system*, Beirut: Carnegie Middle East Center, 2015.

71 They include existing socio-cultural norms, narratives, values/frames, available repertoires for mobilisation and protest, as well as state responses. Della Porta (2016), *op.cit.*; Tilly (2006), *op.cit.*; Scott (1990), *op.cit.*

72 A social movement can be seen as a persistent network of individuals and organisations that engages in making claims to identity, standing and participation against both power holders and the general public, using unconventional repertoires for expressing claims in political terms. We combine elements of both Tilly (2006), *op.cit.* and Della Porta (2016), *op.cit.* here.

73 For more in-depth analysis of how the social construction of ethnic identity can lead to ethnic violence: Fearon, J. and D. Latin, ‘Violence and the social construction of ethnic identity’, *International Organisation*, Vol. 54, No. 4, pp. 845–877, 2000.

74 *Ibid.*

75 Wickham, C., *The Muslim Brotherhood: Evolution of an Islamist movement*, Princeton: PUP, 2013; Mandaville, P., *Islam and politics*, 2nd edition, London: Routledge, 2014

Coercive organisations can emerge from social constituencies and/or mobilisation, as well as by tapping into existing mobilisation processes to increase their power and legitimacy. Whichever the case, the perception, expectations and objectives of such constituencies will subsequently influence their behaviour and development, and coercive organisations need to act broadly in line with these to retain popular support. For example, because Hezbollah based its right to arms and claim to legitimacy with its non-Shi'a constituencies in Lebanon on its resistance against Israel, it had to justify its engagement in the Syrian civil war against fellow-Muslims by introducing the notion of fighting radical extremism that would eventually also threaten Lebanon. While the organisation's core Shi'a constituency has held up well under the ensuing ideological strain, this argument/justification was not cost-free for Hezbollah among its non-Shi'a constituencies. It led to it being perceived as even more partisan, reinforcing a trend that had been evident in domestic Lebanese politics since 2005.⁷⁶ Understanding what is often a complex set of interests requires detailed analysis of how a coercive organisation and its constituency(ies) are linked.

In sum, we argue that the behaviour and development of coercive organisations – once they have emerged in the crucible of protracted violence following the political contestation that disrupted a pre-existing political order – can be explained by the balance between the incentives arising from the domestic political economy, foreign support and social constituency demands.

For hybrid coercive organisations, the picture is even more complicated by the fact that they are often part of a broader sociopolitical platform that also features other strategic elements, such as a political party, charitable foundation and/or religious organisation. While this is a topic for another analysis, such organisational sophistication diversifies the range of modalities for competition and cooperation with the state and enables hybrid coercive organisations to engage in political contestation more effectively and at times also more legitimately. For example, Moqtada al-Sadr's Saraya al-Salam – '(re)created' in response to the 2014 invasion of northern Iraq by IS – is a hybrid coercive organisation that is also the armed wing of the Sadrist Trend (a political party), which supports the broader socio-religious movement around Moqtada al-Sadr and vice versa. This mix ensures that Moqtada al-Sadr has a wide range of possibilities for exercising power and pressure, both with and against the Iraqi state, each of which is enhanced by the other components of his platform.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ ICG, *Hezbollah's Syria conundrum*, Brussels: ICG, Middle East and North Africa report no. 175, 2017.

⁷⁷ Van Veen, Grinstead and El Kamouni-Janssen, *A House Divided: Political relations and coalition-building between Iraq's Shi'a*, The Hague: Clingendael, 2017.

Interaction strategies between governments and hybrid coercive organisations

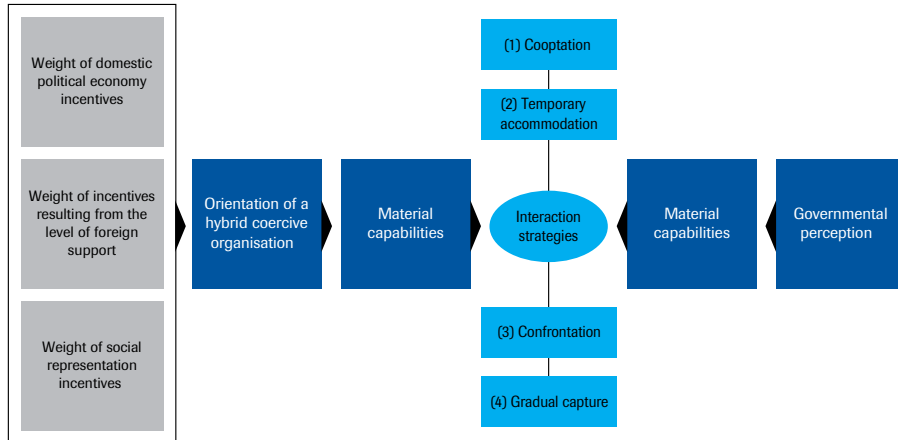
The preceding analysis suggests a number of factors that codetermine interaction strategies between hybrid coercive organisations and the government in which, with which and against which they operate. These factors include:

- The attitudes and behaviour of hybrid coercive organisations will reflect the incentive mix that results from the domestic political economy conditions in which they operate, the levels of foreign support they receive and the level of social representation they reflect.
- Hybrid coercive organisations have different material capabilities, which is a function of the same incentive mix, including path dependencies and initial levels of resources.
- Government perception of hybrid coercive organisations matters – i.e. are they perceived as existential threats, potential allies or unavoidable nuisances? Part of this assessment will depend on the government’s perception of the mix of incentives of hybrid coercive organisations.
- The coercive capabilities of the government also inform interaction strategies. The stronger the government, the less it will be inclined to tolerate challenges.⁷⁸

On the basis of these four factors, basic interaction strategies can be identified that are schematically reflected in Figure 3.

78 It should be noted here that many states in the Middle East can be characterised by a degree of ‘limited statehood’, meaning that their governments are not capable of implementing particular rules and decisions fully and unequivocally. Börzel, T. and T. Risse, ‘Governance without a state: Can it work?’, *Regulation and governance* (2010) 4, 113-134; Boserup, R. and S. Colombo, *Hybridization of domestic order making in the contemporary MENA region*, MENARA project, online: <http://www.menaraproject.eu/> (accessed 9 April 2018); Hiltermann, J. et al., *Tackling the MENA region’s intersecting conflicts*, Brussels: ICG, 2017. For a stimulating analysis of the development of political order in the Middle East: Soler i Lecha, S. Colombo, L. Kamel and J. Quero, *Re-conceptualizing orders in the MENA region: The analytical framework of the MENARA project*, MENARA, online: <http://www.menaraproject.eu/> (accessed 9 April 2018), 2016.

Figure 3 Basic interaction strategies between hybrid coercive organisations and the state



Cooptation: This strategy is likely to guide interaction in cases where both the hybrid coercive organisation and the government are strong and they do not see each other as existential threats. It denotes a situation in which the government has the upper hand on one or several dimensions of capability – such as benefiting from greater legitimacy or more resources – so that it is able to co-opt the hybrid coercive organisation into the state on terms acceptable to the former. This is more likely to happen when the hybrid coercive organisation is not predominantly seen as a foreign proxy and can take the form of a mix of incentives for the hybrid coercive organisation’s leadership, or policies that specifically benefit its constituency. It is possible for such cooptation to acquire a formal shape and become institutionalised over time.⁷⁹ The development of the Badr corps in Iraq after 2004/05 offers a tentative example.

There are several ways in which government cooptation of a hybrid coercive organisation can affect government performance and state development. Plum jobs in the political, administrative, security or economic spheres may be assigned to the leaders of a hybrid coercive organisation; particular revenue streams, territorial units or administrative institutions fall under its control, (il)licit economic activities tolerated

⁷⁹ One could dub the result of cooptation a ‘hybrid security arrangement’, i.e. an implicit or explicit agreement between a hybrid coercive organisation and the government that endows the former with government-like responsibilities (e.g. maintaining law and order in a particular territory) in exchange for acceptance of the broad parameters of the existing political order. See for example: Berti (2016a) *op.cit.*; Luckham and Kirk (2013) ‘The Two Faces of Security in Hybrid Political Orders: A Framework for Analysis and Research,’ *Stability: International Journal of Security & Development*, 2(2): 44, p. 4.

or sponsored; or the constitution and electoral laws revised. There might even be a public pact outlining how particular legal and administrative provisions are interpreted by the parties. In general, the impact on state development will largely depend on how cooptation-facilitating concessions are designed. The more short term and flexible they are, the more likely they are to be net positive as this reduces the risk of violence without blocking possibilities for change in the longer term.

Temporary accommodation: This strategy is likely to guide interaction in cases where both the hybrid coercive organisation and the government are weak. Neither is sufficiently strong to make life really difficult for the other and so a tentative form of coexistence – even some cooperation – can emerge. This is unlikely to be sustainable, however, as both actors will hedge their bets and see what the future brings. Depending on their respective images of the enemy, they may well pursue parallel strategies to increase their relative bargaining power in the meantime. Accommodation is an interim interaction strategy that is likely to lead to one of the others. The relation between Hamas in Gaza and Fatah in the West Bank between 2006 and 2016 was an example of accommodation of sorts, until President Abbas cut salary payments and reduced electricity provision in 2017.

In terms of impact on state development, one might expect to see an absence of violent incidents and issue-specific, pragmatic cooperation where this suits both parties. Coercive capabilities will be retained, violent confrontation refrained from, and respective areas of territorial control will remain untouched. Occasional efforts at dialogue will be well publicised to keep up appearances without leading to meaningful change. Outbursts of hostile rhetoric will occur when constituency support needs to be shored up and blaming ‘the other’ does the job. In general, government performance is likely to weaken due to the instability that temporary accommodation brings about, and state development hampered by continued division.

Confrontation: This strategy is likely to guide interaction when the hybrid coercive organisation is weak and the government strong. It occurs when the government considers it possible to subjugate the hybrid coercive organisation with only minimal concessions. Confrontation does not have to be violent and can also happen in the public discourse by focusing on legitimacy. Or it can take on economic overtones or be political in nature, using judicial and legislative routes. Confrontation can also occur when both the hybrid coercive organisation and the government are weak or strong and see each other as existential threats. In such cases, violence is more likely. The clash between the Peace Brigades of Moqtada al-Sadr and the Iraqi government led by Al-Maliki in 2008/09 is an example.

In terms of impact on state development, one might see large-scale campaigns to delegitimise or discredit the other, the use of other government tools like the judiciary and administrative rules to re-establish control, the use of kidnappings, assassinations and personalised threats and occasional/large-scale violence. In general, government

performance is likely to suffer in the short term as scarce resources are consumed by confrontation. In the long term, state development may be stabilised or advanced if defeat is brought about within a relatively short time frame and the constituency of the hybrid coercive organisation is re-included in the new political order on adequately generous terms.

*Gradual capture.*⁸⁰ This strategy is likely to guide interaction when a hybrid coercive organisation is strong while the government is weak. It will see a gradual encroachment of one or several such organisations on government prerogatives, together with institutional ‘infiltration’ of key governing institutions that will come under the control of the hybrid coercive organisation, or its associated elements. Two scenarios would seem possible here: either a single hybrid coercive organisation or a strong alliance of such organisations establishes a new and more progressive government that reinvigorates the state; or a more predatory new government is established that cannibalises the state – i.e., it fragments the existing sense of identity and belonging while the state continues to exist as a hollowed-out medium for international relations. The Peshmerga in Iraqi Kurdistan are a possible positive example in relation to their control over the Kurdistan Region of Iraq – if one accepts that they have been a hybrid coercive organisation in relation to the Iraqi state for part of the period 2003–2017.⁸¹

In terms of impact on state development, the re-establishment of the government can enable major improvements in terms of better representation of the hybrid coercive organisation’s constituency(ies) and policies that are more geared towards its interests. It can, however, also simply bring a new cast of elites to power with bad habits that foster corruption and nepotism, ultimately even cannibalising the state and so reducing its performance in the short term and undermining its legitimacy in the long term.

The value in setting these different interaction strategies apart from one another is that it helps us to understand the interaction dynamics between governmental and hybrid coercive organisations from different angles, assess what support and/or strategic shifts in interaction might be useful, and tailor diplomatic, policy, mission and programmatic interventions accordingly to influence the success or failure of different forms of interaction (see Section 5). The model is more explanatory than predictive, but is nevertheless suitable to inform forward-looking intervention choices.

80 The difference between cooptation and gradual capture is the degree of control. In the case of cooptation, the elites that used to run the state remain largely in play while those in charge of a hybrid coercive organisation are also given a role. The rules of political contestation do not fundamentally change. In the case of gradual capture, elites in charge of hybrid coercive organisations largely replace the old elites, which can result in a fundamental re-orientation of the government, for example when it comes to foreign policy or resource allocation.

81 On this matter: Fliervoet (2018), *op.cit.*

5 So what? Dealing with hybrid coercive organisations

Beyond the obvious point that interventions for dealing with hybrid coercive organisations – and the states in which they exist – must be based on context-specific analysis, this analysis offers a few more specific points for consideration. First and foremost, it is essential for effective peacebuilding interventions to understand the relative weight of the proxy, domestic political economy and social constituency interests of a particular hybrid coercive organisation, its relations and its growth perspectives. This is a difficult task – as it requires detailed study of local cultural, religious and political histories and dynamics – but it is far from impossible. Long-term research partnerships between local and international think tanks and universities that are guided by clear policy objectives and adequate research-policy-practice dialogue can go a long way.

Once the character of both a particular hybrid coercive organisation and the government of a particular state are understood, peacebuilding interventions that seek to reduce violence should take as a starting point whichever interaction dynamic prevails between a hybrid coercive organisation and the government (see Section 4). Since these interaction strategies are a function of the respective orientations, perceptions and relative strengths of hybrid coercive organisations and the government, they offer entry points for external interventions to make their support count – and can perhaps even tip the balance from one dynamic to another. Table 5 provides practical building blocks for interventions in response to each interaction dynamic.

Table 2 Building blocks for interventions that deal with hybrid coercive organisations

Interaction dynamic	Building blocks	Concrete examples
1) Cooptation	Key peacebuilding aim: Engage in inclusive statebuilding	
	Promote transparency of the cooptation arrangement / parameters	Publication and public discussion / outreach
	Promote flexibility in arrangements that reduce violence without locking in the future	Sunset clauses, joint research on effects and joint committees, a national dialogue process
	Encourage competitive coordination of hybrid coercive organisations under the shadow of hierarchy	Grant hybrid coercive organisations state-like responsibilities, formalise this, but supervise performance
Interaction dynamic	Building blocks	Concrete examples
2) Accommodation	Key peacebuilding aim: Prevent conflict	
	Support confidence-building measures	Establish de-escalation procedures, joint supervision committees and exchanges
	Create common incentives that can generate joint interests in stability	Initiate joint economic projects through investment, charities or NGOs
	Encourage territorial control to shift to sectoral control	Re-establish unified physical state control in exchange for e.g. control over an economic activity or a state asset
Interaction dynamic	Building blocks	Concrete examples
3) Confrontation	Key peacebuilding aim: Shorten conflict	
	Decisively support one side if feasible and practical	Diplomatic advocacy, aid, peace-keeping, arms, direct military intervention
	Support effective disarmament and reintegration after the conflict	DDR-type initiatives, community security and development
	Promote generous inclusion of the defeated party once conflict is over	National dialogue process, targeted reconstruction, development of historical/political narrative, pre-fixed limited political representation and/or other prerogatives

Interaction dynamic	Building blocks	Concrete examples
4) Gradual capture	Key peacebuilding aim: If government is positively re-established, engage in targeted statebuilding	
	Encourage broad governance inclusion in terms of policy effects and resource allocation	Promote research and analysis of policy effects, initiate perception surveys and promote gradual inclusion in the governance of the state
	Strengthen peaceful counter-voices in civil society and among religious actors	Create a 'dialogue and dissent' trust fund to nurture civic capability for political advocacy and policy input
	Key peacebuilding aim: If government is cannibalised, limit aid and increase diplomatic pressure	
	Instigate sanctions and make financial support conditional on practical governance improvements	Analyse sources of revenue and target these, symbolically ostracise individual elite members
	Promote dialogue and constrain negative spillover in parallel to the above	Explore track-II conversations, increase domestic intelligence and law enforcement capabilities where these are still functional, enforce due diligence of mineral supply chains, promote the likes of EITI

While these strategies will need to be tailored to context, they offer basic ideas for how external parties might nudge the interaction between hybrid coercive organisations and the government in a direction that helps to reduce violence based on a more realistic assessment of what is feasible.

Annex:

A note on methodology

The findings, insights and propositions reflected in this report are largely the product of four sets of data:

- An extensive literature review on armed and rebel groups, proxy forces, social movements, contemporary conflict, political order and statebuilding, as well as hybrid governance. This review provided the initial basis for the report.
- Political economy studies of violent conflict in Syria, Libya, Iraq, Lebanon and Israel/Palestine conducted by Clingendael between 2012 and 2018. These studies have served as a general framework and source of inspiration for this report and are available at www.clingendael.org/cru.
- A series of workshops in The Hague, Brussels, Berlin and London in 2017 and 2018 on political and security developments in Iraq and Syria organised by Clingendael, the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, GPPI and the East West Institute. These workshops generated rich and broad analysis of both context and key features of the many coercive organisations active in these countries. Their lively debate generated many new insights and angles.
- Case studies conducted by Clingendael of selected quasi-governmental and hybrid coercive organisations in the Levant, namely the Peshmerga (Iraq) and selected groups of Iraq's Al-Hashd al-Sha'abi (Iraq), as well as the Syrian Socialist National Party (SSNP) and its Eagles of the Whirlwind (Syria), the Tiger forces (Syria) and pro-Assad Syrian militias in general. These case studies form the core of the report's evidence base and can be found at <https://www.clingendael.org/research-program/levant>