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Unravelling the Roots of State Failure: Syria, Libya and Yemen

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Abstract

The collapse of state authority in Syria, Libya, Yemen following the Arab Spring has brought renewed attention to the dynamics of state failure. This article investigates three key factors contributing to state failure and civil war escalation in Libya, Yemen, and Syria: non-professional and non-institutionalized militaries, the absence of a shared national identity and external interventions by regional and global actors. In each of these countries, the failure of the military to act as a neutral and professional institution, combined with deep-seated identity divisions, created an environment conducive to internal strife. In addition, the absence of unifying national identity leads to increased competition among various groups vying for power and undermines the legitimacy of state institutions. Finally, external interventions, often driven by regional and global powers seeking to advance their own interests and supporting competing factions in these conflicts, further weakened the state's capacity to maintain control and fueled prolonged violence. External interventions also exacerbated internal divisions, turning domestic conflicts into proxy wars. By examining the cases of Syria, Libya and Yemen, this article underscores the critical role that lack of professional military and national identity along with external intervention play in state failure and civil war.

Keywords: State Failure, Civil War, Libya, Syria, Yemen

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Devletin Çöküşünün Temel Nedenleri: Suriye, Libya ve Yemen Örnekleri

Ayfer Erdoğan Şafak [1]

Öz

Arap Baharı'nın ardından Suriye, Libya ve Yemen'de devlet otoritesinin çöküşü, çökmüş devletlerin dinamiklerini yeniden gündeme getirmiştir. Bu makale, söz konusu üç ülkede devletin çöküşüne ve iç savaşların derinleşmesine yol açan üç temel faktörü analiz etmektedir: profesyonel ve kurumsallaşmış orduların eksikliği, ortak bir ulusal kimliğin bulunmaması ve bölgesel ile küresel aktörlerin dış müdahaleleri. Bu ülkelerde orduların tarafsız, profesyonel ve ulusal bir kurum olarak işlev görememesi, mevcut kimlik ayrılıklarıyla birleşerek iç çatışmaların zeminini hazırlamıştır. Birleştirici bir ulusal kimliğin eksikliği ise farklı gruplar arasındaki iktidar mücadelesini körükleyerek devlet kurumlarının meşruiyetini daha da zayıflatmıştır. Üçüncü olarak, bölgesel ve küresel aktörlerin kendi çıkarlarına uygun şekilde çatışmalardaki rakip grupları destekleyen müdahaleleri, devletlerin kontrol kapasitesini zayıflatmış ve şiddetin uzun süre devam etmesine neden olmuştur. Bu dış müdahaleler, aynı zamanda toplumdaki hizipleşmeleri derinleştirerek çatışmaları vekalet savaşlarına dönüştürmüştür. Bu makale, Suriye, Libya ve Yemen örneklerinden hareketle, dış müdahalelerin, profesyonel ordu ve ulusal kimlik eksikliğinin devlet otoritesinin çöküşünü ve iç savaşları nasıl tetiklediğini kapsamlı bir şekilde analiz etmeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Çökmüş Devletler, İç Savaş, Libya, Suriye, Yemen.

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Introduction

Today, one of the most significant challenges to regional and international security comes from failed states. Failed states pose a wide range of threats, including their potential to act as hosts for proxy groups and non-state actors who are committed to advancing the interests of global or regional powers. They are also known to serve as havens for illegal flows of finance and arms, terrorist organizations and international criminal networks. Moreover, the collapse of state institutions brings about urgent humanitarian concerns and may require international intervention in the form of emergency relief and state-building efforts. The threat that failed states pose to the international community is so severe that the US National Security Strategy paper of 2002 observed that "America is now threatened less by conquering states than (it is) by failing ones" (US Department of State, 2002). Consequently, there is a renewed sense of urgency around the need to comprehend the complexities of state failure and fortify weak nation-states in the developing world.

The renewed interest in failed states was driven by the recognition that the collapse of state authority in the region had profound implications for both regional and global security. The breakdown of central authority in countries like Libya and Syria created power vacuums that were quickly filled by non-state actors, including terrorist groups like the Islamic State. These groups have often exploited the situation to expand their sphere of influence. At the same time, the refugee crises resulting from these conflicts put enormous pressure on neighboring countries, further demonstrating the far-reaching consequences of state failure. Furthermore, the conflicts in failed states attract the attention of regional and global actors who pursue their interests through financial, military, or logistical support to various factions, often leading to proxy wars that undermine the already fragile political landscape in these countries.

The last two decades have witnessed a growing number of fragile or failed states in the MENA region which are altering the political and security landscapes of the region. As the number of failed states continues to rise, it is crucial for scholars, policymakers, and academics to deepen their understanding of what constitutes a failed state and the myriad factors that contribute to state failure. Focusing on the recent cases of Libya, Yemen, and Syria, this article seeks to provide significant insights into the complex interplay of factors that lead to state failure in the MENA region.

Defining a Failed State

States weaken, become fragile and fail for several reasons. According to Rotberg (2002: 85), nation states fail because their citizens can no longer receive positive political goods from them due to internal strife. In the eyes and hearts of an increasingly large number of its citizens, their governments lose credibility, and the nation-state as a whole loses legitimacy (Ibid.). Thomas Grant adds a new dimension to the definition of failed state which is intervention. First, the term "failed state" may be used to legitimize intervention when the true goal is imperial gain rather than self-defense (Grant, 2004: 52). Second, because regional and global powers use different criteria to determine when and where to intervene, intervention could paralyze international order if it is not constrained by agreement on the acceptable scope of the practice (Ibid.). On the other hand, Charles Call (2011: 303-326) argues that the concept of the failed state is deficient to classify states as diverse as Colombia, Malawi, Somalia, Iraq, Haiti and Tajikistan. He distinguishes among security gaps, capacity gaps and legitimacy gaps that states experience to avoid a one size fits all definition. According to Call, failed states experience capacity gaps when institutions are not able to deliver minimal public

goods and services to the population; security gaps when states don't ensure minimal levels of security vis a vis organized armed groups; legitimacy gap when the political elite and society largely disregard the rules governing the exercise of power and distribution of wealth (Ibid.).

Definitions of a failed state vary across different contexts and variables, yet there are minimum standards that determine when a state could be considered a failed one. In the contemporary international order, a failed state is incapable of carrying out two essential duties of the sovereign state. It is unable to safeguard its national borders and exert power over its citizens and territory. Second, it is incapable of performing the administrative duties necessary to manage people and resources and can offer meager public service, if any. In other words, state effectiveness is central to defining the concept of failed state. The idea that a state needs to be able to perform certain vital functions lies at the core of those definitions. Therefore, "difficult environments", "fragile states", "poor performers" can be regarded as synonymous since they all refer to a state's inability to provide adequate public goods to its citizens including safety and security, basic social services, functioning public institutions, and economic management (Torres and Anderson, 2004). States fail when they are unable to perform these minimal functions. Therefore, state failure can be broadly defined as the inability of a government to provide essential public services, maintain law and order, and uphold the rule of law, leading to widespread insecurity, economic stagnation, and social disintegration.

Failed states are often characterized by their incapability of tax collection, law enforcement, territorial control, provision of security and maintenance of infrastructure. Other common characteristics of failed states include ineffective and poor bureaucracy, political corruption, widespread criminality, and military interference in politics. In most failed states, there is a long-lasting conflict between the government's forces and armed groups seeking to overthrow the government. Moreover, as Rotberg aptly puts it, it is not the intensity of violence that determines what a failed state is, but rather the persistent nature of the violence which targets the existing government or regime. He contends that the nature of political demands for shared authority or autonomy legitimize or justify such violence in the eyes of the rebels (Rotberg, 2003: 5). The civil wars that often go hand in hand with failed states are usually fueled by hostilities between different ethnic, religious or linguistic communities. Criminal violence is another common feature of state failure. As state authority weakens and fails, criminal gangs, arms and drug trafficking become more widespread. The weakening of state authority also prevents law from being enforced and anomic acts begin to become more of a norm. Citizens in failed states resort to warlords or other strong figures with whom they share ethnic or clan solidarity to provide security (Ibid.). Therefore, ethnic or clan divisions are further instigated when the state crumbles.

The popular protests that erupted in early 2011, known as the Arab Spring, brought renewed attention to the concept of failed states. The uprisings, which began in Tunisia and quickly spread across the MENA region brought renewed attention to the concept of failed states. The protests, sparked by demands for political reform, social justice, democracy and economic growth manifested the fragility of many authoritarian regimes in the region. In some cases, such as in Tunisia and Egypt, long-standing leaders were overthrown, while in others, such as Syria, Yemen, and Libya, the uprisings led to prolonged civil wars and state collapse. Protracted civil wars revealed the limits of state control, the fragmentation of society, and the destructive effects of external intervention. The inability of these states to maintain order,

provide basic services, or assert control over their territories led to their classification as failed states.

The rise of failed states following the Arab Spring revived scholarly debates on state failure and why states fail. While each state's trajectory is shaped by unique dynamics, there are certain commonalities in their failure. Recognizing these patterns provides valuable insights for scholars in the field of comparative politics. To this end, this article explores three key factors that help to account for why Libya, Yemen, and Syria became failed states after the Arab Spring. First, the role of the military and the security apparatus is critical as these institutions are often pivotal in either upholding or undermining state authority. Second, the lack of social cohesion due to severe identity fragmentation became the focal points of political and social conflict. Finally, external intervention has been a decisive factor in exacerbating internal strife and state collapse.

The Root Causes of State Failure

Non-professional and Non-institutionalized Militaries

In terms of institutional design, military is the most central institution that plays a key role in state survival. The military plays such role by safeguarding a state's sovereignty and territorial integrity, defending it against external threats, maintaining internal stability and order, preserving the rule of law and projecting power and influence on the international stage to enhance a state's diplomatic leverage and position. In times of public unrest, a revolution is unlikely to occur if the state's coercive apparatus, especially the military, has the coherence and determination to quell protest. Likewise, the most important indicator of state failure is when internal security breaks down and the state becomes increasingly unable to control its borders and territory and monopolize the use of force (Ottoway and Mair, 2004).

In contrast to the other regions of the world, the Arab world has remained resilient to any change towards democratization for several decades. Eva Bellin, a leading political scientist on the Middle East, once argued that the robustness of authoritarianism was the outcome of capacity and the will of the military to repress any sort of protestation from the public (Bellin, 2004: 143). As the Arab Spring unfolded, Bellin revised her initial hypothesis and maintained her initial arguments as the variations in the outcomes of the uprisings indicated that coercive apparatuses' will, particularly that of military, to repress popular protests has stood as the single most important factor (Bellin, 2012: 127). In countries like Tunisia and Egypt, where the military chose to side with the people or refrained from intervening against the protesters, the long-entrenched autocrats were overthrown relatively quickly and peacefully. On the other hand, in cases like Libya, Yemen, and Syria, initial protests quickly escalated into armed conflicts, leading to the breakdown of central state authority. In these countries, armed groups, often backed by regional and international powers or transnational networks, vied for control.

The degree to which the military is professional, institutionalized, and politicized determines its ability to uphold its integrity during times of crisis. An institutionalized military is run according to meritocracy and rules, and it has a unique identity that sets it apart from the state and the regime. Officers in an institutionalized military receive promotions based on their performance, and a merit-based hierarchy is used to enforce discipline (Bellin, 2004: 145). A military establishment's likelihood to stage a coup or cede control to civilian authorities, particularly after a regime collapse, depends on its institutionalization. Civilian oversight and political neutrality are essential to military professionalism. According to Huntington, three

characteristics are necessary for military professionalism: expertise, which relates to military personnel's education; responsibility, which relates to the military's position as the state's defender; and corporatism, which denotes a sense of unity among military personnel (Huntington, 1957: 8-10). Professionalism and institutionalization in the military are closely related; institutionalized militaries also tend to be professional. On the other hand, the potential for civilian control over the military is determined by the level of politicization of the military. The military elite in politicized militaries has significant influence on government and are engaged in policy making in non-military areas (Stepan, 1988: 9).

After the Arab Spring, Tunisia and Egypt managed a relatively smooth transition from peaceful protests to the overthrow of authoritarian regimes and the subsequent holding of the first free and fair elections. Egypt possesses a very large military that is highly institutionalized and professional with a long history of political engagement and an institutional culture that doesn't accommodate the notion of civilian supremacy. The Egyptian military wields substantial political and economic influence, controlling significant sectors of the economy. Post 2011, it has acted as a rational actor, prioritizing institutional survival and consolidation of power. By stepping into the political vacuum after Mubarak's fall, the military strategically positioned itself as a stabilizing force while safeguarding its political and economic interests. Though Egypt didn't manage to transition to democracy, the country maintained relative stability due to the military's dominance. The military's control over key political and economic sectors allowed it to suppress dissent and prevent large-scale unrest, positioning itself as the central authority in the post-2011 landscape.

Tunisia's military, on the other hand, played a constructive role in the country's smooth transition to democracy by maintaining its apolitical stance and refraining from intervening in the political process. It remained professional and focused on national security rather than pursuing political power. This stance was because of its limited capacity, which was a deliberate policy choice by the former regime to weaken the army's influence and prevent it from posing a threat to political power. Its refusal to support President Ben Ali during the 2011 uprising and its neutrality in the post-revolution period allowed civilian leaders and political actors to take the lead in shaping Tunisia's democratic path and its stability, albeit various challenges the country faces.

The cases of Tunisia and Egypt marked a significant divergence from the experiences of Libya, Yemen and Syria where similar protests led to protracted conflicts and state failure. In these countries, lack of professionalism and institutional cohesion within the military contributed to the rapid escalation of protests into violent conflicts and ultimately led to state failure. In addition, an important distinction among Libya, Yemen and Syria was that soon after the uprisings, soldiers turned their guns against protestors in Syria while they split in Libya and Yemen. This single factor could mostly account for the breakdown of the military establishment in Yemen and Libya while the government and military establishment still survive in Syria.

Both Yemen and Libya were characterized by rampant corruption and low levels of institutional development. Tribal affiliations are of utmost significance in the two states since Muammar Qaddafi and Abdullah Saleh, the former Libyan and Yemeni president, appointed their tribesmen and close relatives to key positions in the military and security commands. The military and security forces were divided into several units that had little contact with one another (Barany, 2011: 33). Their mission was to ensure regime survival. President Saleh made a number of concessions shortly after the outbreak of popular protests, including

lowering taxes, supplying food subsidies, raising civil service pay, and vowing that his son wouldn't succeed him (Ibid.). The crowds weren't convinced and demanded his resignation. The armed forces split in the face of the ensuing violence. Another factor contributing to divisions within the army was the desertion of General Ali Mohsen Al-Ahmar, a longtime ally of Saleh who fought Houthi separatists in the north. A large number of generals and soldiers joined Ahmar and declined to use force against protestors (Finn, 2011).

Like Yemen, the military split soon after the protests in Libya. In response to the uprisings Qaddafi unleashed his paramilitary groups on his adversaries. The regime trusted the security units or paramilitary forces which were commanded by Qadhafi's loyal men from his clan or close relatives rather than the military. In addition, the regime employed a variety of tactics to ensure the regular military's compliance, including threats and financial rewards, the removal of commanders who dared not use force against the rebels, and the incarceration of unit commanders' families. Shortly after the outbreak of the protests, Qaddafi placed top army commander Abu Bakr Yunis Jabr under house arrest and removed his brother-in-law Abdallah Senoussi from his position as head of the secret service as he suspected him of being disloyal (Barany, 2011: 34). Nevertheless, a sizable portion of the army and air force forces stationed in Kufra, Misrata, the Western Mountains, and Zawiya as well as the units positioned in and around Benghazi and Tobruk in eastern Libya left the army. As a result, Qadhafi recruited mercenaries from sub-Saharan Africa to make up for the shortage of loyal troops (Campbell, 2011). On the other hand, despite the support they received from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), rebel groups couldn't take over Tripoli and other important strongholds in Western Libya.

The splits in the Yemeni and Libyan armed forces are an effect of the many long-standing divisions in their respective societies. Tribal allegiance and kinship have dominated the political and military structures in both states. This is mostly the result of the penetration of tribal leaders and their men into the military and their occupying important positions. The military lacks an institutional face and coherent ideology to garner support from the masses. The armed forces were able to convince some segments of military to support the regime through coercion and bribery. The threats and bribes to ensure the loyalty of military to the regime further indicated the legitimacy crisis that these militaries went through. Meanwhile, in Libya uncertainty of the civil war and the worsening of conflicts encouraged people to turn to their tribal affiliations to safeguard their lives. In the absence of a coherent and united military, people are organized in tribal structures and tribal and self-declared militias are taking control and refuse to leave control to the central state government (Lamma, 2017: 57).

The Assad regime in Syria, on the other hand, had long been characterized as a coalition of minority groups, with the Alawite community forming its core base of support. This coalition includes other minorities, such as Christians and Druze, as well as segments of the Sunni population aligned with the regime for political or economic reasons. It comes as no surprise that soldiers remained loyal to the regime, as the Syrian officer corps was primarily composed of members of the Alawite sect, to which the Assad family belongs, along with other minority groups. Although Alawites represented only about fifteen percent of the population, they dominated the armed forces and held key positions in the state bureaucracy. This concentration of power among minorities, particularly Alawites, created longstanding tensions with the Sunni majority, who had been excluded from these influential roles for decades. To illustrate, positions including the Commander in Chief, the Ministry of Defense, the Commanders of the Military Corps, and the leaders of the intelligence branches of the

Ministry of Defense are occupied by officers belonging to Alawite sect (Al Mustafa, 2020). Assad also allowed military's partial economic involvement in the country to buy off their loyalty (Barany, 2011: 36). Having found that their future is linked to that of Assad family, the top brass sought to maintain Assad in power. Therefore, the military didn't refrain from using tanks and other heavy weapons against peaceful protestors in 2011. The fact that majority of the Syrian military is heavily politicized and serves Assad family rather than the Syrian people sparked the civil war.

The uprisings in Syria were driven by motives similar to other countries in the region, such as lack of political and civil liberties, economic inequality and injustice under Assad regime (Goldstone, 2011). However, within a short time, they began to be redefined by sectarian fault lines and characterized by mounting violence that led to the civil war (Wimmen, 2016). Unlike Yemen and Libya, the military didn't split into major factions, largely because it was predominantly composed of Alawite officers. Post-2011 Syria has been characterized by both sectarian (Alawites and other minority groups vs. Sunni majority) and ethnic (Kurds vs. Arabs) representation, which has enabled the integration of militia leaderships into the new order. The military and paramilitary groups of different ethnicities and sects got armed and forced the central government out of their towns and cities. Eventually, the protests that broke out to reflect demands for political and economic reforms gave their way to a long-lasting civil war.

The military's composition didn't represent society in any of these three states—Yemen, Libya, or Syria—and it served the regime rather than the general populace. Promotions within the military were often based on sectarian identity, clan ties, or tribal affiliations rather than merit, which hindered the development of a professional and institutionalized military structure. As a result, when faced with widespread protests and escalating violence, these militaries either fractured quickly, disrupting the chain of command, or remained loyal to the regime, even at the cost of alienating the majority of the population. Civil war became inevitable as the military lost legitimacy in the eyes of the public, coupled with the rapid proliferation of paramilitary groups.

Lack of Shared National Identity

National identities have been particularly decisive in times of transition. A nation-state is the first prerequisite for not only democratization but also state survival. In times of social upheavals, the presence of a shared national identity smooths the way for the establishment of a new political power. As Danwart Rustow rightly stated, "the people cannot decide until somebody decides who are the people" (Rustow, 1970: 350-51). National identity can be defined as identification with a particular nation-state based on shared history, culture, traditions, language, values and symbols. It plays a crucial role in fostering a sense of belonging and social unity and solidarity among citizens, which enables the fulfilment of collective action. In addition to enhancing physical security, national identity promotes economic growth, good governance, trust among citizens and support for strong social safety nets (Fukuyama, 2018: 5). In the absence of a shared national identity, people tend to define themselves in terms of their ethnic, religious, sectarian, or tribal affiliations, which fosters fragmentation along ethnic, religious, or regional lines during times of crisis. This fragmentation weakens the central government's ability to maintain control and manage conflicts peacefully. Moreover, groups that were marginalized or excluded from the political, economic or social mainstream may resort to violence to challenge the status quo and demand change.

The Arab uprisings brought an end to the enforced stability of authoritarian regimes, exposing long-standing grievances and deep-seated tensions rooted in ethnicity, religion, and sectarianism across post-Arab Spring countries. The post-2011 political landscape has manifested the countries which enjoy higher degree of homogeneity in their ethnic, or religious make-up and settled the nation question such as Tunisia and Egypt didn't face the threat of a civil war. On the other hand, countries lacking strong national identity such as Yemen, Syria, and Libya which have highly diverse ethnic, tribal, and religious populations, have quickly seen violent civil wars as a result of competition and conflict between various identity groups vying for power, recognition, or resources. Besides, while the former countries put their energy in implementing political reforms, holding elections, or drafting a new constitution, the latter had to overcome problems related to nationhood and social cohesion first.

The main challenge facing the states in the Arab Middle East has been the haphazard imposition of territorial boundaries under imperialism, which led to the mismatch between state and identity (Hinnebusch, 2006: 378). After the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the colonial powers created borders based largely on arbitrary lines among colonial states in Africa and the Middle East where almost none had previously existed. These new borders neglected existing divisions based on language, religion and ethnicity and people ended up in states which were nothing more than artificial constructs. Therefore, the effect of those artificial boundaries created during the colonial period was the incompatibility between identity communities and claimed territories. As a result of this forced division of the Arab world into small entities, important sub-state, and supra-state identities emerged weakening identification with a nation. Popular movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood and pan-Arabism, focusing on themes of identity and unity, filled the void left by these states' lack of a distinct national identity. Such movements inspired by supra-state identities or intercommunal strife are often regarded as a threat to the integrity of the state (Ibid.). The trajectory of the Arab uprisings indicated that the failure to achieve a shared national identity, particularly vis-à-vis religious, racial, and ethnic divisions led to legitimacy crisis for several Arab republics (Shehata, 2014: 89).

In the absence of nationalism, political parties and institutions often play a complex and detrimental role in exacerbating existing challenges. The make-up of political parties is often predicated on fragmentation along ethnic, religious, sectarian, or regional lines. This fragmentation further impedes efforts to build national consensus and stability. In addition, such political parties engage more in corruption, clientelism and patronage using state sources to maintain power while hindering development and governance based on merit. Unlike states that have strong sense of national identity, political parties in ethnically, religiously, or tribally fragmented societies are also more likely to put forth programs targeting specific communities and aiming to distribute resources without founding accountable institutions. In their piece, Ellen Lust and David Waldner observed two main cleavages in the contemporary Middle East:

> "First, universalistic- transformative cleavages, in which parties have programs that affect the entire political community and aim to revise substantially a large subset of political, economic, or sociocultural norms and institutions; and second, particularistic-redistributive cleavages, in which parties make more highly targeted claims to specific sub-communities and seek intra-communal redistribution of resources without necessarily reshaping norms and institutions. Universalist-transformative cleavages became the dominant motives for political mobilization and party politics in Egypt and Tunisia, while the political dynamics of particularistic-redistributive cleavages predominate in Iraq and Libya." (Ellison, 2015: 9)

Historically, Syria hosted a society of overlapping and conflicting identities belonging to different regions, ethnicities, religions, and sects, all of which are fighting for the allegiance of the populace (Hitti, 1959: 31-250). In 1945, when the French mandate came to an end, people from different Levantine cities were declared to be Syrians. The country went through several coups staged by generals until Hafez Al-Assad assumed full control over Syria in 1980. Assad engineered a new identity called Baathism based on pan-Arab socialism. The secular ideology of Baathism depended on Arab nationalism, which promoted the creation and development of a unified Arab state among all Arabs and Arab socialism through a socialist revolutionary government. Hafez Al-Assad and his son Bashar Al-Assad have ruled the country through this tacit social contract which can be defined as Assadism. In return for absolute loyalty to the regime, Assad pledges ideological façade of solidarity and unity (Kahler, 2017). This new identity has been quite a perplexing one given that a family belonging to a minority group ruled a society that is predominantly made up of Sunni Arabs. Alawites made up the urban elite, the military, the security apparatus, the ruling party bureaucracy, and a privileged tribe. The Sunni majority, on the other hand, mostly comes from Syria's impoverished rural hinterlands along the cost and in the mountainous northwest (Zambelis, 2015). Apart from the powerful Sunni merchant class located in cities like Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, and Hama with whom the regime enhanced new networks of support, there was little social upward mobility and political clout for non-Alawites.

The prominent position of a group of Alawites doesn't mean that the rest of the community was endowed with the same privileges. Under Baathist rule, they were subject to repression, poverty, and marginalization as the majority of Syrians (Batatu, 1999: 226-230). Indeed, what enabled most Alawites to stand firmly behind Assad was the regime's constant manipulation of the Alawite sectarian insecurity and its attempt to manifest the Baathist regime as the key pillar of their stability and security (Goldsmith, 2011: 33-60). On the other hand, the opposition was severely fragmented and failed to make up a united front against the regime. Eventually, the diversity of the Syrian population in terms of ethnicity, tribe and sect, and the failure to build a Syrian nation out of this diversity catalyzed a multiparty civil war where each community aimed to ensure its own security and maximize its interests.

Similar to Syria, Libya is a relatively new state devoid of a shared national identity and unity among its citizens. Tripolitania, Fezzan, and Cyrenaica—the three regions that traditionally made up Libya—were each associated with a distinct state. While Tripolitania was situated in Tunisia, Cyrenaica had strong ties to Egypt and the province of Fezzan was part of Sahara Desert with Berber population (Danahar, 2013: 334). Likewise, they fell into different political units under the Ottoman Empire, and each had distinct political, economic and religious traditions. Since Libya gained its independence in 1952 after a resolution passed by the United Nations, there has been almost no initiative by the monarchy to foster national identity. After 1969 coup, Muammar Qaddafi assumed power and joined the group of pan-Arab, socialist, revolutionary Arab republics with a heavy emphasis on Arab unity, nationalism and anti-colonialism. This supra-national identity was not adopted by majority of the population. Instead, tribal interests prevailed, and cleavages that existed along tribalism, ethnic identity, and regionalism made civil war the most likely case in the face of popular protests.

Yemen is another country where shared national identity is almost non-existent. Yemeni tribes have been integral to the political, economic, military and even legal domains. In regions with a strong tribal heritage, the state system has been replaced by the tribal judiciary system and tribes even act as a bridge between the state and community in such regions

(Bonnefoy and Poirier, 2009: 6-9). Therefore, Yemeni people developed a sense of belonging and loyalty to their tribe instead of the state. The tribal system is predicated on maintaining rigid lineage-based social structure in which all the members should stick to rules, respond to the demands of the tribe and maintain *Sharaf al-qabila* (the honor of the tribe) against opponents (Swagman, 1988: 251-261). National and even socialist governments failed to undermine tribal structures and hence, were compelled to cooperate with them. Tribes assist their fellow tribesmen in resolving administrative issues, organized people around certain causes and ensure their non-commercial interests (Bonnefoy, and Poirier, 2009: 7).

Since the Saudi-led coalition launched its military operation in 2015, the civil war in Yemen has been characterized by an increasingly sectarian tone as well as tribal one (Al-Muslimi and Baron, 2016). The country is home to two major religious groups; Zaydis (a sub-branch of Shia Muslims) in the north and Sunni Muslims in the south. The removal of Saleh from power created a power vacuum which was filled with sect-driven opposition group, the Houthis, Shia Islamist political and military organization located in northern Yemen. Sectarian affiliation was particularly decisive in the distribution of political and material benefits in Houthi-controlled areas. In 2015, the Saudi-led operation sought to reverse Houthi gains and reinstate Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, the former president. However, years of fighting led to thousands of civilian casualties and displaced millions of people with no decisive military victory by either side. Houthi insurgents still control the capital Sanaa and northern Yemen mostly while the southern provinces are controlled by pro-Hadi forces or southern separatists backed by the United Arab Emirates. The rise of the Houthi insurgency in the north and the capital, and the Islah Party's fight against the rebellion along with their support for the Saudi intervention has paved the way for gradual convergence of people around their sectarian affiliations. With the ensuing conflict after the Arab Spring, Yemeni society has been reorganized along sectarian lines and plagued by sectarian polarization which began to shape people's relations to one another (Al-Muslimi, 2015).

The ongoing civil wars in Libya, Yemen and Syria are striking examples where the absence of a shared national identity led to fragmented groups pursuing their own political agendas and vying for power. This fragmentation eventually weakened states' ability to govern effectively, creating a power vacuum that various factions might seek to fill through armament. It also led people to identify more strongly with their ethnic, religious, sectarian or tribal groups, which created deep divisions within these societies. Finally, governments in such states often struggle with legitimacy crisis as citizens don't see them representative of the national project and are more likely to challenge the government's legitimacy.

External Intervention

Contrary to international conflicts, or wars between two or among multiple states that usually last short, civil wars are prolonged. Research on the political and economic factors that influence civil wars has shown that, once a civil war breaks out, the rebels' and the government's relative military might play a crucial role in determining the duration of the conflict (Elbadawi and Sambanis, 2000). The cohesiveness of the rebels and their capacity to withstand attempts by the government to split them up into opposing factions are decisive in determining this balance, at least in part. In other words, the ability of the rebel movement to maintain itself, and elude military defeat essentially determines how long the war will last.

According to Collier et al., an important determiner of the rebels' ability to maintain their movement is the degree of societal fragmentation; that is, in polarized societies, given the

ethnic, religious or cultural divide, mobilization for rebels and sustaining support among their group is much easier and efficient than homogenous societies (Collier, Hoeffler and Söderbom, 2004: 253–73). Likewise, it becomes harder for the central government to maintain unity and cohesion in such societies.

Another determinant that impacts the likelihood of a civil war and its duration is external intervention. Elbadawi and Sambanis define external intervention as "a unilateral intervention by one (or more) third party government(s) in a civil war in the form of military, economic or mixed assistance in favor of either the government or the rebel movement involved in the civil war" (Elbadawi and Sambanis, 2000: 8). There are mainly two types of external interventions: First, indirect interventions support armed militias, terrorist groups, or political parties to overthrow the regime, or to support a state's military to sustain the regime, and direct interventions that emerge in the form of sending units of national army or the army of an international organization. Rarely international organizations can intervene to resolve conflicts or make peace. A third and more recent phenomenon in external intervention is "proxy war" in which the intervening state trains paramilitary forces, or state or non-state armed groups, supplies them weapons and sends them to the targeted country which faces internal conflict.

Prior to the Arab Spring, except for Yemen, Middle Eastern and North African countries didn't meet the characteristics of countries facing the risk of civil war Ianchovichina and Abu Bader, 2018). The popular protests garnered support from all segments of the society due to general discontent with the decline in the living standards of the middle and lower classes and scarcity of jobs in the formal sector. Yet, the existence of social divisions within countries like Syria, Yemen and Libya have been exploited by external actors. Ethnic, tribal and sectarian divisions have been exacerbated by direct or indirect external interventions, contributing to prolonged conflict. Regional powers viewed the Arab Spring as an opportunity to expand their sphere of political and military clout in the region. As interventions have been biased toward specific rebel factions rather than maintaining neutrality, they have significantly increased the likelihood of civil war.

Even in the absence of political institutions, in 2011, popular protests broke out in Libya. Protests soon drifted into an armed combat between military forces that remained loyal to Qaddafi and opponent groups and their militias. The UN Security Council resolution 1973 enabled the NATO to intervene in response to the instability, leading to the killing of Qaddafi. While framed as a humanitarian mission to prevent mass atrocities and protect civilians under the United Nations' Responsibility to Protect doctrine, the intervention also reflected the strategic and economic interests of Western powers. Libya's vast oil reserves and its geopolitical position in North Africa made the country a significant area of interest for Western states. The intervention ensured that Western nations would maintain influence over Libya's natural resources and political trajectory post-Qaddafi. Moreover, the intervention can be viewed as part of a broader strategy to reshape the region in accordance with Western preferences. The swift military intervention, coupled with the lack of a comprehensive post-intervention strategy, reflects a prioritization of regime change over genuine concern for long-term stability or the well-being of Libyan citizens.

Libya was left on its own to resolve its problems since no country was willing to commit to another long-lasting war like those in Afghanistan and Iraq (Ottoway, 2022). The NATO intervention had two important consequences: First, NATO's support for the rebels against Qaddafi led to his quick overthrow, yet without any political will for long-lasting

engagement, the collapse of the regime was superseded by a civil war among various factions seeking to take over. Second, the fall of Qaddafi created a power vacuum that was quickly filled by various rebel, paramilitary, and terrorist groups, each receiving funding and support from different states or organizations. The threat that the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) posed to the West as a result of terrorism and illegal migration served as a tool for justification for the continued Western intervention in Libya (Zoubir, 2020: 13). In 2014, the self-proclaimed Marshall Khalifa Haftar rallied militias and rose against the UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli, which initiated the second civil war. National reconciliation has become a remote possibility since external powers like Russia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and France have provided full support to the Libyan National Army (LNA) led by Haftar seeking to fully control Libya while other countries like Türkiye and Qatar have backed the UN-recognized GNA. The financial and military support provided by external actors to the rebel forces not only lengthened the duration of the war but also turned it into a proxy war in which both parties depend on foreign support to stave off the other.

In Yemen, dissatisfied with the decisions taken by the Hadi government and the new constitution, the Houthis, a militant group trained and funded by Iran, organized large-scale protests. After Hadi's provisional government ran its course in 2015, they seized power in the capital, took over the Yemeni government and drafted a new constitution. This move was condemned by Saudi Arabia as an unlawful coup d'etat (Reuters, 2015). Following the failure of the UN mediation efforts in crafting a power-sharing agreement under a new transitional government, tensions between government forces, Houthi rebels, and other armed groups intensified. Yemeni president Mansur Hadi had to escape to Saudi Arabia. In March 2015, a coalition of nine countries from the MENA region led by Saudi Arabia launched an intervention in Yemen at Hadi's request[3]. The Saudi intervention prompted the Houthis to enhance their relationship with Iran and they acquired greater strength on the ground and expanded the areas they controlled. The United Arab Emirates, on the other hand, shifted its policy and views the separatists in the south as a viable solution to the ongoing conflict. Eventually, Yemen has been deadlocked in the power plays among different groups, each seeking to expand their areas of control. Yemen stands as a striking example of a country under proxy war where external intervention has not only altered the balance of power but also substantially intensified and prolonged the civil war.

Since 2011, Syria has faced terrible succession of conflicts, one of which was a government-waged struggle against its own people. Peaceful protest movement soon escalated into an armed uprising which turned into a wide-scale proxy war in the years that followed. The settlement of the conflict seems a long shot since a multitude of domestic and foreign militias along with five regional and global powers-the US, Israel, Iran and Russia- with irreconcilable interests have a military presence in the country (Asseburg, 2020: 7). The Syrian crisis was viewed as an opportunity by the Arab Gulf States led by Saudi Arabia as it would enable them to reverse Tehran's significant expansion of influence since the 2003 Iraq War and redesign the balance of power. The Islamic Republic of Iran viewed the power struggle in Syria as a deliberate attempt by the US and Israel to overthrow the regime in Tehran (Asseburg, 2013: 18). Iran has firmly supported the Assad regime which has been a key ally to the Islamic Republic financially and militarily. The rebels, on the other hand, have received immense

[3] The coalition includes Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Qatar, Sudan, and the United Arab Emirates.

financial, logistical and political support from the US, the UK, and the Arab Gulf States. Türkiye intervened militarily since 2016 along with the allied Syrian National Army to preclude a contiguous Kurdish autonomous administration under the control of the PYD, a branch of the PKK which has long been listed as a terrorist organization internationally. Russia has stood behind the Syrian regime as it has been a long-time ally since the Cold War era and continues to support the regime to challenge the order the West is trying to impose.

From a military standpoint, the intervention of Russia and Iran has long settled the civil war in favor of the Assad government. Approximately two thirds of Syria is under the authority of the Syrian regime and its allies. Yet, radical Islamist groups, terrorist organizations and Shia militia groups, each funded by different countries and organizations, and the flow of foreign fighters have destabilized the security landscape of the country and beclouded prospects for a peaceful settlement of the conflict. Moreover, the political and military support given by competing external powers fueled the sectarian narrative and sparked identity clashes among Syrians (Phillips, 2015: 370). These powers instrumentalized sectarian identities while seeking to maximize their political interests in the region.

In short, the cases of Libya, Yemen and Syria have indicated that external intervention in the form of political, financial and military support can further weaken central authority and inflame a civil war. Once a civil war breaks out, state and non-state actors including paramilitary organizations and rebel groups compete for power exacerbating the existing ethnic, tribal and sectarian divisions. The continuous external support provided to them eventually fuels a protracted conflict.

Conclusion

The interplay of fragmented militaries, a weak or non-existent national identity, and external interventions is central to understanding the outbreak and persistence of civil wars, as exemplified by the cases of Libya, Yemen, and Syria. These dynamics are deeply interconnected, reinforcing each other in ways that create a self-sustaining cycle of instability and prolonged conflict.

In Syria, Yemen and Libya, the armed forces lacked professionalism and institutionalization, functioning more as tools for the ruling elites rather than as impartial defenders of the state. This prioritization of loyalty over merit resulted in weak military structures that were ill-equipped to handle domestic unrest. Military fragmentation, whether through splintering into rival factions or standing firmly behind an unpopular regime, destabilized central authority. The absence of a unified military command created a vacuum that armed groups, including rebels and paramilitaries, quickly exploited. This lack of a cohesive military apparatus perpetuates conflict by fostering an environment where no single entity holds the monopoly on violence, a fundamental requirement for state stability.

The absence of a shared national identity further exacerbates state fragility. Societal divisions along ethnic, sectarian, or tribal lines deepen mistrust between different groups, weakening any sense of collective belonging to a unified state. In Libya, Yemen, and Syria, identity politics have fueled competing visions for the state, making it nearly impossible to unify around a common national project. Instead, rival factions have often prioritized their group's interests over national unity, contributing to protracted internal conflicts. A cohesive national identity serves as a stabilizing factor, and its absence undermines the legitimacy of the central government, encouraging separatism, rebellion, and fragmentation.

Foreign interventions have turned civil wars into proxy battlegrounds for regional and global powers. In Libya, Yemen, and Syria, foreign actors have supplied arms, funding, and political support to rival factions, prolonging the conflicts. External involvement often prioritizes the strategic and ideological interests of intervening states over the well-being of the local population. This fosters dependency among warring factions, reducing incentives for negotiated settlements or genuine peace-building efforts. Moreover, these interventions exacerbate existing divisions and contribute to the regionalization of conflicts, further destabilizing neighboring states and undermining long-term peace prospects.

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