

Future Terrorist Entities in Weak and Failed States

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Islamic Theology of Counter Terrorism

اسلام کے تھیولوجی آف کاؤنٹر ٹیرورزم

An indispensable book in the toolbox of the national security or policy professional is Professor Farid el Khazen's, *The Breakdown of the State in Lebanon 1967-1976*.¹ While Khazen's analysis focused on how domestic and external pressures collapsed Lebanon's confessional balance in 1975 when civil war broke out, the nature of state authority and state weakness apply globally. This study analyzes the nature of the state, and in particular Middle East states, making it a relevant analysis because terror groups like the Islamic State (ISIS) and Hezbollah thrive among weak and failed states. Future terrorist organizations will gravitate towards weak and failed states.

The global order has been organized according to the state system that emerged from the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 that concluded the long religious wars in Europe. The state system created political borders, drawn to benefit European powers, which often failed to account for religious, ethnic and nationalistic aspirations among diverse populations. A cursory review of border issues reveals ongoing conflicts or disputes involving the Basques in Spain, the dispute over Kashmir, chronic trouble in the Balkans, the Arab-Israeli conflict, Kurdish aspirations and the separationists in Baluchistan. Many of these and other areas have been the situs for Islamic terrorism and armed conflict.²

A weak or failed state³ risks having a terrorist group, a non-state actor, arriving on a magic carpet to create a "state within a state" that can challenge state authority. This causes internal stress and when coupled with external stress it can precipitate a civil war as happened in Lebanon in the mid-1970s. Because terror groups need money to buy arms, pay salaries and engage in global operations the weak states natural resources such as oil or diamonds risk expropriation by these entities.⁴

Professor Khazen described how Lebanon's open political system weakened it in a crisis compared to their neighboring Arab states where state authority was consolidated among a ruling elite often headed by a "strongman." This was especially true after 1967 when Nasserism declined and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) became highly militarized. Lebanon's polity was a compromise between the Christians and Muslims that distributed political power according to sect. This sectarian balance was stressed when the Palestinian cause became radicalized and supported by the other Arab states. As the PLO's call for liberation of Palestine by armed conflict replaced Nasser's call for Arab nationalism this revolutionary zeal stressed the Christian-Muslim relationship in Lebanon as the Christians did not support an armed and militant PLO presence acting with impunity in Lebanon.

Professor Khazen described how Arab states—initially puppet regimes tethered to British or French mandates—secured power. According to Khazen, "In most Arab countries, the consolidation of state power has come at a price: freedom and political pluralism. Since independence, Arab states have succeeded, though in different ways and at different times, in achieving the following: first, in giving the state significant autonomy to rule; second, in creating a class to govern and an 'official' enemy to

repress; third, in perpetuating the control of the ruling elite by relying on the military; fourth, in eliminating potentially threatening internal oppression.”

It is worth mentioning that the fourth factor, “eliminating potentially threatening internal oppression” could explain the recent Khashoggi affair where Saudi Arabian entities stand accused of killing Jamal Khashoggi a member of the Muslim Brotherhood which is a terrorist entity according to the Saudi government. Khashoggi was seen as an opponent to reforms by Prince Mohammed bin Salman who is seeking to diversify the Saudi economy and loosen the grip of religious conservatives who have been accorded high priority since the founding of the modern Saudi state.⁵

The consolidation of power as described by Professor Khazen meant that the strong Arab states could off-ramp their “problems” to places like Lebanon where power was diffuse. For example, the Arab states claimed they supported the PLO cause against Israel but they did not allow the PLO to attack Israel within their borders. In other words, the Arab states knew they were vulnerable to severe Israeli reprisals if they allowed the PLO to use their countries as a base but the same Arab states approved of the PLO attacking Israel from Lebanon—knowing that Israeli retaliation would be Lebanon’s problem and not theirs.⁶

The impact of the Arab state’s consolidation of power—no matter how undemocratic—worked to Lebanon’s detriment. Lebanon was not “all-in” on the radical Arab causes and preferred its role as an intermediary. Because Lebanon has a free economy, it promoted the private initiative and, according to Khazen, there was no need for a large government bureaucracy or army to back state power. Khazen noted that the state’s ability to control its people is enhanced when state entities are the largest employer of people.

Lebanon absorbed hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees as a result of the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. The initial idea that the refugees would soon return home failed to materialize. The refugees were packed into refugee camps with limited economic opportunities in southern Lebanon. After the 1967 war, the PLO rose as an alternative to Nasserism and the concept of liberating Palestine by armed struggle galvanized the Arab world. When the PLO was forcefully ejected from Jordan in 1970, they established their headquarters in Beirut.

When the PLO took over and militarized the Palestinian camps in Lebanon it created tension with Israel. In essence, the PLO became a “state within a state” in Lebanon which challenged state authority. However, the Lebanese state lacked the strength and consensus to act decisively with the PLO. The diversity of thought on the PLO issue and the lack of a strong central authority with a strongman in charge militated against decisive action. In other words, Lebanon lacked the power of neighboring states to dictate terms to PLO activities within their sovereign borders.

After the PLO launched attacks on the Lebanese army the parties concluded the 1969 Cairo agreement permitted the PLO to act independently. This was a mistake as it usurped state authority in favor of an armed entity that threatened Lebanon’s security. The Lebanese government was unable or unwilling to exercise state power to prevent the PLO from attacking Israel. The Lebanese government

relinquished their monopoly on the use of force. These events contributed to the likelihood that Israel would invade Lebanon to attack the PLO.

The outcome of a militarized non-state actor like the PLO operating under the color of state authority had global implications. The civil war in Lebanon, and the 1982 Israeli invasion, ultimately brought in U.S. forces along with troops from Italy, France and Britain. At the same time, Hezbollah, another non-state actor, emerged from 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran to combat Israel in Lebanon. When Shia operatives bombed the U.S. embassy in Beirut and then U.S. military barracks it caused the U.S. to abandon Lebanon. These Islamic attacks on a western power had a great influence on future terrorist leaders like Osama bin Laden who claimed the Beirut attacks proved the U.S. was a paper tiger. In essence, the serpentine road to September 11 had its origins in the Islamic attacks in Beirut in the early 1980s.

When the Israeli forces drove the PLO from Lebanon it hardly eliminated the terrorist threat. This is because Lebanon remained a weak state. The void left by the secular PLO was quickly filled by Hezbollah which promoted the interests of the long-neglected Shia of Lebanon. The Lebanese state was no match for the Iranian backed proxy that gained legitimacy among Muslims for their resistance to Israel.

Lebanon was further weakened by Syrian occupation—initially welcomed by some Christians—in order to prevent further outbreaks of the civil war beginning in the late 1970s. But Syria stayed in Iraq for nearly thirty years and influenced Lebanon’s politics. Syria, an ally of Iran, tolerated Hezbollah which became another “state within a state” in Lebanon.

More recently, the Syrian civil war flooded Lebanon with more than a million refugees despite Lebanon’s lack of capacity to handle this influx of people. This sudden transfer of population can serve Iranian interests by changing the demographics in both countries. Syria is a Sunni majority country and a massive displacement of its population has allowed Iranian entities to acquire land in Syria. Likewise, the influx of a million Muslims in Syria causes concerns among Lebanon’s shrinking Christian population who fear a further dilution of their power.

The above analysis demonstrates how a weak state can affect U.S. interests. The problems in Lebanon since the late 1960s have benefitted Iran which is aligned with China and Russia on many issues which run counter to U.S. interests. At the end of the day, many of these interests relate to the production and distribution of hydrocarbons a vital but finite energy source. The fight for access to hydrocarbons has been a central policy objective of governments for the last century and will remain so for the foreseeable future.

Professor Khazen’s brilliant book should be carefully studied to understand the global impact of weakened states especially in the volatile Middle East where there is a confluence of global trade routes, maritime checkpoints, radical Islam and the largest concentration of oil and gas reserves in the world. While Lebanon may be a small country, its unique status as a global financial center, trade hub and intermediary between east and west has consequences for the United States which has sent troops to Lebanon on several occasions.

Terror groups like ISIS gravitate to weak or failed states. Despite military setbacks in Iraq and Syria, the group or its subsidiaries have migrated to areas where state control is weak or non-existent. For example, ISIS operates in oil rich and politically unstable east Libya and in the Mindanao region in the Philippines which has long advocated for their own Islamic state.

The future terrorist groups will seek to exploit weak states in order to acquire resources and territory. Future terrorist organizations will also be transnational criminal organizations they will threaten global security when they engage in the trafficking of drugs, weapons and humans as well as exploiting the global financial system to launder their billions of dollars in illicit activities. The United States has a vested interest in pursuing policies that bolster legitimate state authority or suffer the consequences of weak states that are taken over or share their authority with terrorist groups who are rapidly evolving into sophisticated criminal corporations.

References:

- (1) Farid el Khazen, *The Breakdown of the State in Lebanon 1967-1976*, Harvard University Press (2000)
- (2) These regions are also rich in natural resources like hydrocarbons or located near major trade routes that control the distribution of goods and resources.
- (3) Weak states are distinguished from failed states by degree. Lebanon was a weak state because it functioned normally until internal and external stresses exposed its inability to control non-state entities. A failed state could be Somalia in the 1990s or Afghanistan after the Soviet invasion. A strong state has a monopoly on the use of coercion, economic stability and a functioning judicial system. Strong states are able to maintain control even when conflict or crisis occur.
- (4) In some countries like Lebanon, Mexico, Columbia etc., the natural resources include poppies and hashish which can generate billions of dollars in illicit revenue.
- (5) If this is indeed normative behavior by Arab states then the pressure on the United States to punish Saudi Arabia must be applied evenly to all states who engage in this behavior. To single out the Saudis due to the high profile and political nature of this act would serve no long-term U.S. interests if the net effect of such policies strengthens the hand of Iran—already strengthened by the situations in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon.
- (6) Dany Chamoun, son of Camille Chamoun the former president of Lebanon and leader of a Christian militia, gave interviews where he criticized the Arab countries for this policy and he noted that there was a lack of gratitude for all of Lebanon's contribution of talent and resources to the Arab League.