

Development and Security:

Do sub-state actors pose a threat to ‘development-security’?

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Introduction.

In regions where the state's authority is weakened or contested, sub-state actors increasingly step into the power vacuum. Often driven by dubious intentions, these groups don't just disrupt development, they often pose complex - and sometimes violent - challenges, redefining what security looks like on the ground. To understand how sub-state actors pose a threat to development security, it is important to dissect both terms to fully.

Sub-state actors are groups that operate independently of recognised state structures, such as armed militias, freedom fighters, insurgent groups, terrorist organisations, drug cartels, and in some cases, even cyber syndicates. They often pursue political, ideological, or financial goals, using means that challenge the state authority.¹

Meanwhile, the term development-security refers to the idea that sustainable development and lasting security are deeply interconnected. In theory, development creates the conditions for peace, while security provides the stability needed for progress.² When either side of this balance collapses, the other tends to follow – making the presence of disruptive non-state forces a serious concern.

This essay aims to explore the perceived threat of sub-state actors by examining the challenges of statehood and sovereignty, questioning the nature of the actors themselves, and

¹ Qu, S. and Wang, J. (2024). Sub-state Actors in International Organizations: Analysis of Local Government Involvement and Influence. *Lex localis - Journal of Local Self-Government*, 22(01), pp.175–195. doi:[https://doi.org/10.52152/22.1.175-195\(2024\)](https://doi.org/10.52152/22.1.175-195(2024)).

² International Peace Academy (2004). The Security-Development Nexus: Conflict, Peace and Development in the 21st Century Executive Summary. [online] Available at: https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/publications/security_dev_nexus.pdf [Accessed 30 May 2025].

engaging with the scholarship surrounding the context of development-security - under the principal thesis that sub-state actors, despite noticeable exceptions, often pose a legitimate threat to the development-security nexus.

Section 1: The power vacuum.

The state, as defined by Weber as the “a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory.”³, is traditionally seen as the sole arbiter of power – however this is not always the case. A state that lacks the capacity to complete its duties to its people, could arguably be classed as a ‘weakened’ state, while a state that is “convulsed by internal violence and[/or] can no longer deliver positive political goods to their inhabitants”⁴ is almost definitely in a state of failure.

State failure can arise from several issues, most notably tyrannic rule over the populous – which can be seen in post-colonial contexts, as weak institutions were inherited (rather than developed)⁵, making governance brittle from the outset allowing for decades of extractive rule and international interference⁶ – hollowing out the public’s trust in the state,⁷ paving the way for alternative power centres to come to rise. Sub-state actors often begin by exploiting this power vacuum, usually through settling disputes and distributing resources or services the state has failed to provide. Over time, these groups often transition from this position of an informal actor to a quasi-ruler over the locale.

³ Weber, M. (1919). Politik als Beruf (En: Politics as a vocation). [Lecture] Available at: <http://fs2.american.edu/dfagel/www/class%20readings/weber/politicsasavocation.pdf> [Accessed 29 May 2025].

⁴ Rotberg, R. (2003). Failed States, Collapsed States, Weak States: Causes and Indicators. [online] Available at: https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/statefailureandstateweaknessinatimeoferror_chapter.pdf [Accessed 29 May 2025].

⁵ Bahr, B. (2024). 12.7 Colonialism and post-colonial legacies - Issues of Race and Gender. [online] Fiveable. Available at: <https://library.fiveable.me/understanding-social-change-issues-race-gender/unit-12/colonialism-post-colonial-legacies/study-guide/I6eHwNj1JGkijV7g>

⁶ Hiebert, K. (2025). Foreign interest in Africa comes with damaging disinformation tactics | ISS Africa. [online] ISS Africa. Available at: <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/foreign-interest-in-africa-comes-with-damaging-disinformation-tactics> [Accessed 30 May 2025].

⁷ Edelman Trust Institute (2025). Global Report Trust and the Crisis of Grievance. [online] Available at: https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2025-01/2025%20Edelman%20Trust%20Barometer%20Global%20Report_01.23.25.pdf [Accessed 30 May 2025].

At the heart of a power vacuum lies the inherent fragility of state institutions. States characterized by pervasive corruption, a lack of democratic legitimacy, and a history of human rights violations struggle to maintain control and provide essential services to their populations.⁸ Such institutional weaknesses erode the social contract between the government and its citizens, fostering distrust and creating grievances that can be exploited by alternative power providers.⁹ When a state cannot effectively govern, provide security, or maintain a legitimate monopoly on force, it inadvertently cedes ground to non-state entities capable of filling these critical gaps.

The most dramatic instances of power vacuums leading to the emergence of sub-state actors often follow the collapse or severe weakening of central authority. In post-Gaddafi Libya, the overthrow of the regime in 2011 plunged the country into widespread lawlessness, leading to the rapid proliferation of weapons and the rise of various armed militias and insurgent groups. Libya, once an exporter of security, became an importer, with numerous African state and non-state actors gaining influence within its fragmented borders¹⁰.

⁸ Felbab-Brown, V. (2023). Nonstate armed actors in 2023: Persistence amid geopolitical shuffles. [online] Brookings. Available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/nonstate-armed-actors-in-2023-persistence-amid-geopolitical-shuffles/> [Accessed 2 Jun. 2025].

⁹ Center for Preventive Action (2024). Violent Extremism in the Sahel. [online] Council on Foreign Relations. Available at: <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/violent-extremism-sahel> [Accessed 2 Jun. 2025].

¹⁰ Czerep, J. (2022). Paradoxical Africanisation of Libya after 2011. Growing Influence of Sub-Saharan African Government, Rebel, Diplomatic and Criminal Actors in the Post-Gaddafi State : EuroMeSCo – Euro-Mediterranean Research, Dialogue, Advocacy. [online] Euromesco.net. Available at: <https://www.euromesco.net/publication/paradoxical-africanisation-of-libya-after-2011-growing-influence-of-sub-saharan-african-government-rebel-diplomatic-and-criminal-actors-in-the-post-gaddafi-state/> [Accessed 2 Jun. 2025].

Similarly, the aftermath of the 2003 US invasion of Iraq saw the disintegration of the Iraqi state, creating a fertile ground for the emergence of groups like Daesh¹¹.

The emergence of power vacuums is both a symptom and a cause of state fragility, posing a direct threat to development security. When the state loses its grip on legitimacy, governance, and the monopoly of force, the resulting vacuum invites the rise of sub-state actors whose rule is often grounded in coercion rather than democratic accountability. These conditions fuel cycles of violence, fragment communities, and undermine the institutions necessary for long-term stability and development. Addressing power vacuums, therefore, requires not only rebuilding state capacity but also restoring the social contract between governments and citizens - ensuring inclusive governance, legitimate authority, and responsive service delivery that can outcompete alternative power centres.

¹¹ GASTON, E. and DERZSI-HORVÁTH, A. (2018). Iraq after ISIL: Sub-State Actors, Local Forces, and the Micro-Politics of Control. [online] Available at: https://gppi.net/assets/Gaston_Derzsi-Horvath_Iraq_After_ISIL.pdf [Accessed 2 Jun. 2025].

Section 2: The sub-state actors.

The appearance of such an actor can be seen through the history of Hezbollah. Hezbollah, a paramilitary and political organisation from southern Lebanon, was founded during the Lebanese civil war to fight against the invasion of “Israel ...[and to form a]resistance to Western influence in the Middle East”¹² Hezbollah is not without good, as they provide healthcare and education to many who would not have access otherwise,¹³ allowing for legitimacy in the eyes of the local Shiite population by doing what the state wouldn’t or couldn’t.

Hezbollah is quite unique in its structure as it is not just a militant group, and a political party, but also a significant social welfare provider, offering medical clinics, schools, and orphanages.¹⁴ This extensive network of services fills critical governance gaps left by the Lebanese state, particularly in disadvantaged Shiite areas, thereby solidifying Hezbollah's legitimacy and support among the populace.¹⁵ The organization even receives government benefits, including pensions and compensation for its operatives and their families, indicating a complex, intertwined relationship with the formal state apparatus.¹⁶ Despite its military

¹² Council on Foreign Relations (2024). What Is Hezbollah? [online] Council on Foreign Relations. Available at: <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/what-hezbollah> [Accessed 29 May 2025].

¹³ Perry, T. and Bassam, L. (2020). Hezbollah deploys medics, hospitals against coronavirus in Lebanon. Reuters. [online] 25 Mar. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/hezbollah-deploys-medics-hospitals-against-coronavirus-in-lebanon-idUSKBN21C3R6/> [Accessed 29 May 2025].

¹⁴ EBSCO (2024). Hezbollah | EBSCO. [online] EBSCO Information Services, Inc. | www.ebsco.com. Available at: <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/politics-and-government/hezbollah> [Accessed 2 Jun. 2025].

¹⁵ Kiamah, K. (n.d.). The Social Services of Hezbollah. [online] pp.85–89. Available at: <https://www.lakeforest.edu/Public/Inter-Text/volume4/Kate%20Kiamah%20-%20The%20Social%20Services%20of%20Hezbollah.pdf> [Accessed 2 Jun. 2025].

¹⁶ Haskel, A. (2025). Beirut pays Hezbollah men, families benefits ‘similar to soldiers’ wages’. [online] JNS.org. Available at: <https://www.jns.org/beirut-pays-hezbollah-men-families-benefits-similar-to-soldiers-wages/> [Accessed 2 Jun. 2025].

wing being stronger than the national army, operating with few constraints, Hezbollah's ideology has also evolved from radical Islamic to more nationalistic, focusing on fostering a "resistance society" through values like patriotism and sacrifice.¹⁷

Eventually, Hezbollah became a key political force, even holding ministerial roles in the Lebanese government - while still maintaining an armed wing. This duality blurs the line between integration and subversion. Hezbollah's rise demonstrates how a sub-state actor can both support and subvert the state - providing welfare while simultaneously maintaining its own coercive power outside of state control.

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (AKA ISIL, ISIS, and referred to outwith as Daesh) rose from the instability of post-2003 Iraq and the Syrian civil war, declaring a caliphate in 2014 and seizing vast territories.¹⁸ This proto-state violently destabilised state institutions, replacing them with brutal governance. Economically, Daesh seized oil fields, generating significant revenue (e.g., \$50 million (USD) per month)¹⁹, and imposed predatory taxes, causing rampant inflation and supply chain disruptions in cities like Mosul and Raqqa.²⁰

¹⁷ Trauger, K. (2024). Examining Extremism: Hezbollah. [online] www.csis.org. Available at: <https://www.csis.org/blogs/examining-extremism/examining-extremism-hezbollah> [Accessed 2 Jun. 2025].

¹⁸ Glenn, C., Rowan, M., Caves, J. and Nada, G. (2019). Timeline: the Rise, Spread and Fall of the Islamic State. [online] Wilson Center. Available at: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/timeline-the-rise-spread-and-fall-the-islamic-state> [Accessed 2 Jun. 2025].

¹⁹ Radwan, T. (2015). EconSource: Islamic State Earning Up to \$50 Million a Month in Oil Sales. [online] Atlantic Council. Available at: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/econsource-islamic-state-earning-up-to-50-million-a-month-in-oil-sales/> [Accessed 2 Jun. 2025].

²⁰ HeiBner, S., Neumann, P., Holland-McCowan, J. and Basra, R. (2017). Caliphate in Decline: An Estimate of Islamic State's Financial Fortunes. [online] Available at: <https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/ICSR-Report-Caliphate-in-Decline-An-Estimate-of-Islamic-States-Financial-Fortunes.pdf> [Accessed 2 Jun. 2025].

Societally, Daesh systematically overhauled education, purging curricula and indoctrinating youth, even though programming courses. They replaced civic institutions with their own "hisbah" police, using public torture and executions to enforce coercive control.²¹ This brutal occupation provoked mass displacement, with millions internally displaced and millions more becoming refugees in neighbouring countries like Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan²². As a sub-state actor, ISIL exemplified the kind of threat that not only challenges immediate security but systematically erodes the foundation for long-term development-security - turning already fragile regions into zones of chronic insecurity, poverty, and social fragmentation.

Both Hezbollah and the Daesh show that non-state or sub-state actors can profoundly shape development and security outcomes. While some, like Hezbollah, have a complex relationship with state sovereignty, others, like Daesh wish to take state authority - often through coercive means. The implication for policy and peacebuilding is that development security cannot be delinked from the political nature of service provision. Whether these actors act as proxies, partners, or rivals to the state, their presence redefines traditional notions of governance, legitimacy, and stability.

²¹ Vonderhaar, L. (2021). ISIS's Female Morality Police. [online] Georgetown Security Studies Review. Available at: <https://georgetownsecuritystudiesreview.org/2021/05/13/isiss-female-morality-police/> [Accessed 2 Jun. 2025].

²² BBC (2018). Islamic State and the crisis in Iraq and Syria in maps. BBC News. [online] 28 Mar. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-27838034> [Accessed 2 Jun. 2025].

Section 3: The Impact.

While sub-state actors are often portrayed as the antithesis of the development-security nexus, that is not always the case. As previously explored, certain contexts allow for groups to fill the void that the state cannot (or will not) fill – however sometimes these groups provide a greater rate of positivity for the people they act on the behalf of. As hinted by the section on Hezbollah, sub state actors are never as simple as good or bad and often come with complex impacts on development-security.

Instances abound where sub-state actors have stepped into roles traditionally held by the state, offering services that directly impact the well-being of populations. The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), while a Marxist-Leninist guerrilla group, originated from peasant self-defence groups²³ and promoted an agrarian political line advocating for wealth redistribution from the wealthy to the poor. Their supporters were largely drawn from Colombia's rural areas²⁴, implying a direct engagement with and, in some cases, an attempt to address land-related grievances and economic disparities that the state had failed to resolve.

Similarly, The Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) forces, also known as Peshmerga, in Iraq serve as a compelling example of the diverse nature of sub-state actors . Following the advance of Daesh in 2014, Peshmerga forces provided crucial security, halting Daesh's progress and holding significant territory, thereby filling critical gaps left by the Iraqi

²³ Lovo, F. (2025). The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia - Security Historical Transformations from Armed Rebellion to Political Action. [online] Imctc.org. Available at: <https://www.imctc.org/en/eLibrary/Articles/Pages/article11122024.aspx> [Accessed 2 Jun. 2025].

²⁴ InSight Crime (2023). FARC. [online] InSight Crime. Available at: <https://insightcrime.org/colombia-organized-crime-news/farc-profile/> [Accessed 2 Jun. 2025].

Security Forces - the continuation of which is still ongoing.²⁵ In areas under their firm control, such as Rabi'a and Zummar, the stability provided by Kurdish forces enabled reconstruction and governance activities, leading to high rates of displaced populations returning home.²⁶ They also played a direct role in local administration, with Kurdish security and political actors having a hand in local governance and judicial authority and even recruiting local forces to support their efforts.²⁷ The Peshmerga, as a legally recognized regional force, demonstrated a capacity to provide security and administrative services that the central state struggled to deliver.²⁸

Despite these seemingly beneficial roles, sub-state actors providing services or governance as a long-term solution can often prove to be problematic. While sub-state actors may, in rare and specific circumstances, offer short-term relief or fill immediate governance gaps, their engagement rarely aligns with the principles of inclusive, rights-based, and sustainable development. The apparent benefits often come at the cost of long-term democratic erosion, the creation of unhealthy dependencies, and the undermining of legitimate state institutions and international efforts. A truly sustainable development-security nexus requires the strengthening of accountable state structures, rather than relying on the temporary and often problematic interventions of non-state armed groups.

²⁵ Garamone, J. (2022). DOD, Kurdish Peshmerga Continue Partnership to Fight ISIS. [online] U.S. Department of Defense. Available at: <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3171097/dod-kurdish-peshmerga-continue-partnership-to-fight-isis/> [Accessed 2 Jun. 2025].

²⁶ BBC (2014). Islamic State: Militants 'pushed back' in Iraq. BBC News. [online] 25 Oct. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-29772082> [Accessed 2 Jun. 2025].

²⁷ Kurdistan Regional Government (2024). Kurdistan Regional Government | Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs. [online] Kurdistan Regional Government. Available at: <https://gov.krd/mopa-en/> [Accessed 2 Jun. 2025].

²⁸ European Union: Agency for Asylum (2021). 1.3. Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) authorities. [online] European Union Agency for Asylum. Available at: <https://euaa.europa.eu/country-guidance-iraq-2021/13-kurdistan-regional-government-kr-g-authorities> [Accessed 2 Jun. 2025].

Conclusion

Sub-state actors present a formidable and evolving threat to the development-security nexus, manifesting through direct violence, economic disruption, governance erosion, humanitarian crises, and significant challenges to peacebuilding. Their impacts are sometimes immeasurable, undermining state legitimacy, fostering illicit economies, and inflicting severe human security costs. The analysis of cases like the Basij in Iran and Kinahan drug cartels demonstrates the diverse mechanisms through which sub-state actors operate, ranging from semi-official instruments of authoritarian control that blur the lines between state and non-state, to transnational criminal enterprises that systematically dismantle state functions and social cohesion.

Crucially, this report highlights the dual nature of some sub-state actors, capable of both widespread disruption and, in specific contexts, constructive engagement in humanitarian or development efforts. This necessitates a nuanced, context-specific approach rather than a monolithic response. Effective mitigation strategies must move beyond purely reactive security measures to embrace proactive, integrated development-security strategies that address systemic vulnerabilities and root causes of fragility.

Future policy must prioritise strengthening state capacity, combating corruption, and implementing targeted economic interventions that increase opportunities for legitimate livelihoods. Simultaneously, it is imperative to explore pathways for constructive engagement with certain sub-state actors, recognising their local embeddedness and potential to contribute to humanitarian and development outcomes. This demands a multidimensional approach to fragility, emphasising collective action across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus

and a commitment to the localisation of aid and peacebuilding efforts. Further research is needed to better understand the complex interplay between sub-state actors and local populations, particularly concerning their legitimacy and the conditions under which constructive engagement is both possible and ethical. While continuing to consider the evolving landscape of the groups discussed, it is reasonable to conclude that sub-state actors, , despite noticeable exceptions, often pose a legitimate threat to the development-security nexus.

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