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# **Outsourcing State Violence: the National Defence Force, ‘Stateness’, and Regime Resilience in the Syrian War**

**Antonio Giustozzi and Reinoud Leenders**

## *Abstract*

*This article engages with and contributes to a nascent debate on state-sponsored militias by way of an analysis of the formation and deployment of the Syrian regime’s National Defence Force (NDF). This militia emerged from the regime’s rich repertoire in outsourcing violence and allowing “heterarchical orders” to serve regime maintenance purposes at home and abroad. During the Syrian war (2011-..) the key rationale for using such militias is primarily to address manpower shortages. For an important but limited period, the NDF served this goal well as it contributed to the regime’s military advances. The regime’s devolution of its violence to militias including the NDF brought about a sharp contraction of its ‘stateness’ but this did not constitute ‘state failure’ or its collapse. In this context the regime’s elaborate measures to manage or counter the risks and downsides of deploying non-state militias such as the NDF underscore its general adaptability in its authoritarian governance.*

On 9 January 2013 a hitherto unknown pro-regime militia, the “National Defence Force” (NDF), aired an online video presenting itself as an “auxiliary to the Syrian Arab army”.<sup>1</sup> A second clip released a week later showed its fighters, dressed in indistinct battle gear and wearing white sneakers, in an “anti-terrorist operation” in Daraya, close to the capital’s centre.<sup>2</sup> The NDF subsequently became involved in a growing number of clashes involving regime forces and a plethora of rebel groups throughout the country, in a war that has dragged on since 2011, killed hundreds of thousands of people, and that has thus far failed to produce an undisputed winner or a negotiated settlement.

The present article aims to contribute to a nascent academic debate on state-sponsored militias by discussing the formation and deployment of the Syrian regime’s core militias from the beginning of the conflict in 2011, culminating in the creation of the NDF. Loosely engaging with the themes and arguments in the available literature, we explore the lineages of the Syrian regime’s devolution of violence to private or semi-private actors, causing it to flex and wane its ‘stateness’. This, in turn, increasingly gave way to a “severe heterarchical order” (Santini and Moro, this volume) wherein in the regime’s war-making formal state coercive institutions are accompanied and at times overshadowed by a myriad of non-state actors. We explore the regime’s use of

militias before and during the 2011 uprising and the war that ensued, and focus on the largest, and at least for a crucial period, the most important of them, the NDF. After assessing the state's sponsorship of the NDF and its control over it, the article weighs up the various functions attributed to state sponsored militias and their relevance for the case of the NDF. We then identify the specific challenges that emerged from its creation and deployment, and investigate the ways in which the regime has been able to manage or address these. The Syrian regime's use of militias reduced the 'stateness' of authoritarian governance; yet it did not bring about the state decay, failure or – collapse so often associated with the outsourcing of violence. State power came to be served, rather, by a heterarchical order wherein state and non-state coercive actors proliferated side by side and complemented each other. A range of challenges and dilemmas posed by this at times seemingly unruly arrangement, and the deployment of the NDF more specifically, surely are congruent with warnings against delegated violence. Yet our findings suggest that the Syrian regime was acutely aware of such risks and set out to manage or address them by recurrently flexing its 'hierarchical' muscle top-down when- and where ever needed.

We relied on informed secondary sources prepared by a handful of close observers of the Syrian war and the regime's use of militias in particular, in addition to interviews held outside Syria, Syrian opposition sources and social media footage. We also were able to conduct a limited number of semi-structured interviews with key individuals involved in or working with the NDF, including officials in the Iranian Revolutionary Guard (Pasdaran), members of pro-regime Palestinian armed factions, and Afghan volunteers. These interviews were carried out by a small research team of three interviewers, based in Damascus and linked to pro-regime militias, who remain anonymous to protect their safety.

## **1. State-sponsored militias**

The recurrent use by mostly authoritarian states<sup>3</sup> of irregular and semi-regular armed forces in repressing internal opposition and insurgencies has received growing scholarly attention. With semi-regular forces we mean state-sponsored militias that have received some training and have a more or less centrally organised command,

control and logistical structure, but one that is far less developed than that of a regular force. This usually enables semi-regular forces to mainly operate at a local level, but with limited ability to project force and use advanced weaponry. The way such militias are handled by central states may be viewed as a continuum starting from loose incorporation, often through ruling elites' patronage networks, up to inclusion of their leaders into the state bureaucracy. (Chabal and Daloz, 1999; Dowdle, 2007; Giustozzi, 2011; Mann, 1986) Loose forms of incorporation may particularly suit regimes and elites that do not have a centralising ideology (Staniland, 2015) or that have turned away from such an ideology in daily governance.

Heavy reliance on militias is mostly viewed as an indicator of state weakness, state decay or -failure, as well as a specific characteristic of complex, multi-actor and diffuse "new wars" (Kaldor, 2006; Bates, 2008; Jones, 2012). Particularly in the case of the loosest forms of militia incorporation, the outcome, according to Marten (2012: 25), is likely to be "a complex patronage dance with state authorities" wherein militias manipulate weak states, challenge sovereign control and "defect from the state institutions whose weakness feeds them." That militias may often acquire qualities that effectively cause them to harm, rival or even push aside their state sponsors is also clear from Schlichte's (2010) study of Serbia. Congruently, it has been argued that the growing weight of militias is strongly associated with state collapse and that such militias may increase the length of civil wars by multiplying the number of factions and possibly creating veto players or spoilers. (Jentzsch et al., 2015) Even if a conflict is resolved, militias may undermine evolving peace, for example by turning into organised criminal networks. (Acemoglu et al, 2013)

These perspectives have been challenged by those describing the pattern of using irregular forces in conflict as having illustrious historical antecedents, and as being a particular strategy to cope with internal challenges, rather than a sign of state decline as such. Ahram (2011, 2, 138) suggests that often the aim is to recruit the services of tribes, ethnic groups, and village strongmen to serve as what Olson (2000) calls "stationary bandits." Likewise, Eck (2015: 940-1) finds a rationale in ruling elites' reliance on militias because of their "local intelligence skills necessary to manage the civilian population". Another study found that "fragmented security groups in Iraq, such as the Sons of Iraq militias, while not resembling the vertically-integrated

structure of an army, proved effective and efficient at fighting decentralized but potentially lethal regime threats.” (Carey et al, 2015: 6-7) Ostensibly, simpler and shorter chains of command allow militias to quickly and more effectively react to local challenges (Clayton and Thomson, 2016), especially when fighting well-organised insurgencies that invest in building their own local institutions (Bolte, 2016). State-sponsored militias are also argued to address mobilization challenges. In her historical study of Ottoman war-making, Barkey (1994), stresses the advantage of enlisting the services of irregular formations only when needed, and then allowing them to exist as bandits when such needs waned. Militias are also argued to provide plausible deniability to governments in their use of extreme forms of violence. (Mitchell et.al., 2014; Alvarez, 2006) In all these accounts, the state clearly benefits, more so than that it is challenged or eroded.

A more dynamic view argues that the origins of militias and the impetus for their creation may determine their character and, henceforth, their implications for state strength and/or – weakness. (Barter 2012) Carey and Mitchell (2016) argue that weak state control is a function of agents’ private agendas, with goals that may differ from the government, and them having information advantages: “Groups that operate at an arm’s length from the state are more difficult to control and to discipline, [and] therefore more likely to pursue corrupt or private goals,” and vice versa. However, they add that “weak control could [also] be the result of a strategic choice to give discretion to the (informal) security apparatus.” (Ibid.: 15)

Establishing even semi-official control over militias implies bureaucratic and financial costs that weak or failing states might not be able to afford (Ibid.: 17; Dowdle, 2007). A focus on their sources of support is therefore viewed as crucial. Carey et.al. (2015), Kirschke (2000) and Roessler (2005) argue that it is governments receiving aid from democratic countries that are more likely to have control over militias. More generally, Reno (2007) suggests that militias incorporated into the state’s patronage networks can afford more predatory behaviour towards local communities, not needing their support, and henceforth slowly acquire a degree of autonomy from their state sponsors.

There are clear historical cases of regimes consciously investing resources and strategically planning ahead when it comes to creating militias. However, the decision to actually deploy forces that are more difficult to control than regular ones may also be understood as ad hoc, pragmatic and informed by short term decision-making in the context of an on-going conflict, as opposed to any long-term counter-insurgency strategy or doctrinal consideration. (Ahram, 2016). “Flexibility” as a major rationale for regimes establishing militias to counter new, unexpected threats is also underscored by Raleigh and Kishi (n.d.). Yet Ahram (2016: 207) rightly suggests that even when “functional necessity” and strategic calculations may inform the use of state-sponsored militias, such calculations are made against the backdrop of “broader processes of state formation and regime dynamics that generate distinctive repertoires of violence.”

What the different schools of thought on state-sponsored militias have in common is the identification of militias as a key feature of many on-going or contemporary conflicts. Interest in such armed groups is variously informed by assessments of them tending to prolong conflicts and making peace settlements more difficult, because of their greater inclination towards indiscriminate violence, or because of their implications for state weakness or -failure. Given the significance attributed to them, it is somewhat surprising that despite growing academic interest state-sponsored militias are still a field of study in its infancy.

## **2. Syria’s flexible stateness and lineages of militiafication**

As observed by Staniland (2015: 787), “[t]here is nothing inevitable about movement toward a Weberian ideal-type of state dominance of violence.” Post-1963 Baathist Syria is a quintessential case in point. Despite projecting an uncompromising image of formal state sovereignty, the Syrian regime has a solid track record of flexing and waning the ‘stateness’ (Nettle, 1968) of its violence. When under threat, the regime rhetorically stepped up its claims on state sovereignty while at the same time delegating important tasks to exert its key ingredient, that of violence, through the use of irregular forces. This resulted in episodes exposing the regime’s “militiafication”. (Lund, 24 July 2014) Observers of the post-2011 Syrian uprising and war have in this

context searched for historical continuity in the agency of non-state violence serving the regime. From this perspective, the NDF emerges as an attempt, roughly two years into the crisis, to centralize, regularize and routinize the abstrusely named *shabiha* ('ghosts'), with its historical antecedents dating back to the 1970s and reinvigorated early into the uprising to defend the regime. While largely accurate as such, to this assessment should be added a more varied pallet of pre-2011 repertoires of semi-privatized regime violence, in conjunction with an appreciation of the role of local mobilization in support of the regime since 2011. Conjointly, all these varying actors and the different contexts in which they emerged, before and during the current crisis, can be argued to have converged into a repertoire allowing and informing the emergence of a heterarchical order of agencies of coercion. It is in this environment that the NDF emerged.

While its origins are somewhat disputed, the term *shabiha* commonly refers to a largely disjointed group of individuals --some of whom relatives of Hafez al-Assad, local bosses, and (ex-)military officers—who, following the Syrian military intervention in Lebanon in 1976, built criminal networks crossing the Lebanese-Syrian border under conditions of civil war in Lebanon and rising opposition against the regime in Syria. Smuggling stolen and counterfeit goods, drugs, and commodities subjected to import bans or heavily taxed, the *shabiha* enriched themselves and were involved in paramilitary activities and extortion, especially in Syria's coastal areas. As explained by Al-Haj Saleh (2014), they exercised power through what Syrians call *salbata*: “an amalgamation of *salab* (looting or plundering), *labat* (the act of knocking someone down) and *tasallut* (the unfettered exercise of power).” Arguably being a product of the regime's mobilization efforts against the country's Islamist insurgency at the end of the 1970s and heightened Alawite identity informed by fears of an increasingly sectarian opposition, the original *shabiha* remained influential in especially Latakia and other coastal, predominantly Alawite areas. In the 1990s and 2000s their activities were gradually curtailed due to a number of developments. Perhaps most importantly, and following Bashar al-Assad's succession to power in 2000, a new generation of the Assads and the Makhloufs became firmly established in Damascus. They found much more lucrative sources of rent-seeking made possible by economic reforms and the country's shift to crony capitalism (Donati, 2013).

The original shabiha enjoyed impunity thanks to their tight links to the regime and, in conjunction, their leverage over key state institutions. While most shabiha, acting as thugs or Mafiosi, singlehandedly used violence for extortion and reaffirming their fearful reputations, members of the Makhlouf clan and Rifa'at al-Assad expediently combined their early involvement in the shabiha networks with positions of power in the state's institutions of coercion. (Lobmeyer, 1995: 204). Organizationally independent and separate from the regular armed forces, Rifa'at led the 'Defence Companies' (DC), an elite force that was pivotal in the regime's crackdown on mounting protests and the insurgency in the late 1970s. The DC began to recruit new members among the Ba'ath party's 'popular organisations' including the Revolutionary Youth Federation, also headed by Rifa'at. The DC were aided in their repression by militias linked to the ruling Baath party. (Van Dam, 2011: 172; Batatu, 1999: 255; Human Rights Watch, 1991)

The Syrian regime did not only use non- or semi-state actors to unleash violence against its own citizens; the phenomenon also permeated its foreign policies and international war making. Since the Baath officers seized power in 1963, they have resorted to and supported Palestinian and Lebanese armed, non-state actors, primarily to compensate for limited capabilities of the country's regular armed forces. The regime's tacit alliance with Hizbullah in Lebanon, consolidating in the early 1990s, became perhaps the most intense and continuous partnership with a foreign non-state militia, in its conflict with Israel. Links to Hizbullah also became pivotal to and a vehicle for growing inter-state relations between Syria and Iran. Furthermore, and driven by its ever fluctuating calculations of political expediency, the regime supported and orchestrated Sunni Islamists to raise jihad against its international opponents, as in Iraq following the US-led invasion in 2003.

Henceforth, and not so dissimilar to the domestic front, regime incumbents, state institutions, and a plethora of non-state armed actors mixed and complemented each other to organize the regime's violence abroad, thereby serving its foreign policy interests and, arguably, contributing to its survival in the face of multiple threats. The ways in which the regime crisscrossed and blurred the boundaries between state and society underscore its historical reliance on a heterarchical order wherein the role and prominence of multiple state and non-state actors' ebbed and flowed, but always



gravitated around the regime's projection of power. Consistent with this mode of organising violence, we see in Syria a degree of stateness that has been both partial and flexible, thereby seriously muddling Weber's ideal-type of strategies of violence being solely mediated through the state.

Congruent with this rich repertoire of delegated violence, the regime's response to the uprising and insurgency since March 2011 brought about a sharp contraction of stateness. It unleashed an extremely diverse pallet of non- and quasi-state groups fighting on the regime's behalf, each embedded in their own intricate linkages to various state agents and together re-affirming the heterarchical orders the regime had come to rely on in the past. Historical continuity has been most clearly at work involving the original shabiha networks, as immediately following the first mass protests armed gangs of regime supporters emerged to harass and attack activists. They were led by old-hand shabiha including Hilal al-Assad, a cousin to Bashar al-Assad, and Numir and Fawaz al-Assad (who died in March 2015), to other cousins to the president.

Yet elsewhere, such as in Homs, state security agents with little or no links to the original shabiha played on local fears in communities that had tied themselves to the regime. Some of these recruits owed their state jobs to the regime while others joined because they saw the regime as a form of protection against an uprising that, not in the least because of regime rhetoric, activated sectarian boundaries and turned violent especially in regions of mixed sectarian composition. (Leenders, 4 May 2016) The release of inmates, including common criminals on death row, provided another reservoir of manpower. (Amor and Sherlock, 23 March 2014) Personal lineages involving the original shabiha were even weaker when it came to the establishment of local 'popular committees' to help counter the protests. In Homs some of these committees appear to have emerged spontaneously or in a largely disorganized fashion, although they were quick to receive regime support. Much of this support was provided by Rami Makhoul, the regime's prime business tycoon and descendant of the original shabiha. (Nakkash, 2013) Yet in other places security agencies built the popular committees from scratch, drawing on the state's financial resources. In areas where residents had little regime sympathies, they mobilized clans or extended families, like the Berri clan in Aleppo, that had already been proven useful in the past.

Quickly becoming a template for pro-regime mobilization, the popular committees spread throughout the country, manned checkpoints, amassed arms to pursue opposition activists, and fought rebel groups.

While effectively reshaping pre-existing social structures and moulding groups that newly arose during the first months of the uprising, the regime found far less opportunities in the Baath party's 'popular organizations' that in the past were drawn on to outsource regime violence.<sup>4</sup> This is another indication that historical repertoires of heterarchy were not simply replicated; in this case they only re-appeared selectively. The prime reason for this appears to be that especially following Bashar's rise to power in 2000 the Baath party and its structures were largely abandoned or neglected as the regime stepped up its selective economic reform program.

By the end of 2012 a plethora of endogenously grown armed groups had become indispensable to the regime's counter-insurgency response. Foreign armed groups inserted themselves into this landscape as the threat to the regime saw no sign of abating. Having acted as the regime's prime vehicle in projecting Syria's influence in Lebanon since the early 1990s, Hizbullah in 2012 gradually sent its fighters into Syria, ostensibly to protect Shiite villages in al-Qusayr district bordering Lebanon. The pretence of their limited involvement in the Syrian war was lifted when Hizbullah became instrumental to the regime's recapturing of Qusayr in May 2013. Soon its fighters began to take part in regime operations as far north as Aleppo. Since mid-2012 Hizbullah has provided training to the regime's militias and advised them and the regular armed forces in taking on the rebels, dragging it deeper into the Syrian conflict. In coordination with Iranian assistance to bolster the regime's counter-insurgency efforts, Hizbullah's growing involvement coincided with an influx of foreign volunteers drawn from Shiite communities in Iraq and Lebanon, and later Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas militia was one of the first and most prominent groups to appear in this context. A burgeoning transnational network of Shiite volunteers began linking up with this group, the Pasdaran and Hizbullah, channelling a growing supply of recruits. Thus, in a remarkable reversal of the regime's past reliance on foreign armed groups in projecting its power abroad, such use of foreign fighters was now drawn inwards as they added significant firepower to the regime's outsourcing of violence to a plethora of militias at home.

Within this context, the NDF announced its existence on 9 January 2013. As its first video clip did not show soldiers that could be specifically identified as NDF fighters – it merely featured historical footage of regular army soldiers and commandos—it is unlikely that its boasting of being an “auxiliary to the army” could at that time already be matched with significant manpower. The second clip released a week later showed only a handful of gunmen wearing combat gear sporting the NDF insignia. Indeed, recruitment efforts were at the time still in full swing, and possibly only in their fourth month after Mohamad Ali Jafari, the Pasdaran’s commander, had revealed intentions to create the group. (Dehghanpisheh, 16 September 2012)

The first NDF units appear to have been established in the Tadamun area of Damascus and in the Akrama and Zahra neighbourhoods of Homs.<sup>5</sup> Residents living in regime controlled areas soon noted that pro-regime militias and irregular forces were increasingly being “regularized” into groups branding themselves as being part of the NDF. (Solomon, 4 April 2013) In rapid succession reports emerged claiming to have spotted NDF units at locations witnessing fierce fighting. Then, in May that year, NDF militiamen stood accused of committing massacres of civilians in Baida and Ras al-Naba at the outskirts of the coastal town of Baniyas. (Human Rights Watch, 13 September 2013; Independent International Commission of Inquiry into the Syrian Arab Republic, 16 August 2013) While the regime denied responsibility for the massacre of innocent civilians, the NDF’s mounting importance to it was acknowledged by President Bashar al-Assad. (SANA 18 June 2013) Between July and December 2013, reports emerged of NDF units’ growing involvement in fighting throughout the country.

### **3. The organisation of the NDF**

The NDF is generally viewed as an agglomerate of local forces, with many members even keeping their civilian jobs, and in charge of defending local areas and their communities. The regime presented the NDF accordingly, with Bashar al-Assad describing its members as “local citizens fighting alongside the army to defend their communities and regions.” (Ibid.) At least initially, the NDF does not seem to have

been organised in standardised army-like units; it worked more like an umbrella under which each group's membership varied, mostly based on how many fighters could be recruited locally.<sup>6</sup> The basic combat unit is a group of some 30 members. (Choufi, 2 March 2013) NDF members are supposed to wear distinct uniforms or at least identifying badges, although in reality this does not seem to have always happened. For stockpiles of arms, vehicles and basic food provisions the NDF has been fully reliant on supply centres within the regular army structure (Khaddour, 14 March 2016; Solomon, 21 April 2013). On top of NDF units being paired with the armed forces and the regime's foreign allies – at times by embedding military officers and advisers—this presumably allowed for a degree of central control via the army's command structures.

Various sources have provided NDF members with basic military training, suggesting an additional, albeit weak source of imperfect central control. The initial and more or less haphazard process of generating NDF militias was in part superseded by purposely designed training courses for pro-regime fighters generally, with Iranian and Hizbullah input. (Solomon, 4 April 2013; Al-Hamidi, 14 October 2015) Yet Philips (2016) found that Iranian knowhow was being successfully transferred only to some NDF units, with others unaffected. While many NDF members continued to be left without or with very little training, the Syrian regime set up its own training facilities, mostly run by regular army officers. Reportedly, training in such centres lasts two weeks to a month. (Solomon, 21 April 2013) More comprehensive training for NDF members locally only appears to have been initiated in 2015 with a first group of cadets graduating in January 2016. (SANA, 11 January 2016)

Initially the NDF appears to have been primarily funded by local businessmen linked to the regime, but their role at least in part became overshadowed by Iranian funding when NDF units expanded beyond their means. In turn, Iranian funding was declining at the end of 2015 and in early 2016. This contributed to severe delays in the payment of salaries.<sup>7</sup> Despite growing strains on the state's resources generally, various NDF units also received funding from the regime's security apparatus and the Republican Guard through Brigadier-General Bassam al-Hassan, and from those personally connected to the Assad family and private businesses close to the regime. (Khaddour, 14 March 2016)

From the time of the NDF's establishment there has been a concern among the entourage of the President that it should be kept under close watch. A source in the security apparatus of the regime described the NDF in 2015 as being under a single "central leadership, in coordination with the Bureau of National Security which is in direct contact with the presidency". (AFP, 25 September 2015) Yet there is no evidence for such a strong chain of command. According to a Palestinian source who worked with the NDF, the presidential Palace retained direct control over at least some of the NDF units by putting them under the supervision of Brigadier-General Ghassan Bilal, the manager of Maher al-Assad's military office.<sup>8</sup> Others also identified General Bassam al-Hassan, a key advisor to President al-Assad, as the originator and prime coordinator of the NDF.<sup>9</sup> Some fighters involved in NDF operations highlighted the coordinating role played by Brigadier-General Ghassan Nassour of the Republican Guard. (Mohammad D., 5 April 2014) As of late 2013, the NDF was also said to have been managed and coordinated from within the Syrian Ministry of Defence.<sup>10</sup> It reportedly was aided in this task by an adviser from the Pasdaran and another from Hizbullah. In sum, assessments of the centres of gravity characterising the chain of command involving the NDF vary wildly depending on the sources we consulted. Most likely, they describe differential relations between multiple state agents and specific NDF units, pointing up to the heterarchical order that came to characterize their modes of organisation.

While the imperative of secrecy may partly explain the lack of clarity about the NDF's overall chain of command, the fragmented nature of and the shifts in the NDF's main channels of funding probably caused the exertion of control and command to splinter and evolve according to the rise and fall of benefactors and the resources at their disposal. Furthermore, it is likely that Syrian patrimonial politics and its reliance on diffuse, networked regime power caused certain commanders of the NDF to individually have direct access to the presidential family and other key regime incumbents, bypassing any formal arrangements put in place. (Lund, 2015) While such personal ties to the regime proliferated, the NDF remained formally disconnected from state institutions and the armed forces. This is illustrated by its exemption from military courts' jurisdiction. (AFP, 25 September 2015)

At least formally, local NDF units are answerable to commanders at a provincial level. Yet the degree of institutional development and the quality of the forces they comprise varied significantly. A document obtained by the opposition and allegedly detailing the structure of the NDF in Latakia showed that in mid-2015 the NDF there had evolved into an organisation with eight “battalions” of ground forces with 6,000 men, plus specialist tank, artillery, sniping, military police, signalling and special forces units. It also had intelligence, propaganda, and education departments. (Zaman al-Wasl, 28 July 2015) Yet elsewhere the NDF failed to reach these standards. Already at the end of 2014 there was talk of the regime planning a restructuring of the NDF as units in many locations had failed to live up to expectations or they had fallen into disarray. (Kozak, April 2015; Khaddour, 3 June 2014 & 14 March 2016) Furthermore, and as the militias associated with the regime multiplied, the boundaries between the NDF and other forces became blurred. Bodies of members of autonomous Shi’a militias killed in action were found carrying NDF IDs. (Al-Tamimi, 29 May 2016) A large portion of the Afghan ‘volunteers’ mobilised by the Pasdaran have operated separately from NDF units and yet they were nominally assigned to it. (Giustozzi, 27 October 2016) This seems to suggest that roughly from early 2016 onwards the distinction between the NDF and other militias lost real currency, and that only in a few locations the label continued to designate a distinct fighting force with its own organizational identity.

#### **4. The NDF’s *raison d’être* and contribution to the regime’s war effort**

Explanations advanced to explain the creation of the NDF echo some of the arguments in the wider debate on why states resort to setting up militias. They range from an Iranian intent to create a vehicle of long-term influence within Syria, to bringing order and some discipline to a vast array of local militias, and to sub-contract indiscriminate violence to non-state actors. (ShahidSaless, 9 November 2015; Hamidi, 11 October 2015; Lund, 2015; Phillips, 2016: 162) Yet there is little evidence to fully support most of these claims. We argue that this leaves the NDF as primarily having been established to address the regime’s manpower shortages, and to complement the regular armed forces in this respect.

The Iranians were indeed heavily involved with the NDF and seem to have been keen on its forces to develop for them to be persuasively presented as key forces in the fight against the insurgency.<sup>11</sup> Yet it is striking that there was never any real sign of Iranian efforts to ‘indoctrinate’ NDF units ideologically; their typical members had a secular Ba’ath background, or were Alawite – in neither case likely recipients of the ideology of the Iranian Islamic Republic. If the Pasdaran have been trying to establish vehicles of ideological influence, these are to be found among the various Shi’a militias. From this perspective then, The NDF may at best have been a vehicle for ‘soft’ Iranian influence, perhaps to downplay the extent to which the regime’s military operations relied on foreign fighters.

At first sight, disciplining, restructuring and uniting the vast array of militias seems to have been a more plausible purpose. Yet it then remains puzzling that so many militias, Syrian and foreign alike, continued to exist and proliferate parallel to the NDF. Furthermore, if the regime’s purpose was to let irregular forces like the NDF carry out indiscriminate violence while denying responsibility, the regime should have stuck to the earlier shabiha and popular committees whose lines of command involved the regime much less directly. When the NDF became involved in massacres around Baniyas, regime sources did not use the argument that forces outside its control had perpetrated them. They simply claimed that the victims had been “terrorists”. (Human Rights Watch, 13 September 2013) It therefore would appear that the main *raison d’être* of the NDF was another one.

The key rationale for the establishment of the NDF seems to have stemmed from the regime’s need to supplement the declining manpower of the regular army due to deaths, defections, and draft dodging. By the spring of 2013, and out of its estimated 220,000-strong armed forces in 2011, only between 65-75,000 loyal and deployable regime troops had remained. (Holliday, March 2013: 27) By integrating, equipping and training at least some of the many dissipated militias, and by absorbing new recruits, the NDF appears to have been the regime’s answer to a growing insurgency.

Iranian sources insisted that the NDF started at about 50,000 men, and reached 100,000 members in 2015. (Bastani, 2015; IRNA, 2012). These figures should be taken with a pinch of salt, not only because of their propagandistic character, but also

because of widespread ghost soldiering.<sup>12</sup> (Solomon, 24 July 2015) As of autumn 2013, a source inside the NDF estimated the Syrian members of the force at 39,000, to which some 5,000 Lebanese and Afghan fighters were to be added.<sup>13</sup> At a total between 43-45,000, this is substantially lower than the 60,000 members claimed at that time by the regime. By November 2016 a Pasdaran source claimed that out of a total of over 100,000 militiamen, the NDF accounted for 70,000 of them.<sup>14</sup>

The NDF might accordingly have been smaller than claimed, but anecdotal evidence suggests that the establishment of the NDF and its newly found ability to concentrate its light infantry forces at the provincial level did significantly boost the Syrian government forces for a period. In many cases NDF militias battled to push the armed opposition back from their own turf. (Sly, 11 May 2013, Khaddour, 14 March 2016, AFP, 26 March and 15 June 2014, FARS News Agency, 5 April 2014)

Yet as the fighting moved deeper into territory and communities where the NDF had weaker roots, its performance waned. Apparently, and as the direct threat to the NDF members' own communities receded, the incentive offered to NDF members to serve in their home locations now turned into a liability as the regime strived to put pressure on areas still firmly under rebel control. A number of NDF units also were affected by rising corruption and involvement in racketeering or looting,<sup>15</sup> seemingly at the expense of discipline and troubling their relationship with other pro-regime forces and local populations alike. Coinciding with the temporary pull-out of many Iraqi volunteers and other Shiite foreign nationals from Syria between the Summer of 2014 and the Spring of 2015 (Al-Tamimi, 16 March 2015), the regime not only failed to sustain its offensive, it even became threatened in its own key strongholds as it struggled to maintain the morale and cohesion among its forces (Sayigh, 25 June 2015), including the NDF.

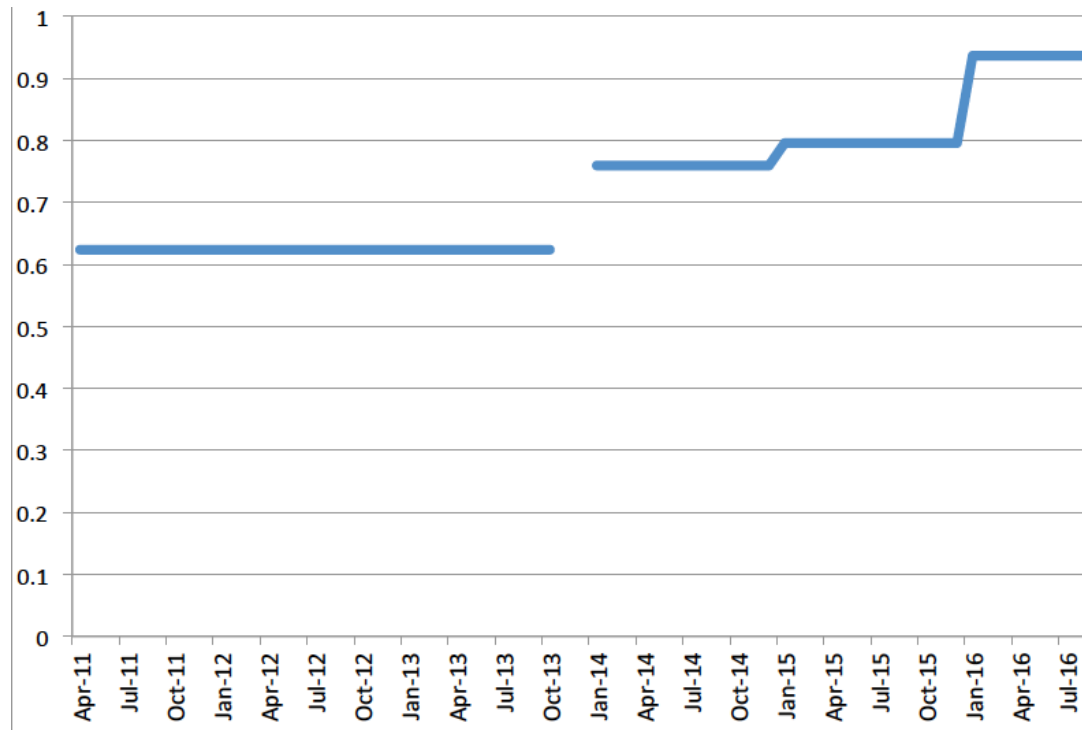
The NDF's faltering performance and the proliferation of armed groups coming to the regime's defence reportedly prompted Russian advisers to the Syrian regime in late 2015 to push for a plan to integrate the NDF into the regular armed forces as a new army corps (the Fourth). (Al-Hamidi, 11 October 2015) Yet a Pasdaran source said that it vetoed the plan.<sup>16</sup> Ostensibly, the Iranians saw the Russian proposal as a



challenge to their influence over the NDF or, perhaps as likely, as triggering undue competition against the many Shiite militias under their control.

Data from the Syrian Observatory of Human Right suggests that since the beginning of the conflict, pro-regime militias generally have been incurring a growing share of regime losses (Figure 1).<sup>17</sup> This most likely reflects their mounting role in the fighting. In November 2013 a source within the NDF indicated that 8,360 NDF members had been killed up to that point.<sup>18</sup> This number is about half the losses by all militias recorded by the Observatory during that same period. Yet from October 2015 onwards the Carter Centre’s Syria mapping database<sup>19</sup> shows a significant decline in reported NDF engagement in fighting operations compared to the same months of the previous year. This is consistent with the suggestion that reform plans were shelved and the NDF was being re-tasked with duties other than frontline fighting. Against this background, the share of pro-regime militia losses suffered by the NDF is likely to have declined.

**Figure 1: Killed-in-action ratio, all pro-regime militias / Syrian regular army**



1=50% killed in action from regular army and militias

Taken together, the available evidence seems to suggest that the overall role of militias in the conflict continued to rise but that other militia forces had taken over from the NDF. A Pasdaran source confirmed this assessment.<sup>20</sup>

## **5. Regime management of the NDF**

While the regime was ultimately unable to overcome the NDF's shortcomings, it noticeably addressed or countered a range of unintended effects and excesses associated with its creation and deployment. The literature on state-sponsored militias generally notes that such groups often become harmful or threatening to the regimes that created them, and ultimately detrimental to the states such regimes claim to represent. A closer look at the NDF allows us to identify such challenges in more detail. Yet the Syrian regime's handling of the NDF suggests a degree of calculative adaptability that effectively mitigated them, at least for now. Accordingly, regime incumbents were careful to recurrently reinsert their dominance in an otherwise heterarchical landscape of militias.

From the regime's perspective, the creation of and reliance on the NDF indeed posed some serious dilemmas and challenges. For one, there is some evidence to suggest that the creation of the NDF further demoralized members of the regular armed forces. NDF members' higher salaries, in combination with greater leeway for them to serve in their home towns and under a far less stringent regime of duties, solicited envy and even contempt among members of the armed forces who were overstretched and exposed to much greater risks.<sup>21</sup> Mutual rivalry has been tangible in addition to perceptions held among the regular armed forces of the NDF lacking professionalism.

Secondly, and especially where the NDF played a disproportionate role such as in imposing sieges, its commanders carved out their own sphere of influence that, at times, was used to openly oppose or obstruct instructions from the regime centrally. For instance, the regime systematically and effectively used local cease-fires to balance its resources and manpower among multiple frontlines of varying intensity. This allowed the regime to separate rebel groups from local populations in cease-fire arrangements that caused them to retreat to peripheral areas. Yet NDF units often

stalled negotiations over such cease-fires, as in Homs, by demanding from the rebels to fully surrender. (Turkmani et.al: October 2014) Their obstinacy was possible motivated by a refusal to forego lucrative earnings from cross-line smuggling into besieged areas. When finally a cease-fire was reached in February 2014, the NDF repeatedly violated its terms, putting the agreement at risk. In another example of NDF units acting against regime interests and –directives, the NDF between December 2015 and May 2016 repeatedly clashed with the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) and security forces (Asayish) in Qamishli, putting in danger a precarious power-sharing arrangement in the city that crucially allowed the regime to concentrate its scarce troops to fight insurgents elsewhere.<sup>22</sup>

Thirdly, pent-up rivalries among regime militias and failing discipline repeatedly triggered violent standoffs among regime forces involving the NDF. For instance, in April-May 2016 NDF units reportedly took aim at another pro-regime militia, the Nafidh Assad Allah group, following mutual accusations of treason following IS advances in Deir az-Zur. (Al-Modon, 8 May 2016; Yallasouriya, 30 April 2016) NDF units were even alleged to have killed regular army officers and soldiers at checkpoints, and to have engaged in shootouts among themselves. (Yallasouriya, 13 September 2015, 26 April 2016 & 18 June 2016) Following the landmark cease-fire deal in Homs, the NDF clashed with the Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party, another pro-regime group. (Williams, 17 May 2014)

Fourthly, NDF involvement in looting, extortion, kidnappings, drug abuse, and wanton shoot-outs caused local residents to accumulate grievances against the NDF that flew in the face of regime efforts to maintain popular support.<sup>23</sup> (Ibid.; Kalin, 12 January 2014; Solomon, 21 April 2013) The NDF’s involvement in looting and extortion generally appears to have been directly linked to the regime’s inability to pay out their wages regularly, similarly to why some Popular Committees’ earlier extorted local communities as soon as government funds transferred to them dwindled. The NDF’s notoriety in this context also became a source of resentment among other pro-regime militias who dreaded that their association with it undermined their reputation as well. (Solomon, 22 July 2015)

Against this background it is remarkable that the NDF’s numerous excesses do not

seem to have reached a level threatening to the regime; its role in a complex heterarchical order never regressed into “anarchy” or “autarchy”, let alone developed into a countering “hierarchy”. Neither did the state appear to have been driven toward collapse as a result of the many challenges that the NDF posed. We contend that at least in part this may be because of the regime’s astuteness to manage the negative fallout of its reliance on the NDF. It did so by reasserting its remaining hierarchical power, in various ways.

Preserving the primacy of the armed forces, the regime consistently portrayed the NDF as a mere auxiliary force, positioning army officers within its units, and ensuring that the supply of arms, vehicles and food was tightly controlled by the armed forces. Sophisticated weaponry remained preserved for the armed forces. (Khaddour, 14 March 2016) Army conscripts’ jealousies of the NDF’s privileges were less easily addressed, although soldiers and officers serving at active frontlines and “confronting terrorists” were promised a bonus. (Dick, 9 June 2015)

More generally, efforts were made to integrate NDF personnel into the regime networks of patronage and support, variously through state institutions or private arrangements financed by pro-regime businessmen. Accordingly, families with members serving in the NDF were given pensions, healthcare and material support through the Syrian Martyrs’ Association, founded in mid-2013. (Khaddour, 3 June 2014) Families of ‘martyred’ fighters and wounded members also gained access to such services as pro-regime charities partnered with UN humanitarian agencies. (Leenders and Mansour, forthcoming) Furthermore, NDF members were included in a law issued in December 2014 stipulating that 50 percent of all vacant positions in the public sector will be reserved to relatives of all those “martyred” in defending the regime. (AFP, 31 December 2014) The regime seemed keen to limit the NDF’s involvement in looting and extorting the communities they were supposed to protect by allowing them to formally raise levies and duties at checkpoints, and reward businessmen linked to NDF units with lucrative contracts and real estate. Such resources variously allowed the NDF to finance itself, and granted it a buffer against fiscal shortfalls of the state. Iranian instructors, on their part, issued stark warnings to their NDF trainees against looting. (Solomon, 4 April 2013)

Accordingly, regime co-optation of local NDF leaders and their private funders appear to have been designed to ensure their unreserved loyalty and curb any tendency toward greater autonomy. This strategy also seems to have informed measures to allow NDF strongmen access to second-tier regime networks. Already in May 2012 pro-regime militia fighters ran for parliamentary elections. For example, Waris al-Yunes was rewarded with a seat in Parliament for his leading role in setting up a Popular Committee in Hama. He later led an NDF unit in his hometown until “terrorists” killed him in October 2014. (SANA, 15 October 2014) The phenomenon widened in 2016 when in parliamentary elections held in March an independent “National Unity List” led by known business tycoons included numerous NDF militiamen describing themselves as “economist-fighter”, “sheikh-fighter” and “artist-fighter”. (SANA, 16 April 2016) Some NDF leaders are believed to front for regime incumbents placed under EU and US sanctions, as *wakil* (agent) for their companies.<sup>24</sup>

When NDF units or their leaders still threatened to act or did act against regime interests, the regime negotiated or coerced compliance. Thus a senior security official was dispatched from Damascus to salvage the Homs cease-fire arrangement in early 2014. Likewise, the regime sent senior officials to negotiate an end to the fighting involving the NDF and Kurdish forces in Qamishli in April 2016. In Deir az-Zur a “Higher Security Committee” chaired by the governor ended clashes among regime militias. (Almodon, 8 May 2016) Reports also suggest that security forces arrested and even killed some NDF commanders who went out of line. In a few cases wherein NDF units undermined its vital interests, the regime –and under pressure of Russian military advisors-- seems to have taken the equally drastic step to dissolve local NDF units that proved to counter regime imperatives, as for example in Qamishli. (The Syrian Observer, 26 April 2016)

## **Conclusion**

In this article we argued that the devolution of violence to non-state actors in the Syrian war built on the regime’s rich repertoire of the use of such militias in heterarchical orders and within an established trend of flexing and waning ‘stateness’, both in its projection of power at home and abroad. This historical record informed

and affected both the regime's opportunities and constraints in taking on a mass uprising in 2011, and then in countering an insurgency from early 2012 onwards. The NDF emerged in this context, and became, at least for a period, the largest and most important militia in the regime's counter-insurgency efforts. Appearing on the battlefield in early 2013 as an agglomerate of haphazardly mobilized local forces involved in two years of fighting, the NDF exposed clear antecedents in the regime's past use of non-state militias. Our analysis of Syria's lineages of militiafication in this respect fits the wider canvas drawn by Ahram (2016) wherein states are locked into a degree of path dependency when it comes to their use of such groups. Accordingly, Ahram's historical data and our own study on Syria both counter views within the literature on 'new wars' that state-sponsored militias are a novel phenomenon. Yet while Ahram's quantitative data underscore historical continuity, our case study points up to how, within this repertoire, the Syrian regime innovated and diverted from such established patterns, and brought them to entirely unprecedented levels. Our more dynamic understanding is in line with how social movement theorists understand repertoires of contention, allowing for innovation and modification within established practices. (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly, 2001: 138)

State sponsorship of the NDF and control over it showed a mixed picture. On the one hand, a formal framework did appear, organizing NDF units per governorate and overseen and controlled by the regime and the regular armed forces more centrally. Yet many NDF recruits failed to receive training, its sources of funding remained highly fragmented and insecure, and a single chain of command failed to emerge. It is unclear whether the loose or even fragmented state control that resulted was produced intentionally, or that this mainly reflected the regime's heterogeneous coalition and its patrimonial style of governance generally, or both. In this context the variety and shifts within the NDF's key financiers may be especially relevant, as these are likely to have caused overall positions of command and influence to change hands. Related to this, the NDF's involvement in looting and racketeering is congruent with what much of the literature expects from pro-government militias when facing insufficient or insecure state financing. Yet at the same time the NDF provides an ill fit to Carey and Mitchell's (2016) category of militias operating at an arm's length of the state. It by no means achieved that degree of autonomy, even when central control faltered and looting became rampant. Would there have been a genuine intention to reform the

NDF, and further strengthen the state's control over it, disagreements and perhaps rivalries involving the regime's main foreign sponsors, Russia and Iran, appear to have countered such efforts. This underscores the need to better incorporate the role of foreign sponsors in the study of state delegated violence; a theme that still needs to be fully explored in the literature.

In our case study of the NDF we see only weak resonance of most functional explanations for why states resort to militias generally. We found that the NDF appears to have been primarily established and encouraged to address the regime's manpower shortages in the face of a growing insurgency. For an important but limited period, the NDF served this goal well just as it contributed to the regime's military advances. Yet both in terms of the manpower it was able to mobilize and its fighting capabilities, the NDF failed to live up to expectations. The regime was ultimately unable to address the NDF's shortcomings on both these scores. This led other, mainly foreign-sponsored militias to overtake its role in offensive operations. Our case-specific findings in this context may warrant some caution when it comes to ascribing sustained and --for their supporters-- beneficial qualities to state-sponsored militias generally, as the sources of their initial strength may ultimately turn into liabilities in fighting insurgencies. Furthermore, the Syrian case suggests that there may be a correlation between the inherent limitations of homegrown regime militias and increased foreign intervention propping up the regime, thereby internationalizing the composition of such forces. This, however, would warrant more research, both on the Syrian case and more generally.

Finally, we argued that since the start of the Syrian conflict in 2011 the regime's devolution of its violence to militias including the NDF brought about a sharp contraction of its 'stateness'. Yet this as such did not constitute 'state failure' or lead to 'state decay' or its collapse, even when other factors may have worked or will work in that direction. Nor did the NDF acquire a degree of autonomy that would have caused its role in Syria's heterarchical order to push the latter into anarchy, autarchy or even a counter-hierarchy. This was not for a lack of challenges and dilemmas posed by the creation and deployment of the NDF. Yet the regime appears to have been acutely aware of the risks involved, judging from a series of measures to manage and counter them by recurrently flexing what remained of its hierarchical power.

Whether the regime will be able to manage other, mainly Iranian-sponsored foreign militias that since the relative demise of the NDF have dominated the battlefield, remains to be seen.<sup>25</sup> Yet what its handling of the NDF is concerned, the regime's elaborate measures are characteristic of and underscore its general astuteness, hedging tactics, and adaptability in its authoritarian governance, both during the current conflict and prior to it.<sup>26</sup> It is against this background that we invite scholars of state-sponsored militias to engage more closely with the broader literature on authoritarian regimes' adaptability and resilience, and pay attention to such regimes' varying capacity to adjust and reconfigure themselves to overcome daunting challenges to their rule. In turn, we call on scholars of authoritarian governance to add state-sponsored militias to their research agenda to help render the latter more relevant to the study of armed conflicts in which authoritarian regimes often find themselves.

## End notes

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rmwk2S4mlmw>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n9dRP7VsR6w>

<sup>3</sup> While there are examples of democratic states using state-sponsored militias, authoritarian and semi-democratic states are found to be most prone to devolving violence to such militias. (Ahrām, 2016; Mitchell, Carey and Butler, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> An important exception to the Baath party's conspicuous absence among post-2011 pro-regime militias are the Ba'ath Battalions. Established in mid-2012, this militia reportedly has been active in regime-held parts of Aleppo and in Damascus, and is led by a party official, Hilal Hilal.

<sup>5</sup> Research team's interviews with pro-regime fighters, Damascus, December 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Research team's interview with NDF commander, Damascus, 22 November 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Authors' interviews with Western observers in Beirut, July 2016. See also Black (22 September 2015) and Al-Souriya Net (9 March 2016).

<sup>8</sup> Author's email communication with Palestinian member of the PFLP-GC, December 2013.

<sup>9</sup> Authors' interviews with Western observers in Beirut, July 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Research team's interview with NDF commander, Damascus, 22 November 2013.

<sup>11</sup> See e.g. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fya9kgsOCV4>

<sup>12</sup> For instance, Saqir Rustum, an NDF commander in al-Zahra (Homs) and nephew of one of the NDF initiators Bassam al-Hassan, was rumored to have claimed the salaries of 18,500 soldiers while in reality he commanded only 10,000 men. (Isa, 6 March 2014)

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Research team's interview with Pasdaran adviser in Syria, Damascus, November 2016.

<sup>15</sup> For footage allegedly showing NDF units' involvement in looting, see e.g.:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tO\\_ROXVkjZY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tO_ROXVkjZY)

<sup>16</sup> Research team's interview with Pasdaran adviser in Syria, Damascus, November 2016.

<sup>17</sup> The data from the Observatory is usually reported in the media, mostly AFP and Daily Star, from where it has been collated.

<sup>18</sup> Research team's interview with NDF commander, Damascus, 22 November 2013.

<sup>19</sup> The Carter Centre's Syria Conflict Mapping database contains a large number of geo-tagged data entries on the Syrian war, mostly derived from Syrian social media sources and human rights organisations. It is only partly available to the public. (<https://www.cartercenter.org/syria-conflict-map/>) We were kindly granted full access.



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- <sup>20</sup> Research team's interview with Pasdaran officer, Damascus, 29 November 2016.
- <sup>21</sup> Authors' interviews with Western observers in Beirut, 1 July 2016; AFP (25 September 2015).
- <sup>22</sup> Tacit cooperation between the regime and the YPG in Hasakeh temporarily broke down later in August.
- <sup>23</sup> Strikingly, during the regime offensive in Aleppo in November 2016 its regime-appointed governor publicly complained about regime forces' involvement in looting. (Al-Watan, 15 November 2016) Among them, several local "popular committees" were likely working under the NDF umbrella.
- <sup>24</sup> Authors' interviews with Syrian businessmen, May 2017.
- <sup>25</sup> After taking Aleppo from rebel forces in December 2016, the regime has faced much greater difficulty managing or reigning in foreign militias. (Lund, 22 June 2017)
- <sup>26</sup> Syrian regime management of state-sponsored militias including the NDF echoes what Heydemann and Leenders (2013: 10) more generally describe as the "multiplicity" of authoritarian governance. "[I]t allows incumbents to juggle their options, constituencies, and resources without being beholden to any of them or being irreparably undercut by the unintended consequences of their choices."

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