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Vanda Felbab-Brown [00:00:18] Thank you for joining us today. I am Dr. Vanda Felbab-Brown, senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, where I direct the Initiative on Nonstate Armed Actors and illicit economies and direct our Africa Security Initiative. In 2022, U.S. policy and much of the world have been preoccupied with great power issues. Of course, Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine, but also US-China competition in the Asia-Pacific region. The issues of terrorism, state fragilities are prioritized today in a very different ways than they were during the first two decades after 911. They are prioritized differently than great power competition issues.

But just as over the past two decades, when terrorism and non-state actors, illegal economies and state fragility dominated the issues of great powers and their focus and after 911, the world was not devoid of great power, politics and geopolitical competition, today, the issues of state fragility, non-state armed actors have not gone away, even as many of the non-state actors have in fact become state actors. The Taliban one took over in Afghanistan and in much of the Middle East, many of the militias are deeply integrated, not just into politics, but into official institutions and governing structures. And in many ways, however, we are in a Back to the Future moment where great power competition has removed some of the key precepts of the post-9-11 era, and we are back to some of the Cold War dynamics of my non-state armed enemy being my rival's friend. And the consensus that non-state actors and foreign fighters are to be uniformly opposed, is no longer shared by great powers who pick their friends and counter their enemies.

And this is, of course, taking place also in the context of the intense regional rivalries that just as the geopolitical competition also impinge on conflict mitigation and resolution. And the very strong legacy of COVID 19, weakening governments and strengthening criminal and militant groups around the world has hardly gone away. Yet at the same time, we have been seeing dramatic developments in Libya, Yemen, Iraq and significant events in Syria over the past year, all of which we are, in the recent months, all of which we are going to explore today with a very terrific panel. Across these countries, the great power competition, Russia's invasion of Ukraine have been strongly felt, in many ways, including in terms of humanitarian impact, food crises, very high, food prices, even more acutely downturn, economies much harder for countries to find ways to cooperate with each other to help resolve conflicts.

So we have an absolutely terrific panel today to explore with us how the geopolitical dynamics, as well as local issues, have impacted non-state armed actors in Syria, in Libya, Syria and

Yemen. We were also supposed to explore those issues in Iraq, where much has been happening in the Shia house, very dramatic developments with profound implications for Saraya Salam, Sadr's party, [inaudible] as well as ISIS. But unfortunately our colleague Dr. Ranj Alaaldin then ended up being stuck on airplanes and may not be able to join us. I hope he might be able to come in just for a little bit.

Let me first start with Libya. I'm absolutely thrilled that we will have the opportunity to hear from my colleague at Brookings, Ms. Stephanie Turco Williams, who is a nonresident senior fellow in the Center for Middle East Policy in the Brookings Institution, and who just brings an enormous wealth of experience and insight into Libya. She recently served as a special adviser on Libya to the United Nations secretary general, and prior to that served as the acting special representative of the Secretary General for Libya and the head of the U.N. support mission in Libya. During her tenure as the special, as the acting special representative, Ms. Williams led the United Nations mediations that resulted in a nationwide Libyan ceasefire on October 23, 2020, and the political agreement on February 5, 2021. Major accomplishments. Prior to joining the UN mission, Ms. Williams served as the US, in the UN, for US Foreign Service with the career focused on the Middle East. She headed the US embassy in Libya prior to her retirement with the rank of minister counselor and she also served as the Deputy Chief of Mission at the U.S. embassies in Iraq and Jordan and was the chargé d'affaires at the U.S. Embassy in Bahrain during the Arab Spring. She served in other important positions in the Near Eastern Affairs Bureau and was the recipient of several Superior Honor Awards during her tenure at the State Department.

So, Ms. Williams, you fostered a major breakthrough in the Libyan context. Yet at the same time, those national unity achievements now seem quite far away. Elections have not been held in fighting at the expense of the Libyan people, has been on full force this year, breaking out into violent skirmishes. And the geopolitical dimensions remain complex. Certainly if foreign forces have not departed from Libya, including the Wagner group. Can you please tell us where we are in Libya and how non-State armed actors and hybrid actors have fared in this environment.

Stephanie Williams [00:07:07] Thanks so much, Vanda. Thanks to Brookings. And I'm really pleased to be on this very distinguished all women panel to talk about the various cases in the Middle East and North Africa. And thank you for the opportunity to talk about Libya. So I always like to start with the glass half full, which is the fact that the ceasefire that was signed under U.N. auspices in

October 2020 is still broadly holding. And that's, that's very important. It's critical that it is preserved because that gives the mediator the space to work with other Libyans on the overall peace process. In the case of non-state actors, I think to contextualize this for the Libyan case, we're really talking about hybrid actors.

'So in Libya, which is a rentier economy, where over 97% of the revenues are derived from one resource, oil and 80% of the Libyan working age population draws a salary from the state, what we have is the phenomenon of hybrid armed groups who, who draw a salary from the state. So they have one foot in the state and then they have one foot outside in this sort of criminal enterprises, this informal, illicit economy. And by no means are when we talk about the armed groups in Libya, they are not a monolith. They are they take very different forms, some of it is more sort of geographically sensitive. So in eastern and southern Libya, Libya, you have one large armed group, actor, Mr. Haftar, with the so-called Libyan National Army, which has more command and control over its forces than, than the other armed groups, particularly those in western Libya, where you have a plethora of armed groups. And, and in the West, you also see armed groups that are more sort of rooted to their communities.

So, so this is, I think, very important in talking about the phenomenon of the armed groups and why it's actually quite difficult to tackle. Ian Martin, who was the first SRSG, the first special representative for UNSMIL for the UN in Libya in 2011 and 2012, has written a really good book called All Necessary Measures, where he lays out really what happened in the wake of the overthrow of Mr. Gadhafi and the fact that I think some decisions that were taken in that period continued to resonate to today, specifically with regard to DDR and security sector reform, where you have this combination of the Libyans really wanting to direct their own affairs and to have a Libyan solution to this issue, which resulted really in in a lot of the, what were called the revolutionaries, the rebels being put directly on the state payroll. And then their numbers over the years just ballooned, ballooning from 30,000 in, let's say, 2011, 2012 to by the time that I arrived in Libya in 2018, some 300,000, for instance, were just on the payroll of the Interior Ministry. And also the fact that, you know, in the wake of Mr. Gadhafi's overthrow, you had the NATO countries really not wanting to send forces or have any deep investment in the Libyan state to let the Libyans work this out for themselves.

So we are where we are with the political process and the overall peace process. And yes, these hybrid armed actors are playing a very critical role. And I will say that, you know, if I put myself

back into the shoes of being the UN mediator, we did really have to wrestle with this phenomenon. Where do you put the armed groups in the peace process? So when we designed what was the Berlin process in 2019 and 2020, they were really seated in two tracks. One was the military and security track, where they were represented in the formal ceasefire negotiations, in terms of Mr. Haftar having representatives to those negotiations as well as, you know, the plethora of the armed groups in western Libya with representatives, in fact, from each of the, the five cities in western Libya. They were also, I should say, represented, but in a civilian form in the political dialog. So again, Mr. Haftar had civilian representatives that he and his staff selected a small number for the political dialog. And there were also representatives, civilians for the armed groups from Misrata, Tripoli and Zawiya.

Now, I think there's an active debate now as to, you know, do you mainstream these guys more into the political process? I guess I would, I would have pause because their inclusion could come at the exclusion of other actors or constituencies in the political process, namely civil society, women's representatives, community representatives and ethnic, ethnic or minority representatives. You know, because you can't just have hundreds of people in a political dialog. The other question that I personally wrestled with was, you know, you could have people around the table who have committed serious human rights abuses, grave violations, and, and does, you know, is it proper really for them to be normalized in such a situation? I, you know, I can't say that I have totally come to, you know, my own conclusions, and certainly the situation in Libya, you know, is, is ever evolving. But it is I think it's something that that needs to be somehow put on the table. And this gets to the issue of transitional justice and national reconciliation and ultimately accountability.

Lastly, I would just say, as the U.N., as a representative of the United Nations and the mediator, I always found it very frustrating, I think Vanda you touched on it in your introduction, which is here's, here's a dilemma, which is that, yes, the whole great power or even regional power interaction with the, these armed groups is very different, you know, these are not these, these groups are not in the category of Daesh or Al-Qaeda where they're obviously completely outside of the tent. These guys are inside the tent. They are in many cases, you know, inside government institutions. They are partners for major, you know, major nation states on sort of issues of bilateral importance, whether it's counterterrorism or, let's say, counter migration, also in the case of Libya. And then and then these countries turn to the United Nations, and they say, you do the institution building, you do the state building. But yet we are dealing with hybrid armed group actors who actually have no vested

interest in state building. They, they want the non-state because the non-state allows them to build their own power networks inside the institutions and strengthens them. So you have this now inherent contradiction, and I'll just throw that out there and leave that with you. Thanks so much.

Vanda Felbab-Brown [00:15:14] Well, thank you. And I actually want to follow up in our second round to ask you about this very impressive brief that you wrote for Brookings on what are the key issues for Libya? You outlined DDR, elections, transitional justice. And when I was reading it, I kept thinking, those are crucial steps. How do we get them done, given the hybrid actors having vested interests to sabotage and prevent every single one of them? So I look forward, Stephanie, to your thoughts as we come to the second round on that. And of course, the issues that you laid out, hybridity capturing the state and warping the state to serve its interest are so prominent in Iraq, and I'm really sad that Ranj has so far not been able to join perhaps he can come because, you know, we see that the dilemma that you outline, do you leave them out? Will they become a spoiler? Do you bring them in? How much do they capture the state?

But at the same time, you also now have the issues, even when they are in, what happens when they no longer want to play nicely among each other? Will the whole house come down, and even if they somehow work out enough of a reshuffling of the resources along themselves, this still leaves vast populations constantly under-served and frankly abused in how governance is being delivered. So very intense dilemmas. Do they, are they in, how they are in? At what point do they go out? How can we get them out? What does this mean for stability, not just in the immediate sense, but in the longer sentence?

I would like now to turn to Ms Natasha Hall in Syria, where we haven't seen the same rupture and drama that we have been witnessing in Libya, Yemen and Iraq over the past several months. But a whole host of complex dynamics are taking place, perhaps quietly. On the one hand, there has been for some years now the strengthening and normalization of the Assad regime, and we have been seeing a weakening of the remnants of ISIS in the Assad regime held territories. But perhaps not very noticed is quite significant relocation of ISIS to the Kurdish help aided us, a significant uptick of ISIS's activity there in the context of unresolved state issues, autonomy, difficult regional issues between the Kurdish groups and Turkey and of course rife smuggling. And lying over this is the one issue that has been receiving some policy attention and that is the very weak and problematic state of the 27 prisons that the Kurdish forces are operating that pose both ISIS fighters, but also women that

have been managed to ISIS, some of whom might be radicalized children and dire humanitarian issues.

I'm absolutely thrilled that we now have Ms. Hall, a senior fellow with the Middle East program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, to discuss Syria with us. She brings an immense experience and wealth of knowledge as a researcher, analyst and practitioner in the complex humanitarian emergencies and conflict afflicted areas in the Middle East and particularly in Syria, where she served with the Shaikh group GIZ, Germany's equivalent of USAID Mayday Rescue, Center for Civilians in Conflict, as well as the U.S. government's Refugees Affairs Division. And she has been a very prominent and strong voice on, on Syria with her analysis and reports driving congressional hearings and high-level donor attention. And I must also say that Miss Hall is the founder of Art in Exile, a terrific endeavor. If I can turn to you Natasha, please give us your overview of where we are with non-state armed actors, the very many non-state armed actors in Syria.

Natasha Hall [00:19:43] Thank you, Vanda, for that generous introduction. And thanks to my fellow panelists, it's an, it's an honor to speak with you today. So I was given the unenviable task of covering armed groups in Syria, which is quite a quite a mandate with dozens, if not hundreds of factions and militias. This is this is quite a considerable endeavor. However, it seems today that the audience is most interested in the events going on across northern and eastern Syria. So I'm going to focus my comments today on those areas, but I'm happy to answer additional questions because I think a lot of these armed groups that we're seeing is sort of a consolidation of networks across the country and, and actually cooperation where you wouldn't otherwise see it.

So I you know, I would have to say to begin with that I think many countries are eager to say that hostilities have somewhat ended in Syria. I'm saddened to say for those of us who follow Syria closely, that this is simply not the case, and it probably won't be the case unless there's a major shift in dynamics. Syria is a country run by armed groups today, and I hope that those watching see this discussion as more than sort of an academic exercise in the behavior of armed groups, because I think assessing the trajectory of these armed groups and militias is more than tactical, because these armed groups are shaping the future of Syria and the everyday lives of populations far more than what we see is the impotent and stalemated national political negotiations that are somewhat ongoing. And I think understanding that reality and the protracted nature of this conflict changes how we think and engage with such groups, because the commitment or sort of lack thereof of these

armed groups, benefactors, whether it's Turkey or Russia or the United States or Iran, is shaping how other opportunistic actors sort of shift the landscape in their favor over the long run.

So in order to sort of highlight these trends, I'm going to point to two events that I'm sure audience members may have been tracking over the past two months. And I'm going to substantially boil down these very sort of granular events in order to sort of extract what I think are overarching themes of especially for opposition and Syrian democratic forces controlled areas. So I'm going to start on the western side. The first event is this Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, so sort of the offshoot of Jabhat al-Nusra, which is an offshoot of Al Qaida, recently attacked or invaded Afrin, which was previously an area controlled by Turkish backed armed groups, which are sort of comprehensively called the Syrian National Army but are composed of myriad factions that are engaged in near-constant infighting. But to cut a weeklong story short, in October, HTS took advantage of this SNA infighting to co-opt two of those SNA groups. In this case, the Hamza division and Suleyman Shah, in order to take Afrin and surrounding areas. Belatedly, Turkey intervened to stop the fighting. Now, this event was hardly covered in the media, so you couldn't be blamed for missing it. But I mentioned this event to start off because I think it encapsulates some worrying trends that are ignored at our peril.

The first thing that I've been covering for a very long time is the complete lack of command and control structure among SNA factions that has led to this near constant bickering over limited resources. I think was the Carter Center that mentioned that between March 2020 and December 2021, there was at least 184 reported clashes among these SNA fighters. And much of this has to do with a lack of resources and to a degree, personal disputes. While Turkey backs these groups, it provides almost nothing, so about \$30 a month to these members. So as a result, these groups constantly fight over their real revenue streams, which are crossings and a monopoly over the import of goods like sugar, cement, wheat from Turkey and the sale and distribution of them throughout Syria.

The second point is that as these resources dwindle, the infighting will grow more pronounced. And HTS, which is by far the strongest armed group in the region and is sure to take advantage without any outside constraints. And speaking of those outside constraints, I would say, finally, that this event sort of points to the near lack of, complete lack of outside involvement in these dynamics, which will inevitably amount to the most ruthless and well-armed group taking control through force. I think that this incident in particular shows Turkey's reluctance to really shape how this

sort of Game of Thrones is being played out among opposition groups. I think Turkey wants a consolidated sort of operations room, but that's not happening.

And in the meantime, they're beleaguered with this infighting and they're unwilling to sort of tip the balance or provide more resources to these groups. So they're sort of willing to let them fight it out to a certain extent. And to be sure, in sort of Turkey's viewpoint, supporting proxy groups and an occupation are far cheaper if you give armed groups the arms to fight it out and take the spoils, rather than providing the resources and the sort of shaping the alternative vision yourself. Now, why do I mention all of this? I mention this because I think that these dynamics are setting us up for a major crisis. These dynamics severely curtail the ability of private investors and aid actors to improve the dire situation in the area. And all of this is happening without any sort of U.S. intervention or engagement or really of any of the countries that are pouring aid into these areas, which, in my opinion, is a significant missed opportunity. I think that the international community needs to start treating this area as an area of protracted displacement and engaging armed groups to improve their behavior and mitigate economic and aid interference is really essential.

I think aside from, you know, sort of effective public backlash, local backlash in some circumstances, these armed groups that have a very uncertain future or have little motivation to change their behavior in the meantime. And I'm going to use that theme of political and economic uncertainty to sort of take us eastward to the SDF controlled areas, which I think there's a lot of interest in today. For the past weeks and months, I think most people have seen that the Turkish attacks and threats have been mounting on this area. I think these threats, once again, sort of call into question the future authority of the Syrian Democratic Forces and their civilian governance structure, the autonomous administration of north and east Syria. Now, as most of you know, Turkey is interested in the northeast because it's controlled by the SDF. And the SDF is a multiethnic fighting force dominated by the YPG, which is an armed group with ideological affiliation to the PKK, which is considered a terrorist organization by Turkey and the United States. But in spite of this seeming contradiction, the SDF remains coalition forces local partner in the fight against ISIS. And this has made over the years very awkward tension between local allies and NATO ally for the U.S. government as many of you know.

Now in the U.S. government's defense, they have tried to delete, deal with this dilemma in several ways by encouraging real power sharing with Arab dominated areas for the SDF and for the

A, AANES by mediating intra Kurdish talks with other opposition groups like the Kurdish National Council, of which I was a part of briefly and even asking the YPG and the AANES to take down pictures of Öcalan, the leader of the PKK. None of this has worked to assuage Turkish concerns. And on top of that, I think the uncertainty over the U.S. commitment to the SDF has further contributed to this growing sense that the autonomous administration and the SDF are lame duck authorities. In other words, it's sort of a matter of time before Turkey, Russia and the regime in Iran split up these areas among themselves. And I think that this sense has been further entrenched over the past three years, when Trump hastily declared withdrawal from Syria in 2019, when the U.S. actually withdrew from Afghanistan. And then ongoing debates here in the United States about ending forever wars in the Middle East and, of course, the latest threats of a Turkish incursion. And I think it's further highlighted by most European states complete avoidance of the autonomous administration as a governance actor.

And I say this all because the regime, Turkey, Iran and ISIS are feeding off of these dynamics every day, trying to weaken the SDF in order to increase their influence and even potentially retake territory in the future if they can capitalize on an opportunity. And in the meantime, they're quite happy to secure resources until that opportunity comes along. In fact, there's now plentiful evidence that ISIS and Russia and the regime are working together to secure supply lines and prioritizing the preservation of trade and smuggling routes over the military defeat of the enemy. So just to encapsulate what the SCF has been trying to do in order to mitigate these trends, I think that these dynamics certainly make it difficult to, to maintain discipline among the ranks if you're not sure if you're going to survive another day. Even though the administration and, and the SDF arguably provide better provision of services in most areas in the regime and higher salaries than the regime. But in order to maintain control and fight corruption, the SDF has done things like rotate soldiers from different posts frequently. The SDF has also reportedly responded to complaints that prison guards and SDF elements are taking bribes and letting large numbers of ISIS fighters and sympathizers escape from prisons and camps.

But I think that the Sinai prison break earlier this year created even more urgency, showing just how ill-equipped security was around these facilities and how dependent the SDF was on coalition forces. And how intact ISIS still is regardless of its sort of sleeper cell status. The SDF has tried to reform to meet these challenges, and just this year there have been at least seven raids on

[inaudible] which have each resulted in dozens of arrests of ISIS infiltrators. Now, I would just finish by saying, I think tactically these efforts are beneficial for the ISIS campaign, counter campaign.

However, I think the lack of U.S. commitment to the SDF, much like the lack of Turkish commitment to the SNA, is pointing to a really grim future where obtaining insurance will be the sole motivators for these armed groups and exploiting this insecurity will be the sole motivator for nefarious actors that seek to undermine U.S. interests in the country and in the region more broadly. And I'll leave it at that.

Vanda Felbab-Brown [00:31:24] Well, thank you for very powerful comments. You know, the theme of much the past 20 years and in my view of the years heading ahead is really the challenge of the external sponsor, local partner proxy relationships, whether they are non-government actors, like some of the actors you are speaking about. Ms. Hall, or whether they are government actors, extremely problematic, corrupt, incompetent, subversive governments like in Afghanistan, like in various times in Somalia, but vice versa. How can the external sponsor patron shape the behavior when its interest, its commitment is limited and certainly has changed? And it's hard to see how the United States at this stage will find much more strength and will to be delivering the assurance and the credible commitment that you so eloquently suggested is lacking and problematically lacking.

So perhaps you know I can turn to you in the second set of questions to reflect on, given that the United States is unlikely to all of a sudden discover much more commitment, and the commitment may be as shaky and limited as it is right now, what kind of leverage can be have with groups like the SDF or with other actors such as the Assad regime, which obviously is under U.S. sanctions and seen as a rogue regime, but at the same time has been increasingly normalized. Certainly the themes of constant bickering, lack of command and control, the supposed enemies of the rivals, the partners fighting with each other as much as they find the present militant group and very difficult regional rivalries, as well as a protracted conflict and critical humanitarian situations, are also the key themes for Yemen.

At the same time, 2022 has, at least to some extent, seemed to be a year of hope. But in the spring, a ceasefire was signed between the Shia militia group, the Shia militant groups, the Houthis and the government and pro-government militias on various sides of negotiations between Saudi Arabia that has sponsored anti-U.S. groups has been even negotiating with the Houthis, while Saudi Arabia and Iran have been having talks about Yemen in Iraq. Nonetheless, in October, the ceasefire

was not renewed. Those same issues of protracted conflict, difficult local and external rivalries and terrible humanitarian situation are remaining, and I cannot imagine a better expert than Ms. Nadwa Al-Dawsari to be discussing Yemen with us today, and I'm enormously thrilled that she has been able to join the panel.

She has a wealth of experience in Yemen, where she has worked with tribes, civil society, local authorities, security actors and non-state armed actors. She is a nonresident scholar with the Middle East Institute and a fellow at the Center on Armed Actors. Previously, she served as a nonresident senior fellow of the Project on Middle East Democracy, a Yemen country director for the Center for Civilians and Conflict, and a founding director for Partners in Yemen. She also previously worked at the National Democratic Institute. Ms. Al-Dawsari, what are your thoughts on where we are in Yemen? Is the future looking bleak or what are the signs of hope?

Nadwa Al-Dawsari [00:35:21] Thank you, Vanda, and thank you for having me. It's really an honor to be with this group. Also to answer your question. It's a complicated question. I'm not honestly very optimistic, but I want to talk about the proliferation of armed groups in Yemen since the beginning of the war. I mean, actually, it started in September 2014 when the Houthis stormed the capital city of Sana'a with support from Iran and former President Ali Abdullah Saleh. And when the Houthis captured Sana'a, they captured state institutions, presidency, parliament, cabinet, media, you name it. But more importantly, they also captured military bases and had their hands on large amounts of sophisticated weapons, heavy weapons, some of which were the weapons that were given to Salah regime to counterterrorism. After they took the capital city of Sana'a, the Houthis expanded militarily, they captured the north, they tried to push into the southeast. And they almost, they, they got too close from capturing Aden City.

Now, the president and the government had relocated to Aden and named it the interim capital then. But when the Houthis pushed into the south and Ta'izz and the eastern parts of Yemen, they were met with armed resistance. Local people picked up arms to stop the Houthis incursion into their areas. But in March 2015, which is six months after the Houthis took Sana'a, the Saudi led coalition intervened with airstrikes but also supported the local resistance groups and helped them push the Houthis entirely outside the south, out of the south, and also helped stop the Houthis from expanding beyond the north until at least 2018 or until 2018, not at least. So what happened between 2014 and now? The government collapsed and lost monopoly over the use of force. The Yemeni

military disintegrated because most of the armed forces before the war were controlled by former President Ali Abdullah Saleh. And those are the forces who were complicit with the Houthis or supported the Houthis directly or indirectly. And most of these after that, they, they stayed neutral.

So the government relocated to Aden then, this was 2015. 16, but it mainly operated out of [inaudible] for years until very recently. It still does not really operate out of Yemen completely. The government was not able to reestablish the military because military operations became largely dominated or controlled by the Emiratis and the Saudis. Now, what the Emiratis have done after liberating the South from the Houthis, they formed several armed groups across the south and the west coast. Some of these forces were formed by Yemeni presidential decree. Others were not. So some of them are hybrid. Some of them are not. But they all function as non-state armed groups. And then explain how. Again, these were dozens of armed groups and mentioned security belts forces, backup and support, support brigades, counterterrorism forces, giant brigades, elite forces, you name it. To name a few, I mean.

And these forces have not operated under the command and control of the Yemeni government, but also by themselves they do not have a unified command and control. They operate geographically. Some forces control certain districts. Some forces control certain areas. And they don't have a sort of, you know, unified structure. And they have clashed occasionally among themselves. But also the UAE backed the formation of the National Resistance Forces in the west coast of Yemen. And these are probably the most professional forces because they are formed of previous military special forces, Republican Guard, mostly the, the, the forces that were loyal to former President Ali Abdullah Saleh. So they're more disciplined, but they still operate largely outside the state structure, although the commander of the force now is a member of the presidential council and the commanders of two other forces as well. But so what happened over the past eight years was the government shrank and non-state armed groups took over. In the north, we have the Iran backed Houthis, they're building their own theocratic police state. They're part of Iran's axis of resistance. That's very important because they're committed to Iran's expansionist agenda, and that's a regional agenda and they're eager to expand and control all of Yemen and push into Mecca and Saudi Arabia to claim the well to claim first to claim the southern Saudi Arabia, which used to be Yemen land some, sometime in the past, but also Mecca.

In the south, you find UAE backed armed groups who although some of them were formed by presidential decree, they did clash with the Yemeni government, and they forced the Yemeni government out of Aden in August 2009. And as a matter of fact, the government continue to lose control to these groups in southern provinces, most recently during the truce in Abyan and Shabwa. So the Saudis have been building their own proxies separate from the Emiratis, but they're not as prominent yet as Emirati backed forces. So in summary, non-state armed groups are the new order in Yemen. They filled the void. They performed security functions, but they also benefited from a thriving war economy, just like in Syria and Libya, which helped them become stronger, which helped them kind of subjugate the state in a way. And they're also involved in violations against human rights.

And I've done research on that, mostly because one, there's no command and control and accountability, but also the majority of members of these forces say over 90% come from civilian backgrounds. They don't have the training. They don't understand the law. They don't understand civilians' rights. They don't understand the concept of civilian protection. So it is unlikely that the Yemeni government will reestablish monopoly over the use of force, even if a political settlement happens, which I know a lot of people were hopeful that this truce happened. And I think in principle, it's good, but I don't think it will lead to something substantial in terms of, you know, reducing violence or ending the conflict. I think it's been largely an opportunity for the Houthis to regroup and kind of plan their next offensive.

So whenever a political settlement happens, Yemen cannot be stitched back together. And I don't think we will see a functioning national government that can kind of bring all these armed groups, you know, under, under its control, at least not in the foreseeable future. So they are a reality. They're here to stay, and we need to think of ways to tame them. Regional actors will likely continue to influence the actions of these non-state actors. Again, the Houthis will likely not give up their ambition to take control of Yemen and push into Mecca. The Saudis and Emiratis have divergent agendas in Yemen, and there has been signs of disagreements. So I would also watch for potential clash between groups backed by either side.

So but what can we do with these armed groups? I mean, yes, it looks grim, but they're there. And I think there are a lot of things that can be done with these armed groups. I've personally been working with them since 2016, doing research, but then in my capacity with the Center for Civilians in Conflict since 2018. I think what can be done and this is something that Civic does is train these

forces on Yemeni law, train them on civilian protection and support civil society groups and dialogue between these actors and civilians to reduce civilian harm. And during my work with Civic, we've seen a lot of success stories of armed actors holding their members accountable for violations against human rights. And I think that's a start. I mean, it's, the big issues will remain. But what, I don't think there is a magical solution to these armed groups. I think, again, I think there will be the new order not only in Yemen but in the region. And to think that we can basically, you know, turn the clock back and reinstate states the way we want them to be is just, is just wishful thinking. I'll leave it at that, and I'll be happy to answer questions.

Vanda Felbab-Brown [00:45:02] Well, certainly the theme that non-state armed actors are the new order is very much something that we have been exploring at the Initiative of Non-State Armed Actors and Illegal Economies at Brookings intensely in many contexts, including in the context of criminal violence in places like Mexico, in places like Colombia, Venezuela, but also in various parts of Africa. And I very much share the view that the actors are not going away. The state is weaker. The state overall is weaker in large parts of the world, significantly weakened by COVID-19. And those actors already are governing entities, perhaps not at the national level, some of them have the ambition to rise to the national level, like the Taliban succeeded or al-Shabab wants to accomplish. But certainly at a local level. And with decreased focus priority in places such as the United States and, and the West, with much more intense involvement of actors such as Russia and the Wagner Group and even China, in faraway places, the odds are they will rule.

And so I have engaged in, in radical thinking, Ms. Dawsari, arguing that we should be really focused not on how we defeat them, but sometimes, often it will be elusive, but how we shape them. And you've already started outlining some of the shaping functions, such as introducing more of a sense of rules, less abuse towards civilians. If in the second time, now, I can turn to you. Do you have any other thoughts on how we can shape the actors or how others can shape them, whether for the good or for the bad?

I want to remind our audience that we are keen to take your questions. We've already received many terrific questions in writing before the event and I will pull from them. But if you would like to submit live new questions, please do so at the hashtag non-state armed actors. Or email them to Brookings events. But meanwhile, Stephanie, if I can go back to you, the impressive agenda you

outlined in the brief. What kind of inducement leverage incentives that are for the hybrid actors, the non-state armed actors to join in.

Stephanie Williams [00:47:42] To, to join in the overall process? Well.

Vanda Felbab-Brown [00:47:45] You're right. To support the agenda that you outlined. On the state building agenda.

Stephanie Williams [00:47:52] The state building agenda? Well, I am I guess I am sort of similarly cautious on this because, again, we have to sort of take into consideration Libya's history, the fact that during the 40 years of, you know, Mr. Gadhafi's very quirky and brutal, one-man rule, the state institutions were hollowed out, as were sort of the military institution. You know, so in the case of the military, you know, not a big surprise that a number of armed groups emerged in 2011 because you already had the phenomenon of the Gadhafi, the brigades that were, were under the control of Mr. Gadhafi's sons. So, so it is. So how do you, so they are in the state now. And but they are not alone in terms of the, in terms of being the only predatory actors, you know, involved with the state.

So you, so you had this network that really was present during the days of the former regime. You know, corruption is not a new phenomenon in Libya. So you had, you have this network of now they are political, economic and security actors, many of whom sort of transitioned from the old [inaudible] regime to the current, you know, chaos sometimes with the networks intact, sometimes with people embedded already in in the various also in the various layers of, of the state. So, you know, you have here you have your sovereign institutions, including the Central Bank of Libya, you, or the Libyan Investment Authority. You have you have your ministries, your formal state institutions. You have state owned enterprises. So, again, you have to reflect on the fact that Libya is a rentier economy. And there are just the vast majority of the working population is, is already drawing a salary from the state. So this so this predation was actually, it's very easy to, to conduct.

So now how do you get these guys who already have a foot in the state to remove their foot, the other foot from the, from the war economy, from the from the criminal enterprises that they are running, and which are very lucrative. So there you need a national and an international solution. So the national solution obviously, is the, you know, the investment in, in the state building, in the institution building as a value in and of itself, very, very difficult, I would submit. But on the international stage, you get to this phenomenon again of countries pursuing bilateral agendas which, which directly strengthen the hands of armed groups who are, you know, running human trafficking,

human smuggling weapons smuggling, drug smuggling, engaged in fuel smuggling is a big, big business in Libya as well. And so there's where you need to also use your sticks. So the international community cannot just pick and choose what are the priorities.

So when you say, okay, I'm going to deal with this armed group on my vital national counterterrorism issues, and let's just say that group is the largest armed group in Tripoli, which runs the largest prison in Tripoli, which is located at the airport. And at the airport, they, there are a number of so-called Daesh prisoners that are detained at the airport. Now, this is an armed group, which, by the way, the whole prison business is the business. They take money from the state. But then they also are charging the families for everything from food to medicine to access to the, to, to the poor people who are detained under horrific conditions, where their human rights are abused in the most horrific and atrocious ways. And so there has to be some, they need to be held to account for that behavior while they are, you know, conveniently meeting the needs of whatever country it is, who has an interest in ensuring that those, the Daesh prisoners, and by the way, there are kids who are in this prison as well who are the kids of Daesh families.

So, so look, I think it's time for some real honest discussions probably applies to Syria, to Yemen, as to, you know, how you holistically deal with this phenomenon. But you also you cannot, you cannot ignore what in in in Libya, the militias with the ties the militia with Kabaka, who are the guys, the economic interests who are behind all of these guys with the guns. Everyone focuses on the guys with the guns, but behind them are a lot of guys without guns who are, you know, exploiting a lot, the many of them, the young men with the guns. You got to go after those guys as well. They are parking huge amounts of money in places where sanctions work. And so, as I said in my other briefing for Brookings, you know, use sanctions like the Magnitsky sanctions, which have the, you know, the benefit of targeting those who engage in wanton corruption and those who abused human rights. And the US has adopted those sanctions. The EU has adopted those sanctions as well as, you know, individual, you know, member states. And so I really think that's something that should also be taken into account, and I'll stop there.

Vanda Felbab-Brown [00:53:53] I think I am so glad, Stephanie, that you brought up the issue of the conditions in the prisons. And of course, that also applies to the absolutely horrific, inexcusable conditions in the migrant detention centers business in of itself, where despite the horrendous conditions and the business and revolving door or less revolving door but, but nefarious

door that the detention centers are European countries, some European countries are paying the militias to be detaining migrants under those conditions, so they don't cross the Mediterranean and they don't arrive in Europe. And we are just seeing perhaps a collapse of the deal, a big spike in migrants leaving from the Haftar areas. And the challenge is also when collapse of the payment detention system in the non-Afghan area. So new challenges there, but inexcusable, intolerable conditions in the prisons.

Natasha, if I can turn to you, the questions I had put forth, what, what leverage do we have in this time of focus on Ukraine, focus on the Asia Pacific, great power competition, intense rivalries, lack of certainty? How can we shape influence actors either on the government regime side in Syria or the non-government side?

Natasha Hall [00:55:25] Yeah. I mean, if I could I want to just enlarge your question a little bit. Prior to this event, I actually had a question directed to me that was similar, but it was it was more along the lines of, of, you know, the United States is not great about dealing with non-state armed groups. How do we get better at sort of expanding our toolbox for them? And I would say that's the, that's the broader question, because it seems like the theme of all of our presentations is that these non-state armed groups are here to stay. Sometimes they do, you know, put ties on. Sometimes they do become politicians, sometimes warlords become politicians. But that doesn't negate the fact that many of these countries are run by armed groups. Right. I mean, Iraq, we don't have that presentation today, but its a perfect example, I think of that.

So I think more broadly, the United States needs to get better about doing this. I think that this administration has sort of shifted to trying to, to move towards a supportive central government or strongman rule because it doesn't like the messiness of non-state armed groups. But I think that that, you know, is potentially problematic, even though we do want to shift from the Middle East to the Asia-Pacific region, because, frankly, our great power adversaries and regional adversaries like Iran are pretty good at dealing with non-state armed groups. Right. Iran in particular. But, you know, Russia has also shown that its particularly good at this across the Sahel and in Syria and, and of course in Libya as well. So I think that, you know, we need to reassess what the optics of our support or lack of support are in Syria.

In the case of Syria especially, I think, you know, I pointed to this issue of a protracted crisis. And I think that we need to start seeing it as a protracted crisis rather than waiting for actors on the

ground to kind of shift events in a way, create their own vision so that we don't have to deal with the issue anymore, because I think that that will lead to a much larger crisis that directly affects national security interests. And there's plenty of evidence that we have that, you know, ISIS's basically just waiting for a U.S. withdrawal, frankly. And I think the Sinai prison break earlier this year sort of really encapsulates that. But there's been a lot of other great reports that show that Russia and the regime are only too happy to, to sort of arrest ISIS or Al Qaida fighters and then launch them out into the world, you know, as, as kind of pawns of, of, of their, of their hybrid warfare scheme.

So I think acknowledging that and sort of putting in, I think, the minimum of commitments in terms of political commitment but also economic resources to sort of protect these areas along the northwest and the northeast is frankly a lot cheaper and more effective than dealing with what the outcomes could be if we continue down this sort of sleepwalk towards normalization with the regime. And, you know, I think that the benefit of that is that we have a lot more leverage with the SDF and with non-state armed groups in the northwest and the northern parts of Syria than we do with the Assad regime. And I think until the Assad regime has some kind of motivation to change its behavior, which until today has just not been apparent, we're not going to see a lot of movement at the national dialogue level. So in the meantime, to prevent those crises, I think sort of the minimum of investment to put to to the SDF and these other non-state armed groups held areas is one way to sort of prevent that crisis and sort of put a how should I put it? Just put a wedge in it. While, while we wait for other circumstances to sort of shape and become riper for, for larger national negotiations.

Vanda Felbab-Brown [00:59:28] Absolutely. So even focus on great power competition doesn't mean that they should have too little focus on those issues, especially as countries such as Russia are very actively inserting themselves into dealing with non-state armed actors, often very problematically, as far as Venezuela and other places. And China itself has entered the space less visibly, less dramatically so far, but also outside of Asia, in places like Africa. Nadwa, any other thoughts on expanding the toolbox as Natasha has phrased it, or other ways of shaping those non-state armed actors that will partly capture the state will have one foot on the street in protests, rebellion, militia, battlefield, one foot few toes in the state and are not going to go away and be causing protracted crises.

Nadwa Al-Dawsari [01:00:27] Yeah. So two things in Yemen. First, the Houthis and then the other armed groups. So diplomacy has failed with the Houthis. The U.N. tried for eight years, and it

reached a dead end because the Houthis are not willing to de-escalate, they're not willing to compromise and not willing to reciprocate with other actors. And the last truce, they, they got fuel ships. The Sinai Airport was open, but they failed to do the one thing that they were supposed to do, which is ending the siege on Gaza City. And so and the Houthis think that they've won the war. They speak from a place of, you know, winner, the Saudis, so the talks in Yemen have shifted. This truce actually has been a truce between the Houthis and the Saudis, not between not among Yemenis. The Saudis are desperate to leave and they're desperate to make some sort of an agreement with the Houthis. And the Houthis know that. So they speak from a place of strength.

My advice for with the Houthis, two things, three things. One, do not give the Houthis political recognition that unless they earn it and they earn it by de-escalation, they earn it by a compromise, they earn it by meeting people halfway through. Two, sanctions. I completely agree. Sanctions are very, very, very powerful tool, sanction individuals. And that's something that the United States and the West can do. And the third one, oh, the US Navy capturing weapons coming to the Houthis from Iran. This has been the United States has been doing a great job with that. And I think we need to double, double down even more on that effort.

So, yeah, with other groups now the other groups are different because they don't, they're not as strong as some of these, they don't dominate large areas, but also they don't have expansionist agenda. They're happy where they are at as long as they continue to get the resources they have. Sanctions, definitely. Training. But also the problem in Yemen, and that's something I don't think I think it's different from Syria and definitely different from Libya is that country is extremely poor. People have been without salaries since 2016. So armed groups are major employer. What can we do? We need to provide opportunities. We need to invest in local economy, and we need to, to, to find to to create job opportunities for people to leave these armed groups. Most people do not want to be with these armed groups, but they have to because that's the only source of income they have. That's how they put food on the table for their families.

But also, I think, important to support local civil society organizations who have been engaged with these armed actors. A lot of these civil society organizations and groups have been holding these armed actors accountable. They've been documenting human rights abuses. They've been engaging with armed actors, lobbying commanders, and many of them have managed to release a lot of forcibly disappeared civilians. For example, for example, one great example is the Mothers of Abductees

Association, a women group entirely women, most of them are housewives, but they came together and they managed with their, they've managed to release almost a thousand civilian abductees by different armed groups, by mobilizing, by lobbying tribal leaders, officials, armed group leaders and using connections. And they did an excellent job. They don't receive much support of any from anybody. And there are other groups as well, like, like them who would do a great job.

So I think we need to support these groups more than, who are doing work on the ground than, you know, spend money unnecessarily on, you know, track to peace discussions that are mostly theoretical in the first place. I would love to see the group of eminent experts come back to Yemen. It was, its mandate has not been extended for two years now, and I would like to see it coming back. But again, retraining these engaging forces, training, help them connect with the communities and, and help communities a lot. And bring it, bring up issues. And there is a lot of room to do that. I know in Yemen there's a lot of room for that to be successful because unlike other areas, Yemen is still a very tribal society. So that kind of accountability that comes with the tribal structure is still there. And commanders, somehow, they do sort of respond to that kind of pressure from tribal groups. You know, and there is that level of accountability that I think we can capitalize on. Yeah.

Vanda Felbab-Brown [01:05:50] Well, great. Thank you. And you know what? You're, of course, stressing Ms. Dawsari, the importance of local context, which will become a cliché and a cliché that often doesn't sink in. And, you know, I certainly have to be modest and acknowledge that even as I often say that policy needs to shift towards shaping armed actors, I also need to recognize how enormously difficult it is in some cases to shape actors like al-Shabab, like the Taliban, that, after coming to power, has proven that the faction that dominates the Taliban has proven enormously insular and really impervious, both to pressure from the outside, but also to internal constituencies, even within Taliban constituencies.

So the receptivity to local communities, receptivity to the international community, obviously, that is enormously among the armed non-state and hybrid groups. We have received many questions about the external actors, actors like Russia and the Wagner Group, as well as Iran, with two themes being on the table. What, how has the power of Russia across the Middle East and North Africa changed? How has the power effectiveness of the Wagner group changed, given what's happening in Ukraine, given the depletion and pressure on Wagner resources, at least in the Ukrainian war setting, and what's happening with Iran. Natasha, you brought Iran, but the regime has been facing protests

for weeks and weeks, has been very brutal. So some of our audience members are wondering if we see a collapse of the regime, or I want to rephrase it, if we see a weakening of the regime in Iran or a regime that's very preoccupied with the internal situation, what are the implications for Iran's proxies and other non-state armed actors?

And I would just set the setting for us by mentioning that although this is outside of Mena, just today, a political transition was announced between the military junta in Sudan and two coalitions of civilian groups. And I think this is significant because it is taking place in the context of Russia and Wagner group being in and being in Sudan and having been a shield, a pretorian force for the junta. And even in this context, the, the framework was signed. We will see whether it will be implemented. Maybe it won't. It will be sabotaged, maybe along the way. But it's sort of part and parcel of a lot of the glitz of Wagner strongly rubbing off, at least in parts of Africa and the delivery of the promise being much smaller than the promise. So in this context, Russia, Iran, where we are today and their influence in the three countries that we are looking at. Maybe I can start with you again, Stephanie.

Stephanie Williams [01:09:14] So very good question. I think there was perhaps an expectation that with following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in late February that you would somehow see a withdrawal or drawing down of Wagner mercenaries in Libya. Uh, I think according to the latest international reports that have been produced, the number of mercenaries in Libya, overall is just about the same. And I don't believe, and I haven't seen anything to indicate, that there has been a significant drawdown on the Wagner, on the Wagner forces. They may have redeployed from sort of different bases. I think they're more concentrated, they're concentrating more on southern Libya. I think that the overall the Wagner strategy and the state strategy in terms of Russia is you just create facts on the ground and, and frankly, I think the current, you know, political uncertainty in Libya is just fine with them. They have an arrangement with one large actor, Mr. Haftar. They had, I gather, some maybe financial difficulties with him, with him that they were hoping to or wanting to get paid. That's probably been worked out now because Mr. Haftar has now made an arrangement with the government in Tripoli, which the mechanism for that was a change in the head of the National Oil Corporation, which turned the tap back on, on the oil which Mr. Haftar and his forces had blockaded for a number of months, with the quid pro quo being that he gets a certain amount of money in a completely nontransparent fashion.

So, so, so there is you know, I think definitely that's the overall strategy is just to play it out. You have facts on the ground, you have bases under your control. You have forces. You have these lines that go in supply lines that go into, into the Sahel. So I don't really see that changing. And in fact, I don't see on the other side of the house, there are a number, you know, thousands of Syrian mercenaries that have been brought in by Turkia. And that's there's no sign that those forces are being drawn down. They're you know, they're being used to protect infrastructure that, you know, the Turks care about. So this kind of gets back to the issue of international engagement and respecting the will of the Libyans and the ceasefire agreement who asked for these forces to, to be withdrawn.

And it is also probably the case, and it has been in the past that mercenaries have benefited also from this war economy, from smuggling of migrants. And you, you alluded to the, or you mentioned the, the now the phenomenon of migrants being smuggled from eastern Libya, which is which is fairly I mean, it certainly was happening not in the numbers that we see now. Not at all surprising because it's a means to extract a rent. And of course, these people are terribly abused in all of the various way stops on their journeys across the Mediterranean. Thanks.

Vanda Felbab-Brown [01:12:48] Thank you. Natasha, please. Your thoughts on Russia, Iran, where we are in Syria?

Natasha Hall [01:12:53] Yeah. I mean, I think the assumption is always that if, if Russia feels overwhelmed or if Iran feels overwhelmed by either their sort of expeditionary forces in Ukraine, for example, with Russia or domestic unrest, in the case of Iran, I would say that a corner tiger tends to lash out. And I think I think that's kind of what we're seeing. So there hasn't really been any diminishment of Iranian and Russian sort of forces in Syria. But even beyond that, I think that these sanctioned actors will also exploit resources in Sudan and Ethiopia, across the Sahel, and that will likely continue because the benefit of proxy forces or of very limited state military forces is that it's, it's quite a cheap way to kind of intervene. And so, you know, unlike, I think, the, the American paradigm of of nation building and a lot of trillions of dollars of investment, really the only thing that they're they're trying to do in many cases is to acquire resources or even, you know, undermine Western diplomacy in the case of Ethiopia.

But, you know, also Syria. So I think, you know, Russia has, has quite, quite adeptly, I would say, used Syria for all it's worth and it's difficult for the United States to undermine Russia to a large extent in Syria as a result. And I don't know how many people know about this, but in the, you know,

the next month, in a month, almost exactly, there will be another vote at the U.N. Security Council on cross-border humanitarian operations into northwest Syria. And the Russians have been able to hold this hostage for years now. And as a result, the United States can't really, let's say, upset that dynamic too much in the interests of maintaining humanitarian aid operations. So I think that Russia and Iran both have quite, you know, quite adeptly sort of manipulated negotiations, I think on the Iranian side, with the nuclear negotiations on the Russian side, with regards to Syria and now Ukraine, in order to sort of capitalize on, on the situation, even when they're at their weakest point, let's say.

Vanda Felbab-Brown [01:15:19] Nadwa, please.

Nadwa Al-Dawsari [01:15:21] Yeah. Iran has invested in the Houthis for decades and during the course of this war has helped the Houthis develop weapon making technology and missile manufacturing technology. But also, more importantly, hundreds of IRGC and Hezbollah commanders are in Yemen helping the Houthis with military strategizing, with also political strategizing. And Iran's support to the Houthis has been extremely effective, very strategic. And that's why the Houthis are, emerged as the dominant force in this war. I don't see that changing unless the Iranian regime collapses. Basically.

Vanda Felbab-Brown [01:16:11] Do you think that the Iranian regime will collapse?

Nadwa Al-Dawsari [01:16:15] I wish. It would be a good reason for the entire region, for the world, good news. But I don't know if it will happen. I can only wish it happens.

Vanda Felbab-Brown [01:16:26] I'm sure, that was a little bit of an unfair question. Obviously, we are all watching very keenly what's happening with the protests and the response, very brutal response and the sustainability and the sustainability of a very brutal regime can be quite enormous. And often we err on the side of assuming that now is here. And somehow, they managed to squeak by. One of the regimes that both non-state armed actors, hybrid actors and regimes managed to squeak by even when it seems like they ought to collapse is of course the theme of illegal economies and exploiting illegal or semi-legal hybrid economies, again, a theme that runs across all three countries as well as Iraq. But everywhere you have the issues of migrants, we have the issues of drug trafficking that's becoming more complex, not just Captagon that people are focused on, but also crystal meth. Very devastating new scourge on the Middle East and globally. Arms, obviously, oil and just generalized extortion.

So maybe I can ask all of you to reflect on what can be done about the illegal economies, if anything. You know, I often say in many contexts that one cannot get rid of the illegal economy until one ends conflict. Yeah, we are nowhere close to ending conflict anywhere in those settings. So what tools do external actors have or internal actors have to reduce the prominence of economies that are illegal, that foster corruption, that exploit, that, that provide finances for non-state armed actors, but at the same time are major source of employment. I mean, it's excruciating humanitarian and economic settings. Maybe I can start in the reverse order with you Nadwa and go through to Natasha to Stephanie time.

Nadwa Al-Dawsari [01:18:36] Yeah, sure. That's a tough question. I think sanctions is one tool, in the case of Yemen, at least in the case of the Houthis, because nobody has leverage on the Houthis. The international community does not have leverage on the Houthis, but sanctions work. I think in the case of the other armed groups, it would be good to have a discussion with the Emiratis and the Saudis because they do have a lot of leverage on these armed actors, and they can help shape them if they want to. So. I think these are unfortunately, that, there are limited tools in the hands of the international community when it comes to this particular topic.

Vanda Felbab-Brown [01:19:25] Thank you. Natasha, please. I should also say that certainly many of these contexts, the various actors, both official militaries and the non-state actors and hybrid actors, has vital interest in keeping these illegal economies alive and Natasha, you already pointed out that even actors like the Syrian Defense Forces are far more focused on keeping logistical routes, including smuggling logistical routes alive and opened and beneficial to them than on fighting ISIS.

Natasha Hall [01:20:03] Yeah. And I would say that that primarily goes, frankly, for the for the Syrian regime. And I think, you know, this isn't a sort of a new phenomenon. Usually, countries that are sanctioned eventually find ways to survive. North Korea has developed a myriad ways around the globe to maintain some level of foreign currency. And Syria, within just a few years, I think, is actually far more advanced in maintaining far higher levels, actually a foreign currency through the Captagon trade and through and through other, other types of drugs and other types of smuggling operations and exploitation of the local civilian population. I mean, I think as Nadal was saying, there is very sort of limited things that the U.S. government can do. I think listing it as a priority and helping allied states like Jordan be able to curb the entry of drug smuggling through, through that transit route is helpful. In Iraq, it's obviously even more difficult because, because of just the chaos that's unfolding there,

because Iran has sort of de facto control over many of those border areas on the on the Iraqi side, but also on the on the Syrian side.

But, but needless to say, I think it needs to be a priority of the United States, not because it's, you know, a war on drugs, so to speak, but because it's a war on, on war crimes and an ongoing conflict, because these resources feed the conflict and feed adversaries within the conflict itself. And I think that that is probably going to be the, the hardest element of, of these, these various countries and trying to put an end to conflicts. We worked pretty hard on trying to find ways to create a more federalized structure, for example, in Syria. So actually opening up trade routes, you know, between areas of control as even a point of leverage or a carrot for the Syrian regime. But the fact remains that there are a handful of actors that make a lot of money from these routes being cut off from one another and having a monopoly over smuggling and trade routes. And I fear if we're unable to sort of untangle that, we will unlikely see any kind of compromise or solution to the Syrian conflict.

One thing I would say is that I think that we need to be, again, careful, going back to my initial point in in the presentation is to, to not say that a conflict is necessarily over if major hostilities have ended. And that goes for all of these countries. And I would just use Lebanon as a very good example of that. We had the end of the civil war, you know, millions, if not billions of dollars of aid sort of poured into that economy. But really, all that happened was warlords became politicians. So we saw a lot of that money just disappear and corruption entrenched in the situation that we see today. And once you get to that point, it's, it's really almost impossible to untangle. So I think trying to find the bits of leverage with armed groups or with governments that we have leverage with is one way to sort of at least begin to confront those challenges.

Vanda Felbab-Brown [01:23:33] And it just reiterates the theme of are they brought in because they win and maneuvered themselves in or through negotiations, or are they left out and what kind quote unquote orders, what kind of systems of dysfunction and prolonged crises are being set up and they are not allowed in or what kind of mechanisms of reducing the nefarious behaviors can be introduced. But Stephanie, your thoughts on the very many illegal smuggling economies in Libya and also their role in people's livelihoods.

Stephanie Williams [01:24:08] Okay. So, look, I think one thing that should, should be, should be focused on and I think here the international community can play a really key role, and I think the United States, through Libya is one of the members of the Global Fragility Act, is local

governance, is decentralization. So Libya is a rentier economy, which happens to be a highly centralized state, and that makes the capital the prize, the target. Therefore, you know, much of the wars that we have seen unfold since 2011 have been attacks on the capital. You know, why do people rob banks? That's where the money is. Why do people attack Tripoli? That's where the money is. So you have to reduce the attractiveness of Tripoli as the target by investing seriously in decentralization, not administrative decentralization, which is sort of the model that's very badly applied in Libya right now. Actual real decentralization. And this the constitutional committee that I met with for three very frustrating months in the spring and where they did not bring it across the finish goal, the finishing line. But they did do very important and valuable work on the issue of decentralization, codifying it in draft articles of the Libyan, the draft Libyan constitution, to not only enumerate here are the provinces that would be selected for decentralization, 13 provinces, but also to enumerate the different authorities between the center, the provinces and the local councils, the municipal councils.

So now you have, you know, a situation where the municipal councils are starved, services are not delivered at a local level. This builds frustration. This drives people into the illegal economy. Bring the power to the local level. Make them, put them in the driver's seat. This will also, I believe, help with the issue of the armed groups, because there are many armed groups that are rooted in their communities. And so when you empower the communities, when you empower the municipalities, they will be able to work with these armed groups. So I think that this is an area there's, so much focus has been put on the national level, and I think that that has come at the cost of attention being paid to this very important local decentralization project, which I think really, regardless of what happens with this awful ruling class, because they're just never, these dinosaurs, these political fossils are never going to change. Turn it back to the communities, maybe turn the equation upside down.

Vanda Felbab-Brown [01:27:05] Now, of course, the issue of the centralization versus the national government is really a question of how do you bring accountability and how you, how one moves accountability closer to people that often really cannot access the central state. And it's been such a central theme in places like Afghanistan and the failure to address the issue of accountability and better governance and centralization, decentralization was one of the reasons for the downfall of the Afghan republic. It's playing out in Somalia, not just with the Shabab, but between Mogadishu and

the federal member states and the lack of clarity and constitutionalization. But it's also playing out in different ways in criminal contexts in Mexico or Venezuela.

I would like very much to thank all of you for your extraordinarily remarks. Ms. Williams, your insights and work on Libya are so crucial. Ms. Hall, your work on Syria being a driving voice on Syria and Ms. Daswari for your enormous efforts and accomplishments in Yemen. Thank you for your extraordinary insights. It has been terrific for us to be able to take advantage of your expertise. I want to thank our audience for joining today. The, our conversation will be posted in full on the Brookings website in a few hours. And those of you who have joined us and want to continue exploring those themes, you have an opportunity to do so tomorrow morning at 8:30 a.m. Eastern Standard Time, where we are hosting and doing an event on the Horn of Africa that will focus on what's happening in Ethiopia with the cease fire negotiate the deal between the Tigray and the Ethiopian government, the role of external actors such as Eritrea and other external actors. We will be exploring what's happening in Somalia with the rise of the anti-Shabab militias, as well as the devastating humanitarian crisis and famine. It's not officially been called famine, but we are really looking at atrocious famine in Somalia as well as Kenya and its role in Horn of Africa with the Ruto government. So thank you all. Thank you for your questions and I look forward to having you join us again next time.