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# **THE ECONOMY OF SHIITE MILITIAS AND ITS IMPACT ON REGIONAL SECURITY**

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## **ABSTRACT**

**T**he phenomenon of militias in the Arab countries is a point of curiosity among researchers, analysts, think tanks and decision-makers. However, previous studies done, despite having divergent analytical tools, focused heavily on security and political aspects. Therefore, this study attempts to fill an important gap in the existing studies by addressing the economic aspects of this phenomenon, however in a framework that does not exclude its political and security aspects. The economic activities of militias are of a hidden, secret and clandestine nature, so it is hard to provide accurate tallies and estimates of their volume. But it is possible to identify the nature of the legal and illegal economic activities of these militias, both locally and internationally. There are many specialized reports that have been prepared by credible international bodies. The data available from multiple sources can be compared to draw general conclusions concerning the economic activities of Shiite militias, with a view to examining their present and future impact on the militias, as well as, their implications for regional security.

There are many studies that have analyzed the phenomena of armed militias in the Arab region. However, this study focuses in particular on the study of Shiite militias in the Arab world. Its focus is on studying the impact of the economic factor on the growth of the activities of these militias during the period from 2011 to 2018. The study raises a number of questions about the present and future of these militias: to what extent are Shiite militias dependent on permanent and sufficient resources to cover the cost of their activities at the domestic and regional levels, and to what extent is their control over economic resources and illegal activities a threat to regional security? What are the likely future paths of Shiite militias in the Arab Mashriq considering a possibility of an expansion or contraction in their economic influence? To what extent can some conclusions and measures be taken to counter their illegal economic activities and deal with the threats they pose in the Arab region? This study will answer these questions through four main axes as follows:

### **First: the Shiite militias in the Mashriq**

The origin of the term militia in political literature refers to the ancient Latin language miles or milit, which means "armed man or warrior who takes up arms for money." French researchers used the term malice as a very old term. It means specifically a semi-official or private armed organization.<sup>(1)</sup> The term "armed organization" or "armed group" is used in the Arabic language. It is an irregular force operating through guerrilla warfare tactics, unlike regular army fighters. They are also known as groups of citizens who are trained militarily to support regular armies or to wage civil war.<sup>(2)</sup>

Based on other encyclopedias and lexicons, particularly the French-Latin lexicon *Quicherater Daveluy*, published in 1932, the term militia means a military operation carried out by mercenaries through a military campaign.<sup>(3)</sup> The *Encarta Dictionary* has referred to militia as an army of civilian soldiers, but they train militarily and can serve full-time during emergencies. In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, militias are defined as "an organized body of people comparable to a military force."<sup>(4)</sup> Bradley Tatar has defined militias as a "fighting force" that has no loyalty to the state, unlike armies or police forces that are under governmental control. Lenin defined civilian militia as an independent armed organization. Charles Tilly called it an anti-government group that maintained practicing terrorism in its territory.<sup>(5)</sup> In the definitions of contemporary researchers, the term "militia" also means "a paramilitary force driven by a religious or political ideology, especially those engaging in insurgent or terrorist activities against a regular army." This definition is consistent with the American definition of the term since the early 1990s.<sup>(6)</sup>

Researchers deal with the phenomenon under different headings, such as "irregular armies," "parallel armies," "non-state actors," "armed non-state actors," "armed factions," "non-state armed groups," "irregular forces," "paramilitary forces," and "armed groups." These are synonymous terms and definitions that describe a phenomenon that is not recent, but they differed in setting a specific definition for the term. This is because most are influenced by their affiliations and political tendencies at the expense of objective criteria in dealing with the phenomenon. It is therefore useful to demarcate the conceptual boundaries between the concept of militias and other concepts such as mercenaries, who are warriors offering their services in return for money, and they include "death squads." They are secret organizations that practice indiscriminate killing to achieve political goals, but they may be small units within militias. The militias are different from insurgent movements. According to some studies, they are armed opposition groups and may be dissident forces that seek to overthrow the government, separate from the state or control a specific geographical area. But militias are primarily civilian, secondly irregular, and third, mobilized voluntarily on the basis of common identity. Militias could turn into rebels seeking to control part of state territory.<sup>(7)</sup>

The militias can then be defined as, "irregular forces formed to protect a regime, elite or

political group that may overthrow a regime or exclude a political elite or group from power. This means that they may be pro or anti state. Or they may be an armed wing of a political group or working independently.”<sup>(8)</sup> According to this definition, militias may be formed on a religious /tribal or national basis and employ religion /tribe / nationalism to enlist, recruit and mobilize.<sup>(9)</sup> It is important to distinguish between two types of militias, the pro-regime militias that are working to protect the regime from falling as is the case in Iraq. And opposition militias that may bring down and change the regime or pressure it to expand their participation, as well as, their political and economic share in the state, such as militias in Lebanon and Yemen.

Researchers have traced the historical roots of militias to the Roman Empire. The emperors formed so-called paramilitary militias to protect their empires. These irregular forces were able to influence the change and removal of emperors. This phenomenon has re-produced itself in modern history, especially in countries that lack adequate political institutions capable of running their affairs.<sup>(10)</sup>

However, Some researchers have traced the roots of this phenomenon to the pre nation state era. They argue that militias emerged side by side with the genesis of American colonies. In the old English tradition, the state relied on mobilizing civilian militias for military service.<sup>(11)</sup> Resistance militias appeared in countries such as France when Germany occupied it during World War II; in Austria after the First World War; in Italy during the interwar period, and in the Soviet Union during the Bolshevik Revolution. They also appeared in revolutionary regimes, and were used to offset any public reactions.<sup>(12)</sup> The demise of the Khmer Rouge era in Cambodia marked the end of militant violence in South East Asia, leaving little in the Philippines and beyond as well. In Latin America, the influence of militias was curbed considerably following the national struggle led by Che Guevara and Simon Bolivar, as well as in Central America after the end of American hostility in Nicaragua and Panama. In the Arab world and its geographical surroundings, militias exist in varying degrees in Turkey, Iran, Eritrea, South Sudan, and in non-Arab countries such as Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as, in Nigeria, Mali and Niger.<sup>(13)</sup>

However, we are in the process of reproducing the phenomenon in the Arab Mashriq region. There are internal, regional and international factors that have played a significant role in the emergence of Shiite militias, the most important is the crisis of state building and its legitimacy in countries ravaged by sectarian divisions.<sup>(14)</sup> This is in addition to the collapse of regular armies and the weakness of their capabilities, as well as, regional interventions, especially by Iran, that has been seeking to create Shiite entities loyal to its policy since the Iranian revolution<sup>(15)</sup> and conflict over economic resources, especially when identity has obvious advantages in resource distribution.

### **Second: Economy of Shiite militias in the Arab Mashriq**

The term “militia economy” is synonymous with a “shadow economy” or “hidden economy” because it is illegal and is run by militias beyond formal regulations, and is therefore an “irregular economy,” “parallel economy” or “informal economy” on the opposing side of the state’s economy, that operates within formal regulations.<sup>(16)</sup> The economy of Shiite militias can be defined as, “Every economic activity that generates income, revenue or profit, whether regulated or unregulated, is legal or illegal, including the imposition of illegal taxes and illegal trade such as drug trafficking and the smuggling of commodities such as diamonds and petroleum products, selling goods on the black market at prices below their real prices in the real market and other illegal activities.”

Many researchers have tried to study the influence of economic factors on the practices of militias, such as Paul Collier and Indra de Saisa in their chapter, “Doing Well Out of War: An Economic Perspective” in the book *Greed and Grievance*. They used quantitative statistical methods in their attempt to track down the effect of greed and grievance in violent conflict. The

results indicated that the variable of greed impacts that of grievance. Blatant religious divisions, old hatreds and other grievance related factors are not adequate in explaining why conflicts arise. They rather disguise the economic agendas of warlords. This leads crime to increase, and allows a small number of actors to control and monopolize the market easily. The struggle for profit margins is markedly exacerbated. Collier and de Saisa identified four distinctly different categories: business owners, traders, insurgents, criminals. Their study reached important results, the most important of which was that peace is achieved when its parties are the most influential and politically powerful than those who have an interest in continuing war.<sup>(17)</sup>

The aforementioned resounds with countries in the Arab Mashriq. During the civil wars the region experienced, the state lost its main apparatus, the army, which divided and fragmented. In the light of this, militia's arose and began to dominate territories, as well as, benefitting from the state's resources and involving themselves in killings, political cleansing and sectarianism.<sup>(18)</sup> The civil wars in Lebanon, Yemen, Iraq, and Syria led to a militaristic hierarchy, resulting from geographical and political spheres being fragmented, and militias taking over parts of the land, state, and its institutions. The 'spoils of war' logic in the mindset of militias was marked by countries being divided into several parts by the use of force to capture political and economic advantages.<sup>(19)</sup>

Laying the groundwork for a political process based on sectarian quotas in Lebanon since independence and in Iraq after the 2003 US occupation has had a great influence in making militias and their 'spoils of war' logic prevail at the political and economic levels.<sup>(20)</sup> These realities assert the importance of theoretical theses in providing an economic explanation and approach to the phenomenon of militias. Donald Horowitz found in an important study entitled "Ethnic Groups in Conflicts", the expansion of kinship networks in different ways makes the community more effective, and reduces the costs of making deals in establishing a sectarian political organization. Hence, the theory of deal-making costs provides an explanation for the economic incentives of Shiite militias involved in sectarian disputes and conflicts in the Arab Mashriq to arise and engage in their illegal activities.<sup>(21)</sup>

The logic that governs the practices of these militias is the logic of deals and compromises that require the sharing of spoils, which necessitates the continuation of war and fighting. According to this logic, mutual compromises between militias and their members is a must for them all to mutually benefit and exist. These militias provide their members with social services, financial assistance and salaries in return for political mobilization, military recruitment, and participation in fighting at home and abroad. The fighters pledge loyalty to these militias in return for the spoil of war they get. However, compromises between militia fighters and the state herald zero results when the state is facing harsh economic conditions making it unable to provide basic services for its citizens. Therefore, militias capitalize on these realities to take the state's place and to develop their own state within a state.<sup>(22)</sup>

One study concluded that militias are productive organizations that use traditional tools of production in their illicit activity,<sup>(23)</sup>s and are well aware of the importance of controlling economic resources and wealth in strengthening their influence. For militias, the state becomes a booty/bargain, and they struggle to control its resources and to cut off the largest possible part of its territory by various means, either by appropriation, the purchase of land or immigration and by settling in the capital and in its major cities. The Houthi militia is an example of a militia that exploits the civil war in Yemen to control most of the country's resources. The Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in Iraq felt the government's appropriations were not sufficient to meet its needs, which prompted them to engage in illegal activities such as drug trafficking and oil smuggling. In the meantime, Hezbollah is an example of a militia that managed to expand its economic clout to the largest possible extent. It exploited the instability in Lebanon, and regional volatility to invest in its illegal trade, and to secure alternative economic sources, as well

as, to mobilize diaspora communities and to secure external supply lines. It employed religious and sectarian discourse in its fundraising activities and when collecting the *Khoms*.

It is worth noting that these militias rely on religious fatwas to legitimize and justify their illegal economic activities. In Iraq, Moqtada al-Sadr encouraged this when he issued a fatwa in May 2003, saying that, "thieves can hold on to what they have seized as long as they have donated a fifth of its value to the local Sadr office."<sup>(24)</sup> War itself has become an important means of obtaining resources. Militias work to prolong wars to the maximum possible extent. Murder, ethnic cleansing and genocide are profitable practices because they allow militias to have more control over economic resources left by the victims, which, according to religious fatwas, are 'spoils of war.' Therefore, civil wars were an appropriate environment for Shiite militias to make money, through their political and military control over economic activities. Between 1975 and 1990, the fighting in the streets of Lebanese cities among the militias resulted in the looting of between \$5 and 7 billion, not to mention the theft of cars, which became a lucrative business in itself throughout the war. According to the records of the Lebanese police, about 1945 cars were stolen, mostly in Beirut in the first eight months alone in 1985.<sup>(25)</sup> During the war, drug cultivation increased by more than 40 percent of the arable area in the Shiite-dominated Bekaa Valley. To this day, it has been a very profitable economic activity, and it has many farms, which earns a great deal of profits. The militia-controlled sea ports. Lebanese militias imposed illegal fees on vehicles and goods as well as taxes on agricultural holdings, commercial and industrial companies, and self-employment.<sup>(26)</sup>

This is no different from the situation in Iraq. From 2003 to the present, smuggling of oil has become one of the most important activities and source of income for Iraqi militias.<sup>(27)</sup> More importantly, violence was mainly because of militias struggling to monopolize Iraq's oil.<sup>(28)</sup> In fact, the profits were enormous. Every militia was ready to use violence to strengthen its control, acting like "criminal gangs, there are no restrictions on violence, bloodshed and smuggling of oil."<sup>(29)</sup> Not only that, Iraqi militias imposed truck protection fees at a number of checkpoints. They generated between \$ 80,000 and \$ 100,000 a day.<sup>(30)</sup> Militias often resorted to financial blackmail, as they asked shopkeepers in the market to pay money for protection. Militias have made substantial money from collecting taxes on trade, reconstruction and oil smuggling.<sup>(31)</sup> The militias have even used violence to confiscate property belonging to the Sunni community. Some reports have indicated, for example, that Shiite militias have driven Sunnis out of their homes to control them. However, they have sometimes permitted displaced Shiites to resort to these homes. They sold or rented these houses to get the money. Violence and sectarian cleansing often have an economic motive. A car bomb in a Baghdad neighborhood was an economic activity aimed at destroying property records in the Directorate of Local Properties in an attempt to weaken the claims of displaced persons, and to seize and resell their property. Even in refugee camps, after NGOs had found it difficult to provide a stable supply of clean drinking water, the displaced were vulnerable to financial extortion by militias who brought in much-needed drinking water, but in return they demanded money. As a result, citizens had no choice but to pay for protection. The proceeds of violence, including protection fees, real estate sales and confiscated rents, boosted the revenues, resources and profits of Shiite militias in Iraq.<sup>(32)</sup>

In Yemen, the ongoing war with the central government provided tremendous opportunities for the Houthis to explore sources of income and funding to support the war effort and to secure tribal alliances. It sought to control state resources, oil and fuel supplies, distribution systems, and illegal taxation since seizing control of the capital Sana'a in 2014. According to some researchers, the Houthis since they took over Saada levied and collected zakat from citizens instead of the state. Although there are excellent economic sources in Saada such as agriculture, crafts and livestock trade, the Houthis never thought of engaging in any productive economic activity to finance their activities. As they entered Sana'a, the Houthi economy moved from "levying" to "war booty."<sup>(33)</sup>

### **Third: the impact of the militias' economy on regional security**

The danger of the expansion of the militia economy lies in threatening political and economic stability in the Arab countries. The practices of militias to cover the cost of their military interventions leads to economic resources being depleted, and a continuous threat to public interests and to state armies, institutions, and apparatuses. Also, this leads to creating a continuous state of tension and a constant threat of direct confrontation and regional war. The militias are dependent on violence and wars to obtain resources to cover their social and political activities. Thus, the economy of the Shiite militias is linked to irregular wars or what is known in security studies as "hybrid war" or "asymmetrical war" and "proxy war." They are unequal wars between states and militias.<sup>(34)</sup> This makes them as one of the most important tools to destroy Arab countries from within.<sup>(35)</sup> Arab countries are engaged in an irregular war, and it is difficult to avoid engagement or involvement.<sup>(36)</sup> Unmatched threats have become one of the most realistic threats to Gulf security. These threats include attacks on infrastructure and on economic and oil installations. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is therefore facing security problems because of the location of desalination plants on or near the Arabian Gulf coast, which increases its exposure to threats from Iran which is supportive of militias across the region.<sup>(37)</sup>

The danger of the economic factor lies in the fact that wars wet the appetite of militias to control the greatest amount of resources. Consequently, the economic motives of militias often prolong regional conflicts, and the countries involved in them incur a heavy economic loss, which accelerates the depletion of their resources which are supposed to be used in investment and development projects. Some Arab countries expend a considerable amount on security and military action to confront militias.

It is worth mentioning that the economy of the Shiite militias is associated with more severe threats. The resources and illegal activities of these militias support their financing of terrorism, military operations, their training and arming of fighters, as well as, paying for mercenaries and new recruits.. They also spend on propaganda, to recruit, and to ideologically and intellectually influence, as well as, to build legitimacy for their role and activities. In any event, national sovereignty in the light of the growing activities of armed militias is no longer of particular importance and sacredness. Some regional and international forces have been supporting these militias in a way that has contributed to the transformation of armed conflicts from internal to extended regional conflicts.<sup>(38)</sup>

Among the most important threats facing the Arab countries, especially Bahrain and Kuwait, is the return of Shiite fighters from Iraq and Syria.<sup>(39)</sup> The danger posed by these Shiite fighters is that their loyalty is to external forces and they could be used to stir internal troubles and revolts against host governments.

### **Fourth: the future trajectories and regional role of Shiite militias**

There are international, regional and internal factors affecting the future of militias and their regional role. The international position towards Shiite militias is still hesitant and tactical and it deals with each situation according to priorities set by leading powers, not in accordance with security considerations. Despite the passage of several resolutions by the United Nations Security Council, demanding the disarming of Hezbollah, the international community is still unable to take firm and effective measures to enforce these resolutions.<sup>(40)</sup> Mostly, international efforts have focused on imposing international sanctions on Shiite militias, particularly Hezbollah and its affiliates, but the international community has been reluctant to tighten its sanctions because of its interest in reaching an agreement with Iran over its nuclear program, and sometimes it has ignored Hezbollah's activity inside its territories for its strategic priorities.<sup>(41)</sup> The US policy towards Hezbollah is not the same as its policy for Shiite militias in Iraq and Yemen, because it deals with these militias according to the priorities of its interests in each country. The position

of the European Union (EU) is still in the air despite militias carrying out terrorist attacks in Europe.<sup>(42)</sup> The EU's classification of Hezbollah as a terrorist organization is therefore vital, because the EU's reluctance to do so will increase the militias economic influence, which is a threat to European security.<sup>(43)</sup>

In the meantime, the regional situation reflects a perpetual state of conflict, especially between Iran and the Arab countries, as the Iranian perspective is different from the Arab perspective on the concept of regional security. However, some Arab countries have taken a neutral position towards the Iran-Gulf conflict in the region. There is still hope for a firm Arab role towards Iran's practices through the Arab alliance, which is now expressing a unified Arab position towards Iranian violations.<sup>(44)</sup> As for internal and national factors, especially the national crisis in Lebanon, Yemen and Iraq, it remains a major challenge to regional security because it represents a political opportunity for Shiite militias to increase their activities. These militias continue to face the sanctions imposed on them, whether by some Western countries or some Arab countries, because of their success in maintaining their economic networks and activities to ensure their viability in the future. In Lebanon, Hezbollah suffers from sanctions imposed on its economic activity.<sup>(45)</sup> Lebanese banks have closed the accounts of individuals and their affiliates in compliance with US law. Civil and regional wars have drained many militias economically and militarily, leaving them vulnerable to the recent Israeli military airstrikes in Syria, which increased following the US withdrawal from the nuclear agreement in May 2018. Thus, by assessing the economic, political and military situation of these militias, we can identify three main scenarios: the regional expansion of Shiite militias and a growth in their economic influence; the declining role of militias and their economic influence; and finally, militias turning into rebels and economic mafias.

#### **The first scenario: the regional spillover of Shiite militias and a growth in their influence**

It is based on the perception that these militias still possess and control enough resources to enable them not only to continue fighting at home but to expand influence across the regional arena. They can hide, search for alternative sources or relocate to other areas, to evade sanctions and to maintain a permanent source of their activities.

The supporters of this scenario believe that these militias have strengthened their political presence within the institutions of the state, and strengthened their military and economic control, benefiting from the weakness of competing forces and from the depletion of the state's resources and its weak institutions.<sup>(46)</sup> They cited the results of the legislative elections in Lebanon and Iraq (May 2018), which resulted in a great victory for the Shiite parties, as well as, the political arms of the militias.

#### **The second scenario: declining role of militias and their economic clout**

The perception is that these militias are facing an economic crisis because of the depletion of their resources, military equipment, human losses and the high cost of continuing regional wars, especially as international sanctions have been imposed on some militias and their activities at home and abroad. In light of these realities, the regional role of some militias will decline, as well as, their economic influence at home and abroad.

This is in addition to the increased international and regional coordination to combat illegal drug trafficking, money laundering, arms trade and smuggling in Latin America, Europe, Africa and North America. This coordination will provide an economic blow to some militias and their activities and influence.

#### **The third scenario: rebel militias and economic mafias**

It is based on the perception that these militias will continue to function as rebel militias and as cross-border militias, but will not be able to engage in direct regional confrontation. But they will

carry out guerilla-style warfare attacks targeting infrastructure and oil fields in the Gulf Arab region. This scenario suggests that these militias will still have some economic influence, and their focus abroad will be on illegal trade, so they will act similar to criminal gangs and economic mafia. This scenario also suggests that these militias will lose Iranian support for one reason or another, such as the Iranian regimes domestic situation that would lead t to its fall either through a popular revolution, a military coup or a military defeat by an international or regional power. Or Iran's foreign policy may change as a result of international and regional pressure declining and it in turn may give up its support for Shiite militias as part of a deal with Western countries.

In any case, the first scenario seems far-fetched, as these militias are already facing recurrent financial crises in Lebanon, Yemen and Iraq, as their economic influence is undermined by international sanctions in Lebanon or coalition military strikes in Yemen, making their resources insufficient to continue their operations.

Therefore, the likely scenario for the future role of these militias will remain limited between the second and third scenarios, depending on the nature of each case. Their future course will be one of declining regional influence as a result of their shrinking economic influence. Or there is a strong possibility that these militias will turn into rebel militias, operating like criminal gangs to seize or destroy resources to deprive adversaries from taking advantage of them.

## **Conclusion**

The economy of Shiite militias is a threat to regional security, because their illegal economic activities makes them able to finance their military operations and clandestine activities in Arab countries. Therefore, confrontation with these militias must be a comprehensive one. Its economy must be targeted at all levels.

At the legislative level, Arab and international efforts should focus on taking legislative measures to prevent fundraising activities in mosques and restrictions on the activity of charities operating under the guise of humanitarian action that raise funds to finance these militias, thereby allowing militias to increase their activities and economic resources. Legal oversight should be imposed to limit the transfer of funds abroad. Consideration should be given to the formation of committees of moderate Shiite clerics to monitor the spending of the Khoms collected, to channel these funds to serve the Shiite population at home and to ensure that they are not used in the activities of militias. Arab States must work through the League of Arab States and regional organizations to curb and criminalize the illegal activity of these militias, particularly the drug trade and money laundering. They should also take security measures through confiscating the funds of companies and institutions affiliated with these militias and prevent banks from dealing with their members. The capacity of the country to counter the militias must be strengthened by providing more development assistance that will strengthen its role in confronting these militias, which are trying to act as an alternative to the state.

At the military level, the capabilities of regular armies in the Arab world must be supported and strengthened so that they can play their role in protecting internal security and protecting the state against external threats. International agreements prohibiting the sale of weapons to militias in areas of conflict must be concluded.

At the political level, Arab efforts should focus on convincing the international community that these militias should be disarmed in accordance with UN resolutions. Arab efforts should persuade international powers to refrain from selective policies when it comes to criminalizing these militias. A unified international position should be taken against them, because they not only target Arab security but international security in general. Economic sanctions should therefore continue to be imposed on the activities and entities that finance these militias. In this context, it is important to intensify contacts with moderate Shiite forces and to hold an international conference to criminalize the activity of armed militias, whether Sunni or Shiite.

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