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Repression, Factionalism, and Radicalization: Understanding The Shift toward Extremism in MENA

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Abstract

This thesis explores the relationship between state repression, internal factional conflict, and radicalization within separatist movements in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region. It uses a comparative case study of three major movements: the Kurdish movement in Turkey and Syria, the Southern Transitional Council (STC) in Yemen, and the Polisario Front in Western Sahara. These cases help to understand how peaceful demands for autonomy can gradually turn into violent or radical strategies when faced with political exclusion, structural inequality, and lack of meaningful dialogue.

The research builds on theories of securitization, political marginalization, and organizational fragmentation. It argues that when governments treat separatist claims as security threats, and respond with repression, they often remove space for moderate voices and unintentionally encourage more extreme actions. The PKK, for example, shifted its strategy due to long-term state violence and internal divisions. In Yemen, the STC turned into a military-political authority during the country's civil war and failed transition. Meanwhile, the Polisario Front, though more institutionally disciplined, also faces limits due to stalled diplomacy and changing international dynamics.

The thesis shows that radicalization is not a sudden or ideological choice, but the outcome of deeper structural conditions and political responses. It highlights how internal splits, lack of representation, and discursive delegitimization play a major role in shaping strategic decisions. Instead of simplifying these movements as threats or extremists, we need to look at how their environments push them to evolve in certain directions.

In conclusion, the thesis suggests that inclusive dialogue, long-term autonomy solutions, and recognition of historical grievances are essential to reduce violence and respond more effectively to separatist movements in the region.

Introduction

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region offers a uniquely complex and revealing context for the study of separatist movements. Situated at a strategic global crossroads, the region's territorial boundaries have been heavily shaped by colonial legacies. This, combined with multiethnic populations, frequent identity-based conflicts, and the prevalence of authoritarian state structures, has produced a tense and conflict-prone sociopolitical environment. As a result, MENA has become a high-risk region where aspirations for national self-determination and trajectories of radicalization often coexist over extended periods.

Unlike other regions where separatist claims are frequently addressed through legal frameworks, federal arrangements, or political negotiations, states in MENA tend to respond with heavy-handed repression, institutional exclusion, and the "securitization" of minority demands—that is, framing the political expression of minority groups as existential threats to national security, thereby justifying the use of exceptional or even violent measures. This approach has contributed to a recurring pattern of rebellion and repression across the region.

At the same time, many separatist movements in MENA are marked by deep internal divisions, with competing factions and divergent strategic visions. For instance, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) has seen the emergence of more radical offshoots such as the Kurdistan Freedom Falcons (TAK); the Southern Movement (Al-Hirak) in Yemen has experienced significant fragmentation between moderate and militant wings; and within the Polisario Front in Western Sahara, younger factions have grown increasingly disillusioned with peaceful negotiation strategies. This convergence of external repression and internal fragmentation has fueled the radicalization and violent escalation of separatist movements in the region.

Research Background and Regional Characteristics

Since the 2010s, the number of extremist attacks linked to separatist movements in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has risen significantly, particularly in areas marked by armed conflict and political vacuum. These attacks are increasingly characterized by high intensity and asymmetric tactics. As a result, separatist movements

have evolved from primarily political challenges into structural risk factors for regional security.

From a broader perspective, separatist struggles in the MENA region also pose a fundamental challenge to prevailing international norms of sovereignty and territorial integrity. On one hand, many of these movements invoke the principle of national self-determination as a source of legitimacy, echoing the international legal emphasis on the rights of oppressed peoples since the twentieth century. On the other hand, most states in the region maintain a strict adherence to the principles of territorial unity and sovereign authority, placing separatist claims in a "zone of legal ambiguity." This tension has not only hindered prospects for peaceful resolution but has also entrenched many of these conflicts in a protracted “neither war nor peace” condition. The persistence of these confrontations has negatively affected socio-economic development in the countries concerned, while also creating dilemmas for the international community in balancing human rights with peace and stability.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Theoretically, this study proposes an analytical framework that integrates securitization theory, the theory of imagined communities, and radicalization theory to systematically explain the evolution of separatist movements in MENA from autonomy claims to violent extremism and terrorism. It argues that the securitization of separatist demands by the state serves as an external “push factor” toward radicalization, while internal “pull factors” such as identity marginalization and group cohesion contribute to a parallel dynamic. These forces converge through identifiable radicalization pathways, ultimately leading originally non-violent movements to adopt violent and even terrorist strategies. This theoretical model addresses the gap between institutional and political-psychological approaches and offers a multidimensional perspective grounded in the interaction between state responses and internal organizational dynamics.

This study seeks to examine why separatist movements in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region have evolved from initial demands for political autonomy into

increasingly radicalized and, in some cases, overtly violent or terrorist strategies, which is the main research question.

In many parts of the world, separatist aspirations are addressed through negotiation, elections, or constitutional mechanisms. However, in the MENA context, numerous separatist organizations have adopted radical trajectories. This shift is driven by a combination of factors, including the nature of state responses, the politics of identity construction, and the internal radicalization dynamics within movements. Accordingly, this research centers on the key questions, which is, in the context of repression, what mechanism lead separatists to radicalization? What's more, there are also some sub-questions followed:

How do states in the MENA region utilize securitization discourse to frame and respond to separatist claims? To what extent does this securitized approach contribute to the radicalization of these movements?

In what ways do separatist organizations construct collective identity through the notion of "imagined communities," and how does this process enhance their perceived legitimacy and mobilization capacity?

How does the tension between state repression and identity-based mobilization translate—via radicalization mechanisms—into the adoption of violent strategies?

Finally, how do internal factionalism and strategic divergence function as mediating variables in the pathway toward radicalization?

To address these questions, the study advances the following theoretical hypotheses:

H1 – Securitization Hypothesis: When the state securitizes separatist demands—defining them as existential threats—it adopts coercive and repressive measures. These responses significantly limit the space for peaceful political expression and push movements toward radicalization.

H2 – Identity Construction Hypothesis: In the face of state denial of political legitimacy, separatist organizations construct a narrative of oppressed national identity through imagined communities. This fosters internal cohesion and legitimacy, reinforcing confrontational strategic orientations.

H3 – Radicalization Pathway Hypothesis: The tension between state repression and identity mobilization is mediated through mechanisms such as ideological polarization, factional rivalry, and martyrdom narratives. These mechanisms channel the movement's strategic trajectory toward violence and, in some cases, terrorism.

Literature Review

At the state level, the Copenhagen School's securitization theory posits that governments can reframe certain issues as existential threats to national survival, thereby justifying extraordinary responses—ranging from military repression and political suppression to legal exceptionalism. Barry Buzan and his colleagues have emphasized that such strategies are frequently applied to minority groups, political dissidents, or separatist movements.[1] Christian Davenport's "state repression paradox" further suggests that heavy-handed tactics often backfire, intensifying dissent and increasing the likelihood of violent responses.[2]

This paper argues that in the MENA region, hybrid regimes with limited democratic checks are particularly inclined to employ securitization strategies against separatist movements. Such approaches not only constrain the space for peaceful political expression, but also escalate internal antagonism within movements, fostering a climate conducive to radicalization. Governments in these regimes often invoke narratives of "national unity" and "counterterrorism," equating separatist demands with threats to state security. This rhetorical framing legitimizes extraordinary actions, such as military

[1] Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998), 21–25.

[2] Christian Davenport, "State Repression and Political Order," Annual Review of Political Science 10(2007): 1–23.

crackdowns, party bans, and media censorship. Moreover, the absence of institutional constraints in many hybrid regimes enables highly selective and instrumentalized forms of securitization, entrenching long-term antagonism between the state and marginalized communities.

In his book Break All the Borders, Ariel I. Ahram argues that separatist dynamics in the MENA region stem not only from governance failures, but also from deeper tensions between colonial-era boundary legacies and modern notions of national self-determination.[3] Given the region's particular geopolitical and historical context, separatist struggles are not merely domestic issues—they also challenge the broader regional order. As a result, states are more likely to frame such movements as security threats in order to justify repressive policies under the banner of maintaining stability.

The academic understanding of the concept of "nation" has undergone a significant shift from essentialist to constructivist perspectives. In Imagined Communities, Benedict Anderson famously argued that a nation is an "imagined political community" constructed through shared language, narratives, media, and symbolic practices.[4] This theoretical lens offers crucial insights into how separatist movements—particularly under conditions of repression—strategically construct and sustain group identity. In the MENA region, most separatist organizations confront challenges such as lack of sovereignty, transnational ethnic dispersion, and fragile political legitimacy. As a result, the construction of national narratives becomes central to their mobilization strategies. These organizations often rely on commemorations of martyrs, education in ethnic languages, retellings of historical oppression, and symbolic cartography to foster cohesion and legitimacy, transforming previously fragmented groups into coherent political actors.

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[3] Ariel I. Ahram, *Break All the Borders: Separatism and the Reshaping of the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

[4] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

This identity-building is not only a tool of mobilization but also a means of asserting political space in the face of state denial and institutional exclusion. At the same time, Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way's theory of "competitive authoritarianism" provides a critical framework for understanding how MENA regimes institutionally suppress minority identity formation.[5] In such regimes—despite maintaining the appearance of democratic institutions—governments frequently engage in electoral manipulation, judicial persecution, and parliamentary exclusion to marginalize the political representation of minority groups, while preserving international legitimacy. These strategies effectively prevent separatist organizations from expressing their identity within formal institutional channels, forcing them to turn toward symbolic and non-institutional forms of nation-building. This dynamic tension between institutional denial and identity construction is a key driver of radicalization within many movement.

A substantial body of scholarship has explored the pathways of radicalization, with contributions emerging from both macro- and micro-level perspectives. Macro-level theories typically emphasize structural drivers such as socio-economic hardship, political exclusion, and cultural or religious tensions. A 2015 report by the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) identifies political repression, group identity, and individual psychological vulnerability as key factors fueling violent extremism.[6] While poverty and unemployment are often assumed to be root causes, the report stresses that economic conditions alone fail to sufficiently explain why individuals radicalize.

At the micro level, Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko propose a multi-layered radicalization model, suggesting that the process unfolds across individual (e.g., anger, revenge), group (e.g., polarization, marginalization), and societal (e.g., normalization of violence) levels.[7] Their framework highlights the interaction between personal grievance

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[5] Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

[6] H. Allan, A. Glazzard, S. Jesperson, S. Reddy-Tumu, and E. Winterbotham, *Drivers of Violent Extremism: Hypotheses and Literature Review* (London: Royal United Services Institute, 2015).

[7] Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, *Friction: How Radicalization Happens to Them and Us* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

and broader collective dynamics in shaping militant behavior. Empirical studies further enrich this theoretical foundation. Chenoweth and Stephan demonstrate that state repression of nonviolent dissent often leads to a strategic shift, with movements turning toward violent resistance—particularly when repression is highly targeted or selective.[8] Similarly, Kathleen Cunningham's work reveals that internally fragmented organizations—especially those marked by factional competition—are more likely to adopt extreme strategies.[9] In such cases, more radical factions often outmaneuver moderates in the struggle for dominance and legitimacy.

Together, these studies contribute to what may be termed a repression–fragmentation–radicalization chain of causality, offering a valuable lens for understanding why separatist movements in the MENA region may drift toward violence. However, the existing literature still tends to focus on single-case or structural explanations and lacks systematic analysis of the dynamic interplay between state responses and intra-organizational factionalism. Comparative research specific to MENA remains especially limited in this regard.

To address this gap, the present study adopts a comparative case study approach centered on three emblematic separatist movements: the Kurdish question, the Southern Yemeni separatist movement, and the Western Sahara conflict. By developing a nested analytical framework that links state repression and internal factional dynamics, the study seeks to uncover both shared patterns and context-specific trajectories of radicalization within varied political environments.

Emerging regional research supports this analytical direction. For example, Phillip Smyth argues that in the wake of state collapse in Syria and Iraq, Kurdish forces rapidly militarized and positioned themselves as "security proxies," thus enhancing their political

[8] Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 43–47.

[9] Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham, *Inside the Politics of Self-Determination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

legitimacy.[10] Virginie Collombier's work on Libya underscores how local separatist actors use anti-establishment narratives to construct collective identities, legitimizing ethnic violence in the process.[11] Likewise, Jacob Mundy finds that within the Polisario Front, the marginalization of moderate leadership and growing frustration among younger factions have led to greater receptivity to radical strategies.[12] These examples illustrate how structural repression, legitimacy struggles, and internal power dynamics can jointly shape the trajectory of separatist movements toward violence.

Academic Gaps and Innovations of This Study

In recent years, the study of violent extremism in the MENA region has expanded significantly. However, existing literature tends to focus predominantly on religious radicalism, jihadist networks, and the governance or expansion of Islamist terrorist organizations such as ISIS and al-Qaeda. By contrast, the radicalization potential of secular or nationalist separatist movements has been largely overlooked. Yet cases such as the Kurdish struggle, the Southern Movement in Yemen, and the Western Sahara conflict demonstrate that non-religious separatist groups can also follow a path toward radicalization. These groups often interact structurally with broader extremist ecosystems in the region—through competition over resources, emulation of violent tactics, or the appropriation of legitimacy narratives. This blind spot limits our comprehensive understanding of regional security dynamics and the evolving nature of political violence.

Moreover, much of the existing research tends to treat state repression or internal factionalism as isolated explanatory variables for radicalization, without providing an

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[10] Phillip Smyth, "The Shiite Jihad in Syria and Its Regional Effects," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 2, 2015, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/shiite-jihad-syria-and-its-regional-effects.

[11] Virginie Collombier, "Make Politics, Not War: Armed Groups and Political Competition in Post-Qaddafi Libya," in Out of the Inferno? Rebuilding Security in Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen, ed. Bassma Kodmani and Nayla Moussa (Arab Reform Initiative, 2016), https://www.cidob.org/sites/default/files/2025-04/Libya%20Country%20Report.pdf.

[12] Jacob Mundy, "Failed States, Ungoverned Areas, and Safe Havens: The Terrorization of the Western Sahara Peace Process," in Nationalism and Intra-State Conflicts in the Postcolonial World, ed. Fonkem Achankeng (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015), 139–140.

integrated framework that captures their interaction. In contrast, this study proposes a "Repression–Factionalism–Radicalization" model, aiming to synthesize external securitization strategies with internal organizational dynamics, and to explore how their interplay drives the strategic shift of separatist groups toward violence and terrorism.

This research makes four key contributions. First, it moves beyond the prevailing academic focus on Islamist radicalism by systematically analyzing the radicalization mechanisms of nationalist separatist movements, thus addressing a thematic imbalance in studies of political violence in the MENA region. Second, it combines securitization theory, the theory of imagined communities, and radicalization pathway theory to construct a multi-level explanatory framework encompassing state responses, identity formation, and violent escalation. Third, through a comparative analysis of three emblematic cases—the Kurds, South Yemen, and Western Sahara—it shifts attention to the organizational micro-level, highlighting internal factional fragmentation, youth radicalization, and strategic polarization, which are often underexplored. Finally, the study provides both theoretical insights and practical implications for the design of security policies under authoritarian regimes, conflict mediation strategies, and de-radicalization efforts—thus contributing to the broader agenda of regional governance and international counterterrorism cooperation.

Chapter 1: Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

It's necessary to discuss some related concepts first in order to establish a foundation of the study, To make sense of how and why separatist movements radicalize, we first need to understand what exactly these movements are. Not all political violence or territorial claims are the same, and defining what counts as separatism is an important first step. Also, there's difference between radicalization and terrorism, the first one is more focused on the process while the last is a performance of consequence. Thus, this chapter starts by outlining the basic features of separatist movements, before moving on to key theoretical concepts that help explain their behavior—especially in the complex context of the MENA region.

1.1 Definitions and Features of Separatist Movements

Separatism is not a phenomenon unique to modern politics; its roots can be traced back to the era of ancient empires, where multiethnic populations under imperial rule occasionally sought autonomy or independence. However, the modern conception of separatism emerged predominantly in the 19th century, alongside the rise of the nation-state system, and experienced a sharp escalation after the two World Wars—particularly in the post–Cold War era.

Unlike earlier political ruptures driven by dynastic succession or territorial conquest, modern separatism is largely grounded in ethnonational identity. It often arises from mismatches between political borders and ethnic distributions, and is closely associated with the rise of ethnic-based claims for autonomy, federal arrangements, or full sovereignty.

The mid-20th century wave of decolonization triggered a global surge in separatist demands, as many minority groups—previously under colonial rule—sought to assert their rights through self-governance or statehood. Following the Cold War, a "second wave" of separatism emerged, characterized less by ideological rivalry and more by renewed ethnic self-awareness, as seen in the fragmentation of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia.

In the 21st century, separatist movements have become increasingly protracted and complex, shaped by a dual context of intensified globalization and authoritarian resurgence. These movements now frequently encompass political, identity-based, and security-related dimensions. In regions with a high degree of mismatch between ethnic distribution and state boundaries—such as the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and parts of Southeast Asia—separatist dynamics are particularly volatile, often compounded by fragile state structures and overlapping ethno-political claims.

Thus briefly, separatism refers to collective political movements initiated by distinct groups who are territorially concentrated and aimed to achieve either full independence or substantial territorial autonomy from an existing state, what unites them are not only

physical ethnicity but also consensus on identity. These movements are often rooted in a sense of historical injustice, identity marginalization, and a perceived denial of self-determination, and they typically emerge in regions where political, cultural, and territorial boundaries do not align.[13] In other words, separatist movements manifest in diverse forms, spanning from constitutional negotiations and political mobilization to armed struggle and violent insurgency.[14]

1.2 Radicalization and Terrorism: Conceptual Distinctions

Although the concepts of radicalization and terrorism are frequently discussed together in public discourse and counterterrorism policies, they are fundamentally distinct in academic scholarship. Terrorism is typically defined as "the deliberate use or threat of violence by non-state actors to instill fear and pursue political, religious, or ideological objectives."[15] In contrast, radicalization is more accurately described as a process through which individuals or groups adopt extremist ideas, reject mainstream norms, and may ultimately come to justify or employ violence.[16]

Radicalization is often perceived as a precursor to terrorism, and are often characterized by extreme violence, but not all radicalized individuals engage in violent acts. It's argued that radicalization is a necessary but not sufficient condition for terrorism: while nearly all terrorists have undergone some form of radicalization, not all radicalized individuals become terrorists, to be specific, radicalization is a progressive psychological ascent,

[13] Hechter, Michael. Containing Nationalism. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

[14] Berkii, Tetiana. "Separatism — the Main Threat for Internal Security." Internal security 11 (2020): 109-117.

[15] Alex P. Schmid, The Definition of Terrorism, Vienna: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2011.

[16] Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, "Mechanisms of Political Radicalization: Pathways Toward Terrorism," Terrorism and Political Violence 20, no. 3 (2008): 415–433.

wherein individuals move through stages—from perceived injustice to moral engagement with violence.[17]

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) emphasizes that radicalization is primarily a psychological and identity-driven process, deeply tied to perceptions of injustice, alienation, humiliation, and social exclusion. Although religious extremism is often highlighted, the UNODC warns against over-religious interpretations, stressing that elements like political repression and socio-economic marginalization etc. can be equally powerful drivers.[18]

This paper understands radicalization as a process in which political movements progressively adopt confrontational or even violent strategies, often in response to prolonged grievances or restricted avenues for political expression. The actors involved in radicalization may include individuals, political parties, or organizations, with aims ranging from demands for self-determination and political inclusion to strategic leverage in negotiations. While radicalization does not inherently or inevitably lead to terrorism, it poses a growing risk of violence and social destabilization. Therefore, understanding and addressing the conditions that foster radicalization is crucial for preventing the escalation into acts of extremism or terrorism.In various cases, radicalization is not limited to ethnonationalist separatist movements—it has also been observed among religious, ideological, and anti-regime actors. What unites these different pathways is the experience of blocked access to institutional political participation and the erosion of trust in peaceful reform.

1.3 Repression Strategies under Hybrid Regimes

After the Cold War, the collapse of ideological confrontation led to a shift in focus within international relations and comparative politics toward the expansion and consolidation

[17] Fathali M. Moghaddam, "The Staircase to Terrorism: A Psychological Exploration," American Psychologist 60, no. 2 (2005): 161–169.

[18] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. "Key Issues: 'Radicalization' and 'Violent Extremism'. https://www.unodc.org/e4j/en/terrorism/module-2/key-issues/radicalization-violent-extremism.html

of democratic regimes. Some scholars, most notably Fukuyama argued that liberal democracy would constitute the "end point" of political development.[19] However, democratic transitions in regions such as Latin America, Eastern Europe, and sub-Saharan Africa revealed a more complex and non-linear reality. These experiences gave rise to scholarly interest in hybrid regimes—political systems that straddle the line between democracy and authoritarianism.[20]

Hybrid regimes are defined as systems that adopt formal democratic institutions—such as elections and multiparty competition—but lack the substantive features of democracy, including the rule of law, civil liberties, and meaningful checks on executive power. They combine the formal appearance of democracy with the informal practices of authoritarianism, and often demonstrate significant institutional inconsistency. Given the wide variation among hybrid regimes in terms of institutional strength, electoral competitiveness, and the degree of authoritarian control, scholars have developed more nuanced typologies to distinguish between different forms of hybrid rule.

	Electoral Authoritarianism	**Pseudo-democracy**	**Competitive Authoritarianism**
Fairness of elections	Low – elections are heavily manipulated or symbolic	Superficially high – appears fair but controlled behind the scenes	Medium – elections are held but tilted in favor of incumbents
Independence of institutions	Very low – judiciary, media, etc. controlled by ruling elites	Nominal – institutions exist but are co-opted or powerless	Limited – some autonomy exists but often undermined
Authenticity of of political competition	Minimal – opposition is restricted or banned	Illusory – pluralism is faked or stage-managed	Present but unfair – opposition exists but faces obstacles

[19] Fukuyama, Francis. The End of History and the Last Man. New York: Free Press, 1992.

[20] Zhang, Changdong. 2014. Hybrid Regimes and the Resilience of Authoritarianism. Foreign Theoretical Trends, no. 5: 36–41. (in Chinese)

Figure 1. Comparison of Hybrid Regime Types[21](Author's own)

These three classifications illustrate the spectrum of hybrid regimes. Across all types, ruling elites commonly employ the strategy of securitization to consolidate their power. Securitization theory, advanced by the Copenhagen School of security studies, redefines security not as an objective reality but as a discursive and performative process, which is argued that security can be not only interpreted as an existing issue but also to be structured as a potential threat to a nation or public order, in order to persuade audience. Thus, securitization can be deemed as a speech act, a powerful rhetorical tool that can be strategically employed by political elites. Especially in a hybrid regime, beneath the surface of elections and multiparty systems, the underlying authoritarian mechanisms require legitimation. In this context, securitization—understood as the discursive construction of specific actors or issues as existential threats to the state—serves as a crucial tool to justify exceptional measures and bypass democratic constraints.

1.4 Factionalism in Separatist Movements

In the context of separatist and nationalist movements, factionalism refers to internal political contestation in which subgroups within a broader organization compete over leadership, strategic direction, ideological framing, and representational legitimacy. Scholars argue that factionalism is not merely a symptom of organizational looseness or a simple division between moderates and radicals; rather, it reflects deep divergences over how to pursue collective goals and what the national cause fundamentally entails.[22] These disputes lie at the heart of separatist struggles. As such, inner factionalism matters because it shapes not only tactical initiatives but also core strategic orientations.

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[21] Sources: Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Andreas Schedler, Electoral Authoritarianism: The Dynamics of Unfree Competition (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2006); Fareed Zakaria, "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy," Foreign Affairs 76, no. 6 (1997): 22–43; Larry Diamond, "Thinking About Hybrid Regimes," Journal of Democracy 13, no. 2 (2002): 21–35.

[22] Wendy Pearlman, "Spoiling Inside and Out: Internal Political Contestation and the Middle East Peace Process," International Security 33, no. 3 (2008): 79–109.

The sources of internal fragmentation may include ideological divisions, ethnic or regional identities, resource allocation conflicts, or differing approaches to engaging with the regime—especially in response to repression. Factional structures significantly influence a movement's strategic decisions and organizational cohesion.[23] Excessive fragmentation often results in low operational efficiency and inconsistent messaging. Crucially, factionalism is not a static structural condition but a dynamic process that evolves under external pressure and internal power renegotiation.

This study conceptualizes factionalism as a strategic political process, rather than merely a breakdown in unity. It serves as a platform for internal bargaining and repositioning in the face of repression and competition over scarce resources. Through these internal struggles, the movement's aims may be redefined, its strategic line reoriented, and either radical or moderate factions may rise to prominence.[24] The intensity of internal contestation, in turn, shapes the degree of cohesion and the overall sustainability of the separatist movement.

1.5 Construction of the 'Repression–Factionalism–Radicalization' Analytical Model

This study proposes a mechanism-based model to explain how repression leads to the radicalization of separatist movements, not in a direct or deterministic way, but through the strategic and discursive structures embedded in hybrid regimes. Unlike pure authoritarian systems, hybrid regimes must preserve a certain democratic legitimacy while maintaining authoritarian control. This contradiction is often resolved through securitization, which becomes a routine governance practice: dissent is framed as a threat, and political violence is justified under the guise of national security.

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[23] Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín and Elisabeth Jean Wood, "Ideology in Civil War: Instrumental Adoption and Beyond," Journal of Peace Research 51, no. 2 (2014): 213–226.

[24] Sidney Tarrow, Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

Through securitization, repression is not only enacted but also legitimated. It becomes systematic and politically palatable—executed via laws, surveillance, arrests, media control, and institutional exclusion. Yet the effects of repression are not uniform. This model identifies internal factionalism as the key variable that mediates and moderates its impact. Repression can exacerbate disagreements within a movement, pushing factions to redefine strategy, blame one another, or compete for survival. When moderation appears ineffective or is actively silenced by the regime, radical factions gain legitimacy and support, portraying themselves as the only viable alternative.

Factionalism thus functions as a pivot point: movements with severe internal fragmentation are more likely to experience radicalization, especially when repression delegitimizes moderate options. Conversely, groups with high internal cohesion, strong leadership, and access to nonviolent channels may pursue alternative paths such as strategic restraint, international advocacy, or legal action.

The diagram below summarizes the model. It reflects a process that is contingent, interactive, and rooted in political structures—rather than in ideology or grievance alone. By analyzing this pathway, the study provides a more nuanced account of how repression and internal dynamics interact to shape separatist radicalization.

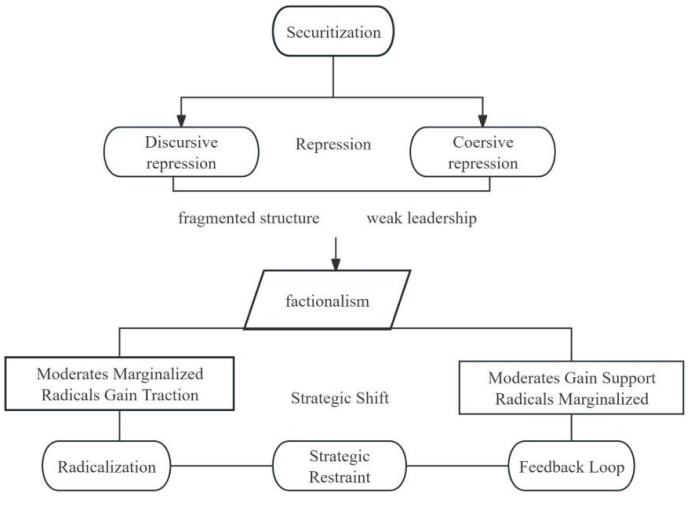

Figure 2： A Conditional Mechanism Model (Author's own)

What worth concerning is that repression does not automatically result in internal fragmentation. Instead, factionalism only emerges under specific conditions, particularly when movements exhibit pre-existing structural fragmentation or weak leadership. These conditions reduce the organization's capacity to coordinate a unified response to repression and increase the likelihood of strategic divergence. Once internal factionalism materializes, it may empower radical factions while marginalizing moderates—or, conversely, allow moderate actors to retain or regain dominance. This model also highlights the non-deterministic outcomes of repression. Movements may radicalize, opt for strategic restraint, or reconfigure their internal dynamics. These outcomes depend not only on repression itself but also on internal structures and external conditions. The feedback loop captures how the state may leverage the movement's chosen path to further justify its coercive strategy, reinforcing the cycle of repression and resistance.

Chapter 2: Methodology and Case Selection

In order to examine why and how separatist movements in the MENA region evolve from autonomy demands to violent radicalization, this chapter outlines the research methodology and case selection strategy employed in this study. By integrating a comparative case study design with process-tracing techniques, the chapter aims to establish a rigorous analytical framework through which causal mechanisms can be identified and validated.

2.1 Research Design: Comparative Case Study Method

This study adopts a comparative case study approach to examine the radicalization trajectories of separatist movements in the MENA region. The choice of this method is driven by its ability to capture complex, context-dependent causal mechanisms, both within individual cases and across different political and historical environments. In contrast to large-N statistical analyses—which may overlook the nuanced interactions among variables—comparative case studies allow for a deep, process-oriented exploration of how repression, internal dynamics, and strategic choices unfold over time.

When studying radicalization, such an approach is particularly well-suited. Radicalization is rarely a linear or universal process; it is often shaped by historical grievances, organizational structures, and the evolving strategies of state actors. A comparative design enables the researcher to not only identify common patterns across cases but also to account for divergent pathways—for instance, why some movements radicalize under pressure while others remain restrained or adapt non-violent strategies. It also provides a foundation for tracing causal pathways: how repression and internal factionalism interact, and under what conditions they lead to more confrontational outcomes.

To this end, the study selects three cases: South Yemen, Western Sahara, and the Kurdish movement. These movements share core features: contested nationhood, statelessness, and prolonged conflict with hybrid regimes. Yet they also differ in meaningful ways—including in levels of repression, international visibility, and organizational cohesion—making them suitable for structured, focused comparison. This design aims to unpack not

just whether radicalization occurs, but how and why, illuminating the mechanisms that drive or deter radicalization in contested political spaces.

2.2 Process Tracing and Mechanism Verification

To examine whether the proposed analytical model operates as theorized, this study applies process tracing as its core qualitative method. In political science, process tracing is defined as an analytic tool for drawing descriptive and causal inferences from diagnostic pieces of evidence[25], and is particularly suited for evaluating causal mechanisms within small-N case studies. Rather than testing variable correlations, process tracing focuses on mechanism verification, that is, whether the hypothesized sequence of events actually occurred and operated in the way the theory predicts[26]. In this case, It means to identify the presence, absence, or failure of intermediate steps such as securitization, discursive and coercive repression, factionalism, and radicalization within different contexts. The aim is not simply to confirm whether radicalization occurred, but to determine whether it followed the specific causal pathways outlined in the analytical framework developed in the previous chapter. Through this approach, the study not only evaluates the validity of the model, but also deepens our understanding of how and why radicalization emerges or fails to emerge in different separatist contexts.

This study uses process tracing in each case — South Yemen, Western Sahara, and the Kurdish movement to assess whether repression was followed by internal fragmentation, whether radical factions gained dominance, and whether these shifts followed the logic predicted by the model. To do so, it relies on diagnostic evidence which may be characterized by public discourse, policy shifts, leadership statements, external reactions, and reported organizational dynamics.[27] Mechanism verification in this context means confirming whether repression influenced radicalization through the identified pathways,

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[25] Collier, David. "Understanding Process Tracing." Political Science and Politics 44, no. 4 (2011): 823–830.

[26] Beach, Derek, and Rasmus Brun Pedersen. Process-Tracing Methods: Foundations and Guidelines. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013.

[27] Ibid.

and whether variations in outcomes are due to breaks or reinforcements within the mechanism.

2.3 Rationale for Case Selection

This study focuses on three separatist movements—South Yemen, Western Sahara, and the Kurdish regions—selected for both their structural comparability and their variation in outcomes. Each has experienced prolonged statelessness, contested national identity, and repression under hybrid regimes that blend democratic institutions with authoritarian control. These shared characteristics make them ideal for a most similar systems design (MSSD)[28], which holds broader structural conditions relatively constant in order to better observe how key mechanisms—such as repression, securitization, and internal factionalism—produce different radicalization trajectories.

At the same time, the selected cases differ in meaningful ways. They vary in their levels of internal cohesion, degree of international recognition and support, and the strategic orientation of their leadership. These differences create the necessary space to explore how similar structural pressures may interact with internal dynamics to yield divergent paths some moving toward radicalization, others toward strategic restraint or organizational collapse.

While the study concentrates on the MENA region, it briefly references the Basque separatist movement in Spain as a conceptual contrast. The Basque case emerged under a consolidated democracy with stronger rule of law and political pluralism, and lacked the systematic securitization and coercive repression seen in hybrid regimes. Still, it experienced internal factionalism between radical and moderate actors. By highlighting such differences, the Basque case helps to clarify the structural boundaries of the model proposed in this study.[29] It reminds us that the causal chain outlined here, beginning with securitization and leading to repression, fragmentation, and radicalization is not

[28] Lijphart, Arend. "Comparative Politics and the Comparative Method." American Political Science Review 65, no. 3 (1971): 682–693.

[29] Woodworth, Paddy. Dirty War, Clean Hands: ETA, the GAL and Spanish Democracy. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001.

universally applicable, but rather structurally dependent on the presence of authoritarian features within a regime.[30]

In this sense, the Basque case serves not as a formal unit of analysis, but as a theoretical boundary marker, a way of acknowledging that the model works within specific political contexts. Recognizing these limitations allows the research to remain focused while also staying conceptually open to future comparative extensions beyond the MENA region.

2.4 Data Sources and Research Limitations

This study relies on a diverse set of qualitative data sources to trace the causal relationships between repression, internal factionalism, and radicalization in separatist movements. These sources include academic publications, historical narratives, human rights reports, news media, official state communications, and statements issued by separatist groups themselves. Rather than treating these materials as mere background information, they are used as diagnostic evidence—that is, as indicators that help confirm whether key mechanisms such as securitization, discursive repression, or organizational fragmentation were actually present in each case and how they developed over time.

To strengthen the credibility of findings, the study uses a strategy of cross-verifying evidence across multiple types of sources. Special attention is given to materials that capture how political actors frame their identities, justify their actions, or respond to external pressure such as speeches, manifestos, and public announcements. In cases where direct access to internal decision-making processes is limited, particularly in semi-authoritarian or conflict-ridden contexts, secondary reports from reputable international organizations (e.g., Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the United Nations) are used to fill in the gaps. When needed, translation and regional expertise are consulted to ensure the accuracy of interpretation.

[30] Goertz, Gary, and James Mahoney. A Tale of Two Cultures: Qualitative and Quantitative Research in the Social Sciences. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012.

At the same time, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the availability and quality of data vary significantly across the cases—especially in settings where freedom of information is restricted. Second, many sources carry a degree of political bias: official narratives may understate repression, while activist or exiled groups may exaggerate it. Third, the internal dynamics of factionalism are often difficult to observe directly and must be reconstructed from fragmented, and sometimes conflicting, accounts. These challenges are common in research on contentious movements, but the use of multiple data points and a mechanism-oriented approach helps ensure that the analysis remains both empirically grounded and theoretically focused.

Chapter 3: Case Study I — The Kurdish Movement

This chapter begins the empirical analysis of this study by applying the proposed mechanism to the case of the Kurdish movement, with a primary focus on Turkey and Syria. This case was selected for its rich history of factional evolution, long-standing struggle against state repression, and its complex relationship with both domestic and international actors. It offers an especially illustrative setting for observing how hybrid regimes utilize securitization and repression, and how these strategies affect the internal dynamics and radicalization trajectories of separatist movements.

3.1 Historical Context and Movement Evolution

The roots of the Kurdish question lie in the geopolitical upheavals that followed the collapse of the Ottoman Empire after World War I. In the wake of the empire's disintegration, the victorious Allied Powers redrew the map of the Middle East, carving up Ottoman territory into new mandates and nation-states. Within this process, the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres recognized the Kurdish people as a distinct group with a potential claim to statehood. Article 64 of the treaty explicitly outlined the possibility of Kurdish independence, should the population in the designated area express such a desire.[31]

However, the treaty was never implemented. As Turkish nationalist forces led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk consolidated power and Western interests shifted, Kurdish aspirations were quickly sidelined. The subsequent Treaty of Lausanne, signed in 1923, which established the modern Republic of Turkey and replaced Sèvres, omitted all references to the Kurds.[32] From that moment onward, the Kurdish population—numbering several million—found themselves divided between four newly formed states: Turkey, Iraq (under British mandate), Syria (under French mandate), and Iran (then known as Persia). None of these states granted the Kurds recognition as a national group, nor did they offer institutional channels for autonomy.

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[31] Treaty of Sèvres, August 10, 1920, Articles 62–64, in The Treaties of Peace, 1919–1923, vol. 2, edited by Lawrence Martin (New York: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1924), 941–942.

[32] David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004), 115–120.

In Turkey, the new republican regime embarked on an aggressive campaign of ethno-nationalist homogenization. Kurdish language, cultural practices, and identity markers were outlawed; even the word "Kurd" was officially replaced with the euphemism "mountain Turk."[33] Several uprisings, including the Sheikh Said rebellion (1925), the Ararat revolt (1927–1930), and the Dersim uprising (1937–1938), were brutally crushed by the state. Ankara treated these revolts not as political grievances but as existential threats to the integrity of the Turkish nation, leading to decades of martial law and militarized governance in the southeast.

Elsewhere, the Kurdish experience followed similarly repressive patterns, albeit with regional variation. In Iraq, the British initially encouraged Kurdish autonomy to counterbalance Arab nationalism, only to abandon those promises when strategic priorities shifted. The short-lived Kingdom of Kurdistan (1922–1924) and the Mahabad Republic in Iran (1946) were early Kurdish attempts at statehood, both of which were dismantled by central governments with support from global powers.[34] In Iran, the Pahlavi monarchy oscillated between co-optation and coercion, while in Syria, the Ba'athist regime denied citizenship to large portions of the Kurdish population, rendering them effectively stateless.[35]

These divergent but uniformly oppressive policies laid the groundwork for fragmented Kurdish movements, each shaped by the institutional structures and geopolitical logics of the states in which they emerged. Rather than a singular nationalist trajectory, the Kurdish question evolved into a series of localized yet interconnected struggles—each one shaped by the failures of post-imperial state formation, international diplomacy, and domestic authoritarianism.

3.2 State Repression and Political Exclusion

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[33] Kerim Yildiz, The Kurds in Iran: The Past, Present and Future (London: Pluto Press, 2007), 45–48.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Harriet Allsopp and Wladimir van Wilgenburg, *The Kurds of Northern Syria: Governance, Diversity and Conflicts* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2019), 56–63.

The repression of Kurdish identity across the Middle East has taken both physical and discursive forms, reflecting a combination of coercive and symbolic control. States like Turkey, Iran, and Syria have engaged in what the Copenhagen School calls securitization—the framing of political and cultural claims as existential threats to the state. This process legitimizes extraordinary measures, not only through the use of direct force (coercive repression), but also through dominant narratives that criminalize and delegitimize identity itself (discursive repression).

In Turkey, these two forms of repression have worked in tandem. Discursively, Kurdish identity has been framed as incompatible with Turkish national unity. Celebrations like Newroz are portrayed as thinly veiled separatist rituals, while Kurdish-language media and political speech are cast as subversive.[36] The long-standing label "mountain Turks" sought to erase Kurdish ethnicity altogether. At the same time, coercive repression has included the forced evacuation of over 3,000 villages during the 1990s, mass displacement, and the prosecution of elected officials from Kurdish parties like HEP, DEP, and HDP.[37] These legal and military interventions are justified through the discursive claim that peaceful political actors are merely fronts for terrorism.

In Iran, the dual logic persists. Kurdish cultural expression is occasionally tolerated, but political mobilization is consistently repressed under security-related charges. Organizations such as PJAK are labeled terrorist entities, and community leaders are often imprisoned for threatening "national unity."[38] Kurdish-language education is heavily restricted, and cultural organizations frequently face shutdowns. Here again, discursive repression labels cultural assertion as political deviance, while coercive repression ensures that these expressions are policed and punished.

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[36] Nicole F. Watts, *Activists in Office: Kurdish Politics and Protest in Turkey* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2010), 25–32.

[37] Human Rights Watch, *Displaced and Disregarded: Turkey's Failing Village Return Program* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2002), https://www.hrw.org/report/2002/10/30/displaced-and-disregarded/turkeys-failing-village-return-program.

[38] Clingendael Institute, *The Kurdish Struggle in Iran*, https://www.clingendael.org/publication/kurdish-struggle-iran-power-dynamics-and-quest-autonomy.

Syria exhibits a more structural form of discursive repression through invisibilization. For decades, the state denied citizenship to hundreds of thousands of Kurds, stripping them of legal personhood.[39] Cultural repression was embedded in national policy: Kurdish names were banned, the language prohibited, and cultural associations dissolved. Simultaneously, the Arab Belt program functioned as a coercive tool of demographic engineering, forcibly relocating Kurds from strategic borderlands. This fusion of narrative and force made Kurdish identity not just unrecognized but actively erased from the public sphere.

Together, these strategies reflect how discursive and coercive repression reinforce one another: the former constructs identity-based claims as illegitimate or dangerous, and the latter operationalizes that logic through state violence. Securitization thus becomes not merely a speech act but a framework for repression. In environments where culture is suspect and protest criminalized, some Kurdish actors come to view violent resistance not as a preference, but as the last available response to structural exclusion.

3.3 Organizational Fragmentation: PKK, YPG, TAK and PJAK

The Kurdish nationalist movement has been shaped not only by external repression but also by internal strategic fragmentation across different state contexts. Four major organizations—PKK, YPG, TAK, and PJAK—reflect distinct ideological directions and geographic focuses within the broader struggle for Kurdish autonomy and rights. While these groups share foundational roots in Abdullah Öcalan's ideology and Kurdish ethno-nationalism, their trajectories have diverged significantly due to the nature of state repression and shifting regional geopolitics.

Founded in 1978, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) initially pursued an independent Kurdish state through Marxist-Leninist insurgency, launching armed rebellion against the Turkish state in 1984. Over the decades, it shifted toward demanding cultural rights and

[39] Human Rights Watch, Group Denial: Repression of Kurdish Political and Cultural Rights in Syria, https://www.hrw.org/report/2009/11/26/group-denial/repression-kurdish-political-and-cultural-rights-syria.

democratic autonomy, inspired by Öcalan's theory of democratic confederalism. Throughout the 1990s, the Turkish state pursued extensive counterinsurgency campaigns in the southeast, which involved the destruction of entire villages, extrajudicial killings, and the forced displacement of hundreds of thousands of Kurdish civilians.[40] In a historic development, the PKK announced its official dissolution and the end of armed struggle on May 13, 2025, following its 12th Congress and a strategic directive from Öcalan. The decision represents a significant shift in the Kurdish movement in Turkey, as the PKK repositions itself as a civilian political actor advocating for constitutional reform and peace through nonviolent means and was welcomed by many Kurdish political parties and human rights groups. Some members of the Turkish opposition also gave positive responses.[41]

The People's Protection Units (YPG), established in 2011 as the military wing of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), have been the main Kurdish military force in northern Syria. The YPG gained international recognition for its role in defeating ISIS, particularly in the battles for Kobani and Raqqa.[42] It was central to establishing the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), a project inspired by democratic confederalism emphasizing local governance, secularism, and gender equality.

However, since the partial withdrawal of U.S. troops in 2019 and intensified Turkish military operations, the YPG has come under increasing pressure. The region it governs faces security threats, limited recognition, and mounting economic hardship. While Turkey views the YPG as a Syrian extension of the PKK, the YPG insists on its distinct local mandate.

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[40] Jongerden, Joost. *The Settlement Issue in Turkey and the Kurds: An Analysis of Spatialisations, Modernity and Kurdish Resistance*. Leiden: Brill, 2007.

[41] "Kurdish PKK Group Announces End to Armed Struggle." Reuters, May 13, 2025. https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/kurdish-pkk-dissolves-after-decades-struggle-with-turkey-news-agency-close-2025-05-12/.

[42] Wladimir van Wilgenburg and Harriet Allsopp, The Kurds of Northern Syria: Governance, Diversity and Conflicts (London: I.B. Tauris, 2019), 88–91.

The Kurdistan Freedom Falcons (TAK), first emerging in the early 2000s, represent a radical offshoot of the Kurdish movement, widely believed to have splintered from or operated as a proxy for the PKK.[43] The TAK has claimed responsibility for multiple urban bombings targeting Turkish state institutions, military forces, and occasionally civilians. Although the PKK has officially denied organizational ties, the blurred boundary between strategic disavowal and operational overlap remains contested.

TAK's attacks are generally interpreted as a response to the securitization of Kurdish identity and the perceived ineffectiveness of negotiated solutions. Since 2018, TAK's visibility has declined sharply, suggesting a period of strategic dormancy or internal fragmentation.[44]

The Free Life Party of Kurdistan (PJAK), founded in the early 2000s, operates primarily in the Kurdish regions of western Iran. Closely aligned with the PKK both ideologically and structurally, PJAK demands cultural rights, gender equality, and democratic federalism within the Iranian political system.[45] It has clashed with Iranian security forces and remains designated as a terrorist organization by the Iranian state.

In recent years, PJAK's military activities have diminished under sustained pressure from the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). While it maintains a limited armed presence, PJAK now appears to focus more on ideological outreach and civil resistance, mirroring the PKK's shift in strategic posture.[46]

3.4 From Autonomy Demands to Terrorist Strategies

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[43] Raffaello Pantucci and Sinan Ulgen, *The Kurdistan Freedom Falcons: A Profile of the Arms-Length Proxy of the PKK*, Combating Terrorism Center (CTC), 2020, https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-kurdistan-freedom-falcons-a-profile-of-the-arms-length-proxy-of-the-kurdistan-workers-party/.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Eva Savelsberg and Siamend Hajo, "The Kurdish PJAK Movement and the Quest for Democracy in Iran," Middle East Policy 18, no. 2 (2011): 122–132, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4967.2011.00480.x.

[46] Ibid.

At the outset, a number of Kurdish groups pursued cultural rights and political autonomy rather than independence. Organizations like the PKK first requested democratic self-rule in southeast Turkey, where a large majority of the population is Kurdish, but without separating from the state. The Kurdish movement did not begin with violence. It started with demands for dignity — language rights, equitable political representation, cultural recognition. Nevertheless, as negotiations failed time and again and after the worst state repression experienced by the Kurds and the securitization of Kurdish identity, some parts of the movement shifted to more radical and violent forms of action. This section details how the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) progressed from seeking political demands to carrying out armed insurgency and a subsequent demobilization. It also contrasts the trajectory with more radical offshoots such as TAK.

The PKK has always sought to solve the Kurdish issue through negotiation. From the 1990s, the group has announced a number of unilateral ceasefires: in 1993, 1999, and 2013. These were typically ruptured by Turkish military action or violence attributed to splinter PKK groups. Every breakdown further diminished trust — from both sides. The best (and last) opportunity for this was the peace process of 2013–2015 under the AKP government.[47] Letters from the imprisoned leader of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan, were read in public, and discussions with Turkish intelligence officials suggested a new start.[48] But the process came to an abrupt halt in 2015. Most think it was prompted by the HDP's electoral success, which threatened the government's authority.[49] Violence returned swiftly. Curfews, urban warfare and escalated military operations in Kurdish towns reopened old wounds and confirmed that the window for peaceful dialogue was shut — again. It was these repeated setbacks that caused a lot of those in the PKK to lose hope in

[47] *Kurdistan Workers, Party (PKK) Ceasefires*, ANF News, "Ceasefire processes and their outcomes (VIII)," April 30, 2023, https://anfenglishmobile.com/features/ceasefire-processes-and-theiroutcomes-viii-78768.

[48] Abdullah Öcalan, "Öcalan's Historical Newroz 2013 Statement," *Free Öcalan*, March 21, 2013, https://www.freeocalan.org/news/english/ocalans-historical-newroz-statement-2013.

[49] Kareem Shaheen, "A Last Gasp for the Peace Process in Turkey," *New Lines Magazine*, June 1, 2021, https://newlinesmag.com/argument/a-last-gasp-for-the-peace-process-in-turkey/.

the peace talks. Moderates were arrested or silenced, and hardliners advanced. In that context, violence didn't seem like the first choice — it seemed like the only one left.[50] May 13, 2025 saw the announcement of a historic change by the PKK, to cease military activities. The decision was made at the group's 12th Congress and came after a call from Öcalan, according to reports.[51] The statement attributed the move to a shifting political landscape, a growing civilian fatigue, the need to "pave the way for peace through democratic channels" — a possible reference to ceding space to civilian politicians not under military control. The reaction was mixed. The ruling was applauded by many Kurdish political parties and international observers. A few Turkish opposition figures cautiously applauded the move. But skeptics in the movement were worried that disarmament would cede the sole leverage it had, especially in a state that remained hostile to Kurdish demands. The disarmament was strategic not only in the tactical sense, but symbolic. It was an indication that after decades of war, the PKK was willing to risk its own obsolescence for a shot at peace. But not all sides went that route. The Kurdistan Freedom Falcons (TAK) - believed to have broken away from the PKK in the early 2000s - said it would never negotiate.[52] TAK gained a reputation for high-profile urban bombings in cities such as Ankara and Istanbul, hitting state institutions and at times civilians. TAK's creation is largely viewed as a direct outcome of the criminalization of even non-violent Kurdish activity. Their communiqué was blunt: if the state criminalises all dissent as terrorism, then they will live up to the charge. Even at supposedly weakened levels (perhaps because of internal fractures, or security operations), TAK's existence is a metaphorical cloud over the entire Kurdish movement. The fact that the PKK announces its decision to disarm and that TAK increases the level

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[50] "Caught In the Middle of a Civil War Between Turkey and Its Kurds," *Time*, June 16, 2016, https://time.com/4371205/caught-in-the-middle-of-a-civil-war-between-turkey-and-its-kurds/.

[51] "Kurdish PKK Ends 40-Year Turkey Insurgency, Bringing Hope for Peace," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, May 12, 2025, https://www.rferl.org/a/kurdish-pkk-turkey-disband-disarm-ocalan/33411438.html.

[52] Raffaello Pantucci and Sinan Ulgen, "The Kurdistan Freedom Falcons: A Profile of the Arm's-Length Proxy of the Kurdistan Workers' Party," *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*, March 2020, https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-kurdistan-freedom-falcons-a-profile-of-the-arms-length-proxy-of-the-kurdistan-workers-party/.

of violence reveals a very stark division in notions of the development of the Kurdish struggle. Where one faction envisioned a future in democratic reform, the other wielded pain as protest. These are not merely ideological distinctions — they're responses to structural constraints.[53] When peaceful roads are shut, and moderate voices are penalized, extremism becomes more justifiable. It's not an exception, It's a symptom. The story of radicalized Kurds is not the story of a people attracted to violence for its own sake; it is the story of a people shut out of the political process time and time again, deprived of their language, and painted as dangerous for merely demanding rights. There is nothing that says violence is their opening card. It was the final available card to play.

[53] Dilar Dirik, "Criminalizing Our People: Social Impacts of the PKK Ban," *Truthout*, November 29, 2015, https://truthout.org/articles/criminalizing-our-people-social-impacts-of-the-pkk-ban/.

Chapter 4: Case Study II — South Yemen

Following the discussion of the Kurdish nationalist movement and its evolution across state borders, this chapter shifts focus to a different regional context: the former state of South Yemen. While the Kurdish case illustrates how ethnic and linguistic minorities respond to repression and fragmentation, the case of South Yemen highlights a different dynamic—secessionist revival grounded in a prior history of sovereignty. This chapter explores how the legacy of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) continues to shape separatist demands in the south, with a focus on the period leading up to and following the unification of North and South Yemen in 1990.

4.1 Historical Origins and the 1990 Unification

South Yemen, officially known as the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY), was established in 1967 following the end of British colonial rule in Aden. As the only openly Marxist-Leninist state in the Arab world, the PDRY aligned itself closely with the Soviet Union and its satellite states.[54] It pursued radical socialist reforms such as nationalization of industry, land redistribution, women's emancipation, and secular education, setting it ideologically and institutionally apart from its northern counterpart, the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR). Despite these ambitions, the PDRY faced internal factionalism, repeated coups, and economic stagnation—most notably the 1986 civil war in Aden, which killed thousands and severely weakened the ruling Socialist Party.[55]

Meanwhile, the YAR maintained a conservative tribal-republican model, more reliant on Gulf aid and Western support. Despite their ideological divergence and historic mistrust, unification became increasingly attractive by the late 1980s, largely due to shifting international dynamics: the Cold War was ending, the Soviet Union was in decline, and

[54] Fred Halliday, *Revolution and Foreign Policy: The Case of South Yemen, 1967–1987* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

[55] Samuel Ramani, "Russia's Strategic Balancing Act in Yemen," *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, May 1, 2019, https://agsiw.org/russias-strategic-balancing-act-in-yemen/.

economic conditions in both Yemens were deteriorating.[56] Motivated by pragmatism, leaders from both states resumed dialogue and agreed to unify. On May 22, 1990, the Republic of Yemen was officially declared.

The unified state adopted a multiparty democratic constitution and a power-sharing arrangement between northern and southern elites. President Ali Abdullah Saleh (from the north) remained head of state, while southern leader Haidar Abu Bakr al-Attas was appointed prime minister.[57] The military and civil institutions were theoretically integrated, and parliamentary elections were scheduled to follow. On the surface, this arrangement promised a new, pluralistic national framework built on inclusion and cooperation.

However, beneath the rhetoric of unity, structural inequalities and mutual mistrust soon re-emerged. In practice, northern elites retained disproportionate control over critical institutions, including the military, intelligence services, and key economic assets. Southern military officers were gradually pushed out or demoted. Oil revenues from fields located in southern governorates were increasingly channeled through northern networks, fueling a perception of economic exploitation.[58] The dominance of northern tribal and patronage-based politics clashed with the PDRY's centralized, secular legacy, creating a deepening sense of alienation among southern officials and citizens alike.

Tensions mounted after the 1993 parliamentary elections, which produced a fragile tripartite coalition between the northern General People's Congress (GPC), the southern Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP), and the Islamist Islah party. Disagreements over resource distribution, military control, and administrative appointments paralyzed the government. Political assassinations targeting southern figures, combined with aggressive northern military movements, convinced many in the south that unification was being undermined.

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[56] Noel Brehony, "From Chaos to Chaos: South Yemen 50 Years After the British Departure," *Asian Affairs* 48, no. 3 (2017): 428–444. DOI: 10.1080/03068374.2017.1361249.

[57] Raiman Al-Hamdani and Helen Lackner, "War and Pieces: Political Divides in Southern Yemen," European Council on Foreign Relations, January 2020.

[58] Fred Halliday, Yemen: the tortuous quest for unity, 1990–94, International Affairs, Volume 73, Issue 3, July 1997, Pages 600–601, https://doi.org/10.2307/2624330

In May 1994, amid spiraling tensions, southern leaders declared the re-establishment of the Democratic Republic of Yemen. A short but intense civil war followed, ending with the military defeat of the south in July 1994.

Rather than fostering reconciliation, the post-war period marked the consolidation of northern hegemony. President Saleh's regime restructured state institutions to eliminate southern autonomy. Southern military units were dissolved, public-sector jobs were slashed, and southern officers were forcibly retired. Educational content and media narratives glorified unification and dismissed southern grievances. Many southerners viewed this period not as post-war reconstruction but as punitive occupation.[59]

As political and economic marginalization deepened, frustration in the south gave rise to grassroots activism. By the mid-2000s, military retirees and unemployed youth began organizing protests demanding fair treatment, local development, and eventual autonomy. These protests evolved into the Southern Movement (Al-Hirak al-Janoubi) by 2007, combining civic mobilization with a new separatist narrative: that the 1990 unification was not a merger of equals, but a "northern annexation of the south."[60] This reinterpretation of the past became central to Al-Hirak's mobilization strategy and was later adopted by the Southern Transitional Council (STC) and other armed actors following the outbreak of the civil war in 2015.

In retrospect, the 1990 unification once framed as a visionary project of national unity—has become a symbol of betrayal and marginalization for many in the south. The failure to uphold the principles of partnership, equality, and representation not only destabilized the unified state but also laid the groundwork for renewed calls for secession.[61] These calls continue to shape Yemen's political landscape, illustrating how unfulfilled

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[59] Afrah Nasser, "Who Are South Yemen's Separatists?" *Al Jazeera*, September 20, 2019. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/9/20/who-are-south-yemens-separatists

[60] Human Rights Watch, "In the Name of Unity: The Yemeni Government's Brutal Response to Southern Movement Protests," December 15, 2009. https://www.hrw.org/report/2009/12/15/name-unity/yemeni-governments-brutal-response-southern-movement-protests

[61] Samuel Ramani, "Russia's Strategic Balancing Act in Yemen," Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, May 1, 2019. https://agsi.org/analysis/russias-strategic-balancing-act-in-yemen/

constitutional promises and unresolved regional inequalities can reignite long-dormant divisions.

4.2 The Rise of the STC and Fragmentation of the Southern Movement

Founded in 2007, the Southern Movement (al-Hirak al-Janoubi) is a secessionist movement that was organized in response to the marginalization of southern Yemenis after the June 1994 Civil War. First a youth-led peaceful movement calling for southern rights and self-determination, al-Hirak transformed to create the Southern Transitional Council (STC) in 2017. This part sheds light on the origin of the STC, its goals, organization, and wider implications on the political scene in Yemen.[62]

In the years following unification, the south became increasingly discontented with its political and economic disenfranchisement. In 2007, a group of laid off army officers and jobless young men founded the Southern Movement, or al-Hirak, to air these grievances. The movement took its name from the so-called Dignity Camp and made its presence felt through frequent rallies and street protests, in particular in Aden, calling for the secession of South Yemen from the Republic of Yemen.[63]

In April 2017, President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi sacked Aidarus al-Zoubaidi as governor of Aden, accusing him of disloyalty. This led to mass demonstrations in Aden and the "Aden Historic Declaration" on May 4, 2017. This year the Southern Transitional Council (STC) was formed and al-Zoubaidi took an office as the council's president.[64] The council drew on the governors of five southern governorates and two government ministers, marking a dramatic change in southern politics.

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[62] Day, Stephen W. "The Role of Hirak and the Southern Transitional Council." In *Yemen in the Shadow of Transition*, 253–270. Cham: Springer, 2020.

[63] Peter Salisbury, "Yemen's Southern Powder Keg," International Crisis Group, Report No. 233 (2019): 4–9

[64] GCC Rejects Formation of Yemen Transitional Council," *Al Jazeera*, May 13, 2017. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/5/13/gcc-rejects-formation-of-yemen-transitional-council

The STC presents itself as the true representative of southerners and calls for the re-establishment of the independent state of South Yemen.[65] It is led by prominent southern politicians, and has a military wing called the Security Belt Forces. The establishment of the council represented a shift from a loose al-Hirak movement to an organized political structure with strong secessionist aspirations.

While the STC has taken the helm in southern politics, it has failed to bring all southern factions together.[66] Some factions of al-Hirak have reservations about the STC, especially its alliance with the UAE and its top-down style of leadership. There are also regional rivalries, with some regions such as Hadramawt and Mahra being resistant to STC's authority and in favour of local structures of government, criticizing it for failing to create inclusive platforms for decision-making.This fragmentation has undermined the STC's ability to present a coherent southern agenda on the national or international stage. It also raises critical questions about the feasibility of a unified southern state should secession ever materialize.

The STC's discord with the internationally recognized government further took and down turn in August 2019, with STC forces seizing Aden. Saudi Arabia consequently attempted to broker the Riyadh Agreement in November 2019 as a conduit to incorporate the STC into the government structure and provide a united front to combat the Houthi rebels. [67]Yet the agreement has been tested by violations on both sides.

In April 2022, President Hadi delegated his powers to the newly established Presidential Leadership Council (PLC), which had STC President al-Zoubaidi as a member.[68] The move was believed to be aimed at bringing all groups opposed to the Houthi to

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[65] Brehony, Noel. "The UAE's Role in the Yemen Crisis." In *Yemen in the Shadow of Transition*, 131–147. Cham: Springer, 2020.

[66] Öztürk, Selim. "The Saudi−UAE Divide Over the Yemen Quagmire." *Middle East Policy*, 2023.

[67] Forster, R. "Yemen's 'Handshake Moment': What Other Peace Processes Can Tell Us About the Riyadh Agreement." *Conflict*, 2019.

[68] Emerald Expert Briefings. "Yemeni Separatists May Be Forced Back to the Table." *Emerald Expert Briefings* (oxan-db252447), 2020.

collaborate under one leadership. However, the STC continue to call for southern secession, reflecting the lack of political unity in Yemen.[69]

The STC has many hurdles to overcome in its pursuit of independence for the south. At home, it needs to overcome regional differences and to integrate the countless southern factions at its service. It must also maneuver and make decisions in a complicated relationship with the Yemeni government, the Saudi-led coalition and the international community. Its objectives are also compliclake the current humanitarian crisis whilst trying to deliver good governance in areas under islamist control.

Its legitimacy, however, is disputed despite increasing influence.[70] It still depends on UAE support, has only weak grassroots democratic representation, and has a fractured opposition in the south making it difficult to engage in a unified southern front. Moving forward, the fate of the STC and southern Yemen generally relies on its ability to establish inclusive governance[71], obtain political recognition, and provide security in one of the world's most volatile environments.

4.3 Confrontation with the Central Government and State Repression Mechanisms

The southern separatist bloc that brokered the deal, the Southern Transitional Council (STC), has gone from a protest movement calling for secession to a de facto ruling body in southern Yemen since its guerrilla-style formation in 2017.[72] Its relationship with the internationally-backed Yemeni government has been increasingly hostile, contentious

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[69] Ibid.

[70] Amnesty International. "Yemen: Southern Transitional Council Must End Crackdown on Civic Space." March 2024. https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/03/yemen-southern-transitional-council-must-end-crackdown-on-civic-space/.

[71] The New Arab. "The STC Struggles to Define Its Future in a Fragmented Yemen." August 26, 2024. https://www.newarab.com/analysis/stc-struggles-define-its-future-fragmented-yemen.

[72] Stephen W. Day, "The Role of Hirak and the Southern Transitional Council," in *Yemen in the Shadow of Transition* (Cham: Springer, 2020), 253–270.

and fraught with occasional armed clashes.[73] It has its roots in President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi's decision to sack Aidarus al-Zoubaidi, as governor of Aden, in April 2017 over accusations of disloyalty. The action prompted mass protests and the "Aden Historic Declaration" on May 4, 2017, calling for southern autonomy. A week later, the STC was formally formed, with al-Zoubaidi as chairman, and with the military backing of the UAE along with the languages of a number of southern politicians.[74]

The STC quickly built its own security structures, notably the Security Belt Forces, and took over Aden and other southern cities. In so doing it also started to defy the central government ideologically and militarily. They erupted into open conflict in August 2019 when STC forces overran the government's key institutions and infrastructure in Aden, effectively excluding the central government from the city.

Saudi Arabia also brokered the Riyadh Agreement in November 2019 to try to paper over differences in t he two sides. Under the agreement, the STC is supposed to be brought back into the government and have a share of power in the cabinet, and its armed forces should be integrated into the country's own forces. Nevertheless, the parties frequently broke the terms of this agreement, accusing each other of bad faith. In April 2020, the STC declared self-rule across southern Yemen in a move that has eroded prospects for the already shaky deal.

The STC has faced both military opposition as well as de-legitimation processes to it in law and media as part of its state's method of repression. Pro-government media repeatedly portray the STC as a UAE proxy and a threat to Yemen's sovereign state. Elsewhere, in governorates like Lahij and Abyan, government-aligned security forces have conducted crackdowns on STC supporters and activists. Human rights organisations have also condemned STC practices in its areas of control and its

[73] Peter Salisbury, *Yemen: National Chaos, Local Order* (London: Chatham House, 2017).

[74] Reuters. 2017. "Thousands Protest at Yemen President's Sacking of Southern Leaders." *Reuters*, May 4, 2017.

crackdown on speech or arrest of opponents.but the central involvement has been more procedural and is as defense against assults on the unity of the Republic.[75]

The formation in April 2022 of the Presidential Leadership Council (PLC), of which al-Zoubaidi is a member, would seem to provide a formal mechanism for power-sharing. However this framework has largely failed in addressing fundamental disputes. The STC has continued to stand alone in its decision-making, armed forces and even foreign relations, particularly with the United Arab Emirates (UAE). In effect, it operates as a parallel authority in the state, which undermines the claims of the central government to exclusive sovereignty.

The stand-off between the STC and the Yemeni government reflects an underlying contest over legitimacy, power and national identity. There are two perceptions of the STC, from the central authorities, the council is a threat for the national unity, and to itself it is the legitimate voice of the historically oppressed South. This deadlock is not just a failure of negotiators, but a deep institutional and ideological rift within Yemen's post-unification political order.

Without being addressed in a truly inclusive, power-sharing way, the stand-off threatens to deepen, destabilize the south of Yemen and complicate wider national and peace-building efforts.[76]

4.4 Parallel Governance: The Rise of the STC and Strategic Shifts

The journey of the Southern Movement towards radicalization in Yemen has been molded by multi-dimensional state behavior, securitization, and internal factionlism. As the movement began as a peaceful, bottom-up campaign for recognition of southern Yemenis who were marginalized, particularly former members of the army and unemployed youths, systematic rejection of their political space led to the escalation of both rhetoric and tactics.

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75 Human Rights Watch, "Yemen: Events of 2020," World Report 2021, https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/yemen.

76 Farea Al-Muslimi and Adam Baron, "The Limits of Saudi Arabia's Vision for Yemen," *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 2020

After the civil war of 1994 between the north and the south and the latter's integration under northern hegemony, dissatisfactions in the south arising from complaints of unemployment, loss of land, and exclusion from the political power were first expressed through peaceful demonstrations. And in 2007 the Southern Movement (al-Hirak al-Janoubi) held massive demonstrations demanding more autonomy or full independence. Nevertheless, the state response was largely repressive. In reporting on multiple incidences between 2007 and 2009 where security forces fired live ammunition against peaceful protesters, Human Rights Watch pointed to civilian deaths and mass arrests. This repression did not only intensify feelings of marginalisation among southern communities, but it also clearly communicated that peaceful protests will not be responded to with dialogue.[77]

The state also practiced discursive repression by characterizing activism in the south as a threat to the national unity of Yemen, and its leaders as foreign agents or traitors.[78] The government by securitizing southern identity also delegitimized moderate, nonviolent demands by the fact of their desire, opening a space through which more radical actors could claim a larger portion of southern movement legitimacy.

The emergence of the STC in May 2017 was an important strategic development. Consolidating southern control Initially created as a response to President Hadi sacking the governor of Aden, Aidarus al-Zoubaidi, the STC swiftly took over all aspects of power from the top down in the south, becoming a literal parallel power. [79] It created its own armed wing "the Security Belt Forces" with the backing of the United Arab Emirates. Though the STC now claimed to be the incarnation of southern interests, it also represented the transformation of the movement from essentially a civil idea, emerging from the Yemen civil society struggle, to a primarily militarized form.

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[77] Human Rights Watch. 2009. *In the Name of Unity: The Yemeni Government ,s Brutal Response to Southern Movement Protests*. December 15, 2009.

[78] GIGA. 2021. "The Future of South Yemen and the Southern Transitional Council." *GIGA Focus Middle East*, No. 2. https://www.giga-hamburg.de/en/publications/giga-focus/the-future-of-south-yemen-and-the-southern-transitional-council

[79] Yemen Policy Center. 2020. "Competition in al-Dhali: The STC Takes the Upper Hand." *Yemen Policy Center*. https://www.yemenpolicy.org/competition-in-al-dhali-the-stc-takes-the-upper-hand/.

Tensions increased in August 2019 when STC forces took over Aden from the UN-recognised government. Even when Saudi Arabia sought to reconcile them through the Riyadh Agreement that year, poor implementation and violations on both sides made it largely irrelevant.[80] The STC announced self-rule in southern provinces unilaterally in April 2020, an unprecedented step to assert its own sovereignty as a rejection of the current political arrangement.

This radicalization was not a sudden process, but a response to long-term exclusion and betrayal. Securitization of southern demands delegitimized moderates and the use of coercive force produced martyrs and steel in equal measure. In such a context, radicalization was opted in as a strategic necessity, not chosen, as the Brits would say, as an ideological preference.[81]

The STC's increasing military and political assertiveness also coincided with internal splintering. It came to dominate the south and the al-Hirak movement as a whole, but proved incapable of unifying it. Regional figureheads in Hadramawt and Mahra, for example, rebuffed STC control and called for greater local accountability.[82] These rivalries within the south made it difficult for STC to display a united front and made a mockery of its claims to be broadly representative.

Worldwide, the STC's support from the UAE led to a deep polarization of views. On one hand, Emirati backing brought with it military muscle and financial muscle, but also allegations of foreign manipulation, especially from other southern factions and parts of civil society. The STC's dependence upon external sponsorship revealed the shakiness of its domestic legitimacy and the viability of their governing model.

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[80] Al Jazeera. 2019. "Separatists Seize Aden Presidential Palace, Government Military Camps." *Al Jazeera*, August 10, 2019. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/8/10/separatists-seize-aden-presidential-palace-govt-military-camps.

[81] Human Rights Watch. 2019. "Yemen: Riyadh Agreement Ignores Rights Abuses." *Human Rights Watch*, December 12, 2019. https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/12/12/yemen-riyadh-agreement-ignores-rights-abuses.

[82] Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. 2024. "Saudi-Emirati Divergences Lead Hadhramawt to a Crossroad." *Carnegie Endowmentfor International Peace*, December 2024.

In conclusion, the radicalization of the Southern Movement was a conjunctural dynamic that was to some extent determined by structures and political choices. A combination of acts that have cracked down on peaceful opposition, identity securitization, and fragmentation of the southern political map have led to change in tactics from a decentralized civil disobedience to a militarized and institutionally linked type of struggle.[83] But the momentum toward radicalization itself will undoubtedly persist as long as southern demands remain politicized from the perspective of national security and dialogue mechanisms to bring them in are not revived.[84]

[83] Forster, R. (2017). The Southern Transitional Council: Implications on Yemen's Peace Process. *Middle East Policy*, *24*(3), 133–144.

[84] Critical Threats. 2022. "Understanding Military Units in Southern Yemen." *Critical Threats*, September 2022. https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/understanding-military-units-in-southern-yemen.

Chapter 5: Case Study III — Western Sahara

Contrastingly, the examples of the Kurdish and South Yemeni movements illustrate how repression and factionalist politics can result in further division and radicalization and that this is not always the case is the Western Sahara. Decades of occupation, exile, and systemic repression notwithstanding, the Polisario Front remained practice, with few exceptions, immune to the extremist turn.[85] This chapter details how colonial legacies, Moroccan state repression and the international legal architecture in the context of the Western Sahara dispute have formed the movement's pathway. It specifically looks at how securitization narratives, dual-track repression, and quest for international legitimacy as explanatory factors in the Polisario Front's enduring commitment to non-violent struggle and organizational discipline. The case demonstrates that external legitimacy and internal cohesion can serve as a guard against radicalization even amidst protracted conflict.

5.1 Colonial Legacy and the Rise of the Polisario Front

The conflict in Western Sahara cannot be understood without first confronting its colonial history. As one of the most recently decolonized African territories, Western Sahara (as Spanish Sahara) had been colonized by Spain for almost 100 years, from the late 19th century until Spain withdrew in 1975. Spain, meanwhile, never developed a substantial political institutions or means of self-determination for the Sahrawi people. Instead of establishing a local elite or preparing the colony for independence, the regime concentrated on exporting of resources (especially phosphates and fish) and the pacification of opposition by force. This failure of institutions would prove to be part of the cause of the post colonial power vacuum.[86]

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[85] Stephan, Maria J., and Jacob Mundy. 2006. "From Guerrilla Resistance to Mass Nonviolent Struggle: The Western Sahara Conflict." *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies* 8 (3). https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/olj/jmss/jmss_2006/v8n3/jmss_v8n3d.pdf.

[86] Zunes, Stephen, and Jacob Mundy. 2010. "The Nonviolent Struggle for Self-Determination in Western Sahara." In *Nonviolent Social Movements: A Geographical Perspective*, edited by Stephen Zunes, Lester R. Kurtz, and Sarah Beth Asher, 231–248. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

In 1973, triggering colonial repression and growing pan-Arab nationalist movements throughout North Africa, the Polisario Front (Known in full as Frente Popular de Liberación de Saguía el-Hamra y Río de Oro), composed of Sahrawi students and exiles formed. The organisation described its struggle as an anti-colonial liberation war as well as a nationalist campaign to achieve independence. Its prompt mobilization depended on grassroots mobilization very much among Sahrawi nomads and refugees. Polisario quickly emerged as the sole organised political-military group promoting Sahrawi self-determination, in contrast to the tribal elites that merely provided few concessions to the colonisers, or collaborated and were left weakened in the wake of French and Spanish decolonisation processes.[87]

During the early 1970s international pressure on Spain to decolonize mounted. The UN has consistently upheld the right of the Sahrawi to self-determination, with the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruling in its 1975 advisory opinion that there were no ties of territorial sovereignty between Western Sahara and Morocco or Mauritania—directly denting Moroccan territorial claims. However, pressured by both Morocco and Mauritania, Spain signed the Madrid Accords in November 1975 (Seisdedos Agreement), by which it directly transferred administrative power of the territory to these two remaining states without any Spanish consultative – let alone democratic – process. [88]
This power vacuum led to a regional showdown. Morocco and Mauritania partitioned the reemerging state, with Morocco acquiring the northern two-thirds of the territory, while the Polisario Front controls the sparsely populatedSahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, and Mauritania the remaining southern third, though its control of the southern portion was largely nominal. [89]Algeria, itselfjust recovering from a bitter anti-colonial war, gave

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[87] Human Rights Watch. 2020. "Western Sahara: Morocco Cracks Down on Activists." *Human Rights Watch*, December 18, 2020. https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/12/18/western-sahara-morocco- cracks-down-activists.

[88] International Court of Justice. 1975. *Advisory Opinion on Western Sahara*. October 16, 1975. https://www.icj-cij.org/case/61.

[89] U.S. Department of State. 1976. "The Polisario Front." *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977–1980, Volume XVII, Part3, North Africa*.
https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v17p3/d221.

Polisario crucial logistical, military and diplomatic backing. Mauritania, which had twice been invaded to prevent its entry into the conflict, had by this time lost a part of its own territory to the advancing forces and felt that it could no longer afford being part of the occupation and had withdrawn its claims, leaving Morocco as the sole occupier of Western Sahara, as it had already resumed control of much of the territories in the previous months.[90]

The Polisario countered by declaring the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) on February 27, 1976, from Tindouf, Algeria. SADR declared a republic and a government in exile, and continued its guerrilla war against Moroccan forces. As time passed, the organisation changed from a loose-knit resistance movement into a well-organized nationalist organization with a bureaucracy and education system that operated out of its refugee camps.[91]

Not only did colonial heritage define the legal and geopolitical fault lines of the conflict, but it also infused the political identity of the Sahrawi people with a deep sense of betrayal and desertion by external forces. The lack of a referendum on decolonization is often cited in Sahrawi nationalist rhetoric as the area's principle grievance, and a focal point around which to rally. The arbitrary drawing of boundaries by some past colonial power or another ensured that the resulting territory would be volatile for decades.[92]

In conclusion, the emergence of the Polisario Front must be seen as emanating from the colonial dynamics of exclusion, territorial engineering and sovereignty negation. It was due not only to the repression of Spanish colonialism, but the neo-colonial theft of its

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90 Ibid.

91 Human Rights Watch. 2008. *Human Rights in Western Sahara and in the TindoufRefugee Camps*. December 19,2008. https://www.hrw.org/report/2008/12/19/human-rights-western-sahara-and-tindouf-refugee-camps.

92 Zunes, Stephen, and Jacob Mundy. 2010. *Western Sahara: War, Nationalism, and Conflict Irresolution*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.

people and resources by Morocco and Mauritania which it fought.[93] Colonization's legacy speeded up the constitution of Sahrawi national consciousness and the lasting institutional structure of the Polisario as a disciplined, state-like actor vowing to the principle of self determination.

5.2 Moroccan Repression Policies and Sovereignty Dispute

After the withdrawal of Spain in 1975, as a result of the Green March and the Madrid Accords, Morocco controlled two-thirds of this region of the Sahara. It cast this annexation as the "completion of territorial integrity," a narrative based on the monarchy's historical sovereignty over the Saharan tribes.[94] To substantiate such claim, the Moroccan state underwent a two-faced process: the securitization of Sahrawi resistance and the institutionalization of repressive governance.

Morocco's policies towards the Sahrawis, in this dual coercion and assimilation approach, have switched between these two models of state-society control: the coercive exclusionary and the developmental inclusionary. First, institutional suppression has entailed restrictions on freedom of expression, the proscription of pro-independence bodies, systematic surveillance and the exploitation of elections and legal structures to sideline divergent views. Violent crackdown, on the other hand, has included police brutality, arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearance, torture, and the use of emergency laws to stifle protests.[95]

A hallmark of repression took place during the 2005 Sahrawi Intifada in which peaceful protests calling for social justice and independence in Laayoune and other towns were

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[93] Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic. 1976. *Proclamation of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic*. February 27, 1976. https://porunsaharalibre.org/en/2023/02/27/february-27-1976-proclamation-of-the-independence-of-the-sahrawi-arab-democratic-republic-5/.

[94] Amnesty International. 2005. *Morocco/Western Sahara: Sahrawi Human Rights Defenders Under Attack*. November 24, 2005. https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde29/008/2005/en/.

[95] Amnesty International. 2021. *Morocco/Western Sahara: Rights Trampled Amidst Protests, Violence, and Repression*. July 2021. https://www.amnesty.org/en/wpcontent/uploads/2021/07/mde290202010en.pdf.

brutally repressed by Moroccan police. Human rights groups like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have reported patterns of abuse, frequently with impunity.[96]

Meanwhile, Morocco has followed a twin-track approach of infrastructure investment and cultural integration to legitimise its claim to sovereignty. Development projects in the area — housing projects, roads and subsidies — have been positioned as attempts to "integrate" the region into the nation, but they are often instruments of co-option that offer more symbolic than substantive empowerment.[97] And government-funded colonisation of Moroccan settlers in the territory tips the demographic balance, adding another twist to the likelihood of a free independence referendum.

One critical justification underpinning Morocco's position has been its deployment of securitization discourse; painting the Sahrawi independence struggle as a threat to national security and regional stability. In such perspective, Polisario is not an authentic liberation movement, but an actor of regional destabilization, abetted on the path to terrorism and subservient to foreign interests. This securitized framing legitimates the exception the state claims for itself and rallies domestic support, alongside delegitimating Sahrawi political identity to global publics.[98]

Then, international ambivalence has supported indirectly the Moroccan reading. While the United Nations has maintained the principle of self-determination and established a mission, MINURSO, to monitor a planned referendum, a lack of progress has permitted Morocco to consolidate its hold.[99] The diplomatic impasse, further fueled by close ties

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[96] Equal Rights Trust. 2010. *Torture and Discrimination in Western Sahara*. https://www.equalrightstrust.org/ertdocumentbank/Torture%20and%20Discrimination%20in%20Western%20Sahara.pdf.

[97] Human Rights Watch. 2005. *Morocco's Truth Commission: Honoring Past Victims During an Uncertain Present*. November 2005. https://www.hrw.org/reports/2005/morocco1105/morocco1105.pdf.

[98] Arab Center Washington DC. 2020. "The Polisario Front, Morocco, and the Western Sahara Conflict." https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/the-polisario-front-morocco-and-the-western-sahara-conflict/.

[99] Sousa, Constança. 2024. "A Forgotten Mission, An Unrealized Referendum: The Failure of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara." *FLUX: International Relations Review*. https://fluxirr.mcgill.ca/article/view/168/133.

between Morocco and France, Gulf states and, increasingly, Israel, creates a permissive environment for repression to persist.[100]

This is part of a broader pattern of state repression in which the Moroccan regime proved able to use legal manipulation, coercion, and the securitization of public policy to squash a nationalist movement without fragmenting society and driving people to terrorism or indiscriminate violence on a massive scale. This two-tiered strategy challenges established conceptions of state violence and underscores the obstacles to Sahrawi political mobilisation and the context for the severely limited strategic choices open to the Polisario Front.[101]

What is remarkable here is that, even though the coercive repression has been enduring and harsh, the Polisario Front has not broken up or leveraged indiscriminate violence. In contrast to groups like the PKK, which fragmented and gave rise to militant offshoots, the Polisario is still organizationally unified and ideologically consistent.[102] It is because of this non-fragmentation that the potential for radicalization has been much limited, proving the value of both internal unity and international legitimacy in containing the spread of arms in separatist struggles.

5.3 Organizational Discipline and Internal Restraints against Radicalization

The Polisario Front appears to be a striking case where organizational discipline and internal unity act as powerful brakes on radicalization — instead of a flashpoint — even under severe and prolonged coercive repression.[103] Unlike other secessionist groups like the PKK in Turkey, or the PDRY in South Yemen, which fragmented and fostered

[100] AP News. 2025. "UK latest country to back Morocco's plan in disputed Western Sahara." *AP News*, June 1, 2025. https://apnews.com/article/c9d32485e082c1a406207021eb26409f.

[101] International Crisis Group. 2023. *Paving the Way to Talks on Western Sahara*. October 30, 2023. https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/western-sahara/paving-way-talks-western-sahara.

[102] European Council on Foreign Relations. 2024. “Still Free to Choose: What Polisario's Legal Win Means for EU Ties with Morocco and Western Sahara.” ECFR. https://ecfr.eu/article/still-free-to-choose-what-polisarios-legal-win-means-for-eu-ties-with-morocco-and-western-sahara/.

[103] Purcell, Alex. 2024. "The Polisario Front: An Organisational Overview." *Grey Dynamics*. March 21, 2024. https://greydynamics.com/the-polisario-front-an-organisational-overview/.

radical splinter groups, the Polisario has kept its ranks together. The Data in this chapter support this claim that the movement's strategic trajectory was shaped by the movement's internal organizational structure and unity.[104]

The Polisario Front's top-down authority structure, represented by its long-standing leadership and one-party command structure, has proved effective in deterring dissenting factions. Concentration of power in the Secretary-General and the Politburo have also simplified the decision-making process, maintained strategic consistency. This centralised system is underpined by a collective of institutions functioning in the refugee camps of Tindouf, that mix education, political training and military service in an integrated system of community governance.[105]

It has resulted in ideological purity and stunted the growth of internal rivals. Many young Sahrawis are growing more and more frustrated at a diplomatic process that has been largely stagnant for years, but they have relatively few institutional avenues to organize outside of traditional structures, or advocate for anything beyond incremental change. The internal architecture of the organization, in this sense, has the effect of bottling up pressures that could otherwise break the organization apart, or toward an extreme. Indeed, the absence of internal fragmentation has allowed the Polisario to keep a non-military, diplomatic strategy, confirming its international legitimacy and bypass the delegitimating effects of terrorism.

Moreover, internal socialization instruments for a shared national liberation narrative, highlighting discipline, sacrifice, and legal enforcement of emancipation. These same refugees are also being exposed to: (a) the political education of the cadres in the refugee community; (b) a communal life in the refugee camps in which the movement plays an important role in delivering certain basic level of services and in the socialization and

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[104] Sousa, Constança. 2024. "A Forgotten Mission, An Unrealized Referendum: The Failure of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara." *FLUX: International Relations Review*. https://fluxirr.mcgill.ca/article/view/168/133.

[105] Arab Center Washington DC. 2020. "The Polisario Front, Morocco, and the Western Sahara Conflict." *Arab Center Washington DC.* https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/the-polisario-front-morocco-and-the-western-sahara-conflict/.

identity formation. Such internal mechanisms have made consensus on non-radical course possible even when things look radically different from the external peripherals.

There is empirical support to this judgment. The Polisario Front has not engaged in major violent operations or terrorist acts since a 1991 cease-fire was brokered by the United Nations.[106] No armed splinter factions have arisen which advocate unfocused violence, and no credible evidence has linked the movement to transnational extremist networks. There have been sporadic demands from angry youth for a revival of armed struggle, but these have not coalesced into any sort of nor structured militant group. Unline those cases in which fragmentation dismembered or radicalized in complete splinters — like Turkey's PKK-TAK break, or in Palestine, between Fatah and Hamas — the Polisario Front has stubbornly held on to strategy cohesion, rationalizing its rank and file to not engage in any escalation or extremism.

In short, the example of the Polisario Front shows that strong organizational discipline and internal coherence can provide an independent barrier against radicalization. This contradicts the idea that repression invariably produces violence and points rather to the importance of organizational variables as mediators ofthis relation.

5.4 The Role of Organizational Coherence

The case of the Polisario Front demonstrates a perverse effect between repression and radicalization. Although many separatist movements who suffer sustained and brutal repression have radicalized, the Polisario Front has never adopted terrorist methods or endorsed blind violence.[107] This divergence leads to a fundamental question: how was it that the Polisario Front was politically resilient in maintaining strategic restraint in the face of coercive onslaught?

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[106] Arab Center Washington DC. 2020. "The Polisario Front, Morocco, and the Western Sahara Conflict." *Arab Center Washington DC*. https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/the-polisario-front-morocco-and-the-western-sahara-conflict/.

[107] Porges, Matthew, and Christian Leuprecht. 2016. "Refraining from Terror: The Puzzle of Nonviolence in Western Sahara." *Revista CIDOB d'Afers Internacionals* 112: 149–170.

It is argued in this chapter that it was internal discipline and the lack of fragmentation that was instrumental in preventing more radical paths being taken by the movement. Unlike the situation in which state repression led to structural cleavages that grew into radicalization, the centralization of decision making and tight shackling of ideology restricted such polarizing tendencies to emerge within the hierarchy of the Polisario.[108]

Organizational discipline here does not mean merely hierarchical control, but also ideational coherence in which there are mechanisms for enforcing ideological homogeneity, loyalty to the leadership, repressing factionalism and aligning tactical moves with strategic objectives. This internal discipline was a way of regulating between each other and not just of keeping the unity, but to prevent that internal pressure would once more lead to a violent spiral.

The Moroccan state has utilized a gamut of repressive tactics—from brute repression through political ostracization and securitization rhetoric—in its bid to delegitimize Sahrawi aspiration for self-determination. It's under such circumstances that many movements could have resorted to extremism in response to such an act as an escalatory response. But in the case of the Polisario Front, its disciplined organization, its strategic logic, and its integrated refugee governance system created an antidote for those sympathies.[109]

Discipline also allowed the movement to decline provocations that were seeking to provoke violent reaction. Repression by Moroccans, especially at episodes such as the 2005 Sahrawi Intifada, targeting peaceful demonstrators included excessive use of force. But Polisario's leadership pursued a policy of diplomacy and nonviolence. It is this strategic patience – which is not tactical but institutionalised within the party's ability to

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[108] Stephan, Maria J., and Jacob Mundy. 2006. "From Guerrilla Resistance to Mass Nonviolent Struggle: Western Sahara." *Journal ofMilitary and Strategic Studies* 8 (3): 1–32.

[109] Arab Center Washington DC. 2020. "The Polisario Front, Morocco, and the Western Sahara Conflict." https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/the-polisario-front-morocco-and-the-western-sahara-conflict/.

contain reactionary impulses among sections of its support – that helps maintain the status quo.

Most importantly, the movement's legacy of legalism and international legitimization has further limited the appeal of violent radicalization. The price of forfeiting international recognition or provoking a backlash from donors seems far too great for any short-term gain from deploying extreme methods. Therefore, suppression cannot be used as a sufficient explanation for strategic effectiveness; it needs to be considered in combination with organizational elements.

To conclude, the Polisario Front shows us that radicalization is not a given under extensive coercive suppression. Where that unity of the organisation, loyalty and disciplined hierarchy continue, the non-violent approach may still have life despite external provocation.

Chapter 6: Comparative Analysis

After having delved into three separatist movements (Kurdistan, South Yemen, and the Sahrawi) in depth, this chapter shifts to a comparative approach. Each of these instances faced different levels of state repression, internal organization or disorganization and different radicalization outcomes.[110] Very nice and very balanced, but the object here is not only to compare these movements in a descriptive way but also to explain the causal mechanisms through which repression, factionalism, and radicalization are connected in each of these cases.

Using a process-tracing method the chapter reveals when and how specific factors, such as coercive repression or organizational fracturing, represented a game-changing moment. Although each of the three incidents received a coercive state response, not all resulted in radical splinter factions or terrorist methods. The explanatory power of internal organisational discipline and of strategic consistency is pointing out as a key issue when trying to understand those contradictions. In the following sections, this thesis compares the three movements on several dimensions, and consider what the preconditions for the growth of extremist factions in each case are, yet, finally reflect on the theoretical implications of the repression–factionalism–radicalization model.[111]

6.1 Comparison of Core Variables across Cases

The empirical foundation for the comparative matrix Set out hereunder each variable value reflects case specific evidence as presented in Chapters 3 to 5. The nature of the repression is identified according to the use of coercive state force and discursive securitization (i.e., framing movements as threats). Fragmentation is coded for the appearance of splinter groups or serious leadership crises. radicalization as an output is operationalised as the resort to terrorist techniques, indiscriminate violence, or the

[110] Bakke, Kristin M. 2015. *Decentralization and Intrastate Struggles: Chechnya, Punjab, and Québec*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[111] Beach, Derek, and Rasmus Brun Pedersen. 2019. *Process-Tracing Methods: Foundations and Guidelines*. 2nd ed. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press

creation of militarised factions. These estimates have the goal of making it possible to detect the patterns of causality across cases.[112]

This chapter juxtaposes the cases of the three separatist movements studied in this thesis，the Kurdish Movement, the Southern Movement (including PDRY and STC) in Yemen and the Polisario Front in Western Sahara within an integrated framework to examine the interaction between repression, organizational discipline, fragmentation and radicalization dynamics. The aim is to code each of the key variables in each case to determine the necessary and/or sufficient conditions for radicalization or moderation.

It should be mentioned that the Kurdish movement entails several prominent groups, such as the YPG in Syria and PJAK in Iran, but this paper concentrates largely on the PKK given its centrality in the Turkish case and its more evident course of internal fragmentation and radicalization (e.g. the emergence of TAK). The YPG and PJAK, though ideologically rooted in the PKK, have made their own prints and imprints for themselves, often colored and fraught through their particular geopolitical arenas and international partnerships. A full treatment of them would necessitate a separate analytical framework that falls beyond the purview of this thesis.

Case	Organizations	Repression Type	Fragmentation	Radicalization Outcome
Kurdish Movement	PKK → TAK	High coercive + discursive repression	Yes	Yes

[112] Bakke, Kristin M. 2015. *Decentralization and Intrastate Struggles: Chechnya, Punjab, and Québec*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Yemen	PDRY → STC	Low → High coercive repression (post-unification)	Yes	Partial
Western Sahara	Polisario Front	Dual-track (coercive + developmental repression)	No	No

Figure 3： Comparative Matrix of Radicalization Drivers(Author's own)

This comparative matrix shows that fragmentation consistently coincides with radicalization, especially when coupled with strong repression and organizational fragility. In contrast, the Polisario case — despite severe repression — avoided radical escalation, suggesting that internal unity and strong discipline can act as critical buffers. This supports the central hypothesis of this study: that repression alone does not predict radicalization — its outcome is shaped by intervening organizational factors.[113]

In the following sections, we further explore the specific mechanisms through which radical factions emerge, the causal chains that distinguish violent and non-violent outcomes, and the theoretical insights that can be drawn from this comparative framework.

6.2 Conditions for the Ascendancy of Radical Factions

Rogue elements of separatist movements do not simply arise from nowhere; they tend to be created through a process in which the state's repression weaves together with internal organizational collapse. This section offers an in-depth process-tracing of the

[113] Gurr, Ted Robert. 2000. *People Versus States: Minorities at Risk in the New Century*. Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press.

enabling conditions that foster the growth of such factions, specifically examining the PKK in Turkey and the Southern Movement in Yemen. In either instance, coercive repression by the state laid the groundwork for radicalization, but it was the weakening of organizational discipline and the fracturing of opposition that facilitated the rise of extremist splinters.

In the Kurdish context, the decisive turning point was the rupture of peace talks between the Turkish state and the PKK in 2015. The securitization narrative advanced by the Turkish state was sharpened, and a series of arrests, village razing, and curfews ensued. No mass organization stepped in to oppose this clampdown. Rather, more youthful and radical parts of the PKK grew fed up with the peace process, not least the perceived impotence of nonviolent mobilization. This created the Kurdistan Freedom Falcons (TAK), a breakaway that practiced greater levels of indiscriminate and terrorist tactics and operations in the cities. The schism was more than tactical — it laid bare a deeper ideological division in the Kurdish movement about the legitimacy and effectiveness of violence.

And in Yemen, the splintering was more architectural. After unification between the north and the south of Yemen and the sidelining of southern elites, the first Southern Movement (al-Hirak) was peaceful in its form. But lack of centralised leadership and a clear-cut ideology made it vulnerable to disintegration. While the Houthi war intensified, and the state instruments of the Yemeni state collapsed, military forces such as the [Southern Transitional Council] took advantage of the void. The STC's ascent was not solely a result of outside repression but also was a reflection of internal incoherence inside the original Hirak movement. While al-Hirak had been based around an early civil resistance ethos, STC favoured military force, supported by militias and external backers, chiefly the UAE.[114]

The Polisario Front in Western Sahara, in turn, did not fall apart despite experiencing decades of repression, both coercive and discursive, by Morocco. Centralized leadership

[114] The Guardian. "Crisis in Yemen as Aden Separatists Declare Self-Rule." April 26, 2020. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/26/crisis-in-yemen-as-aden-separatists-declare-self-government.

of the Front, underpinned by its governance of the Tindouf refugee camps, promoted doctrinal unity and discouraged the proliferation of radical offshoots. A younger generation of Sahrawis have become increasingly frustrated, yet the movement's ingrained culture of discipline, political education, and respect for international law prevented internal splits. Unlike the PKK or the STC, the Polisario's unity served as a containment against radical impulses.

Hence, the rise of radical groups is not just a product of repression, but of the interaction of repression with internal susceptibility. Fragmentation and ideological disintegration provide fertile ground for extremists. Conversely, in cases of maintained organizational cohesion, even long-term repression does not necessarily produce a radicalized trajectory.[115]

6.3 Differences in Radicalization Outcomes and Explanations

While the three separatist movements reviewed in this thesis all met with high levels of repression, their paths towards or away from radicalization present different results not only based on the amount of repression they experienced, but on how this repression interacts with the organizations' internal structures and their mediating context. It is the case of the Polisario Front, in particular, which defies deterministic assumptions that coercive pressure leads automatically to violent escalation.

Zooming out, the PKK and the Polisario Front appear to have several structural characteristics that, in theory, might have facilitated the emergence of radical splinter groups: Both are to a certain degree operating in exile; both recruit among the disillusioned youth; and both move in intricate ethnic and religious landscapes. But it was only the PKK that suffered such strategic fragmentation and the birth of groups such as TAK. What is it that accounts for this divergence?

The question here is rooted in the Polisario's internal discipline and institutional strength. Polisario secured a high level of ideological unity and command centralization

[115] Pilkington, Hilary. 2023. "Radicalization as and in Process: Tracing Journeys through an 'Extreme-Right' Milieu." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*. https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2023.2169896.

despite Moroccan oppression—from mass arrests to discursive securitization. Refugee camp governance in Tindouf is a welfare system and, more importantly, a political socialization system which cultivates loyalty, patience, and procedural restraint. This insulated design, impervious to tribal manipulation or external ideological contamination, left little room for splinter movements to thrive.

The PKK, on the other hand, experienced domestic frustration and tactical radicalization following the breakdown of the Turkish peace process in 2015. With little internal mechanisms for mediating ideological divisions, the group's radical wing split off to form TAK, which becomes modeled on the basis of indiscriminate urban violence. The ideological command of the PKK was porous which made it exposed to a factional escalation.[116]

In addition, resource limitations determined the results. Unlike the PKK, which relied on wider transborder networks—together with black finance—Polisario experienced tighter command over its mobilization infrastructure, reflecting in large part its containment within Algerian-based (tribe) camps. This bottleneck of resources [notwithstanding], the operational freedom of rogue attackers the channeling of dissent into internal dialogue, rather than the splintering of violent action, ironically.[117]

Finally, there was the moderating hand of international legitimacy. Polisario's deep commitment to UN arbitration and international law had them reputationally based on the opposition to radicalization. Terrorism would undermine its diplomatic position, cut off aid from international donors, and compromise its legal entitlement to self-determination. In this environment, repression did not breed extremism so much as reinforce institutional prudence.

In short, radicalization is not a mechanical reaction to repression. It is formed by a constellation of internal and external elements: organizational unity, fragmentation

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[116] Gunes, Cengiz. "Turkey's New Left." *New Left Review*, no. 107 (September–October 2017).

[117] Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. "Simmering Discontent in the Western Sahara." March 12, 2012. https://carnegieendowment.org/2012/03/12/simmering-discontent-in-western-sahara-pub-47461.

potential, resource configurations and international limitations. The experience of the Polisario Front suggests that movements can sustain pressure without radicalizing — as long as internal cohesion and strategic restraint are deeply institutionalized.

6.4 Theoretical Implications of the 'Repression–Factionalism–Radicalization' Model

The cross-case results in this study debunk determinist theories of radicalization by showing how internal organizational variables mediate between repression and violent action. The experience of the Polisario Front, in particular, serves as a reminder that radicalization is not the necessary product of repressive state pressure. But rather, it depends on how much organizational discipline there is, how easy it is for movements to fragment, the context in which movements are operating, all of these broader strategic factors.

A major theoretical implication of such an analysis is that radicalization cannot be treated as a linear and irreversible process. The PKK is a case in point. Though TAK, a radical breakaway faction, began to surface as far back as the early 2000s, it was the 2015 collapse of the peace process that intensified internal schisms and saw TAK exert itself more viscerally. However in more recent times, including in 2025 when the PKK has formally announced a return to unarmed struggle, there are signs that radicalization can potentially be unrolled by internal recalibration of its goals and direction and external diplomatic normalization of relations. This shows that radicalization is not a point of no return, but a stage that can be changed within any group's cycle.

The case of the Polisario Front demonstrates how long-term cohesion and institutionalized discipline can be a buffer against escalation even under extensive repression. Its strategic modesty wasn't just tactical; it was rooted in a more general system of ideological acculturation, centralized control and abiding by international legal norms. The prospect of losing international legitimacy, funding, and the moral high ground provided strong motivations for the movement to remain moderate.

These results have more general implications for conflict research and policy. They highlight the importance to consider radicalization as not only being a function of the level of repression, but of a relational dynamic defined by organizational resilience, factional dynamics, and strategic rewards. If given the right internal reforms and external opportunities, movements can change course and turn away from violent paths.

Finally, the repression–factionalism–radicalization model should be recognized as a dynamic model. Repression is not the sole cause of extremism; rather it is repression when combined with internal fragmentation and the loss of discipline that creates the breeding ground for extremism. Instead, restoring internal discipline, combined with international mediation and legitimate law, may steer movements toward moderation. This theoretical framework provides a richer and more optimistic interpretation of separatist trajectories in disputed territories.

Conclusion

To conclude, this research has offered a multi-layered investigation into the drivers of radicalization among separatist movements in the MENA region. Before closing, it is worth briefly summarizing the key empirical findings that emerged from the comparative analysis, and situating them within broader theoretical debates.

Summary of Findings

This research has investigated the circumstances that lead to escalations of separatist movements into violence or to their continued strategic restraint in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in a comparative process tracing across three cases–the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey, the Southern Movement in Yemen and the Polisario Front in Western Sahara. Even if all three of these cases were subject to long-lasting and multi-levelled repression – both coercive violence and discursive securitization – only the PKK went under a significant internal fragmentation and gave birth to a more radical splinter group, the Kurdistan Freedom Hawks (TAK).

We can draw a few important observations from this comparison. First, the argument that repression alone does not cause radicalization is untrue. Instead, its effects depend on contact with other elements of an organization. The path taken by the PKK is an example of how the lack of ideological clarity and institutionalized structures for strategic consensus provide ripe conditions for extremist offshoots. In the meantime, the Polisario Front, even in prolonged exile and subjected to severe Moroccan pressure, managed to maintain ideological and institutional coherence, which potentially served as a mechanism for control of radicalism. What evidence currently exists also indicates that the Southern Movement, while shaped by a militant history, has not adopted on an organized scale tactics of indiscriminate violence or civilian targeting that would in the standard sense fall under definitions of terrorism.

Second, the international legitimacy is a moderator. The Polisario's entrenchment in international legal frames and its adherence to the UN arbitration model may have motivated its self-restraint, resisting violent strategies that might weaken its diplomatic

capital. What's more, the Southern Movement involvement in transitional political game-playing, and its shifting alliances also indicate that even partial institutional inclusion can act to moderate radical escalation, albeit on a much weaker empirical basis.

Third, in this study it is suggested that radicalization is not an inevitable nor an irreversible process. Although the story of the PKK has been one of armed struggle and fragmentation, there have been attempts at readjustment, with the 2025 announcement of returning to unarmed action being an indication of strategic shifting. This implies that organizational paths can be changed through endogenous reforms and exogenous forces, even in extended conflict environments.

Theoretical Contributions

This thesis contributes to the literature on political violence and radicalization in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) across four main axes.

It shifts focus away from the current mainstream academic emphasis on jihadist networks and religious extremism, examining rather systematically such secular and nationalist separatist movements trajectories of radicalism. Although the radicalization of Islamist groups such as ISIS and al-Qaeda has been exhaustively studied, the radicalization processes of non-religious groups, such as the PKK, the Southern Movement, and the Polisario Front, has been relatively neglected in academia. This thesis redresses this imbalance by explaining the ways in which these actors interact with the wider extremist ecosystems through tactical imitation, discursive competition, and structural interconnects.

Second, the analysis presents a unique "Repression–Factionalism–Radicalization" model, which accounts for both external state behavior and internal organizational dynamics. In contrast to previous works, which have considered separately repression and factionalism's influence, this study presents them as a reciprocally reinforcing phenomenon. The model shows that, when systems of domination characterized by discursive and coercive repression are met with fragmented structures and poor

leadership, factionalism is the result, leading to divergent pathways, which are radicalization, strategic constraint, or safety valve modes of consolidation.

In its third innovation, this study integrates the securitisation, imagined community, and radicalization process theories to establish a multi-level explanation. This model links state-driven creation of threats, collective identity building within the movements as well as strategic choices under repression. It also highlights the mediating effect of international legitimacy in encouraging movements towards moderation as opposed to extremes.

Finally, the study offers a fine-grained micro-level scrutiny of internal organizational dynamics—particularly of youth radicalization, ideological fragmentation, and leadership intraparty conflicts—via comparative process tracing. These under-researched factors are found to be determinative on movement trajectories and, thereby, crucial to modelling the future of separatist contention and regional security.

Together, these contributions recast radicalization as not an unmediated product of repression but as a contingent, context - specific process. The results provide theoretical nuance and practical direction for conflict resolution, the scholarship on authoritarian stability, and de-radicalization initiatives.

Policy Implications

The findings of this study suggest that an excessive reliance on securitization and coercive repression may be counterproductive in managing separatist movements. While such strategies might yield short-term stability, they often deepen internal divisions, marginalize moderate leadership, and create fertile ground for extremist factions to emerge. A more sustainable conflict resolution approach would balance calibrated security measures with mechanisms for political inclusion and efforts to address the root causes of dissent.

International actors can play a constructive role in promoting moderation by strengthening the internal governance capacities of separatist groups that demonstrate political responsibility. This includes fostering inclusive leadership structures, creating

negotiation platforms, and aligning incentives through diplomatic recognition, conditional aid, or pathways for peaceful engagement. Well-designed external interventions can offer strategic logic to movements that prioritize restraint over escalation.

Furthermore, international legitimacy can serve as a powerful form of strategic leverage. Movements embedded within international legal frameworks and diplomatic arenas are less inclined to radicalize, in part due to the reputational costs and material losses associated with violating global norms. Building international mediation systems that reward strategic patience and nonviolence—while avoiding the wholesale delegitimization of separatist claims—can contribute meaningfully to long-term stabilization in contested regions.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Over and above a relatively formalized comparative structure for framing understanding between these logics of action, however, we are also limited by the paucity of empirical data on the internal dynamics of clandestine organizations. Crucial processes such as competition for leadership, youth mobilization and ideological splits often play out informally, outside the parameters of observable institutional behaviour, making it difficult to get complete and verifiable data.

The geographical area of this research is limited to three cases in the MENA. As rich as the analytical points are — not least being the implications of these on development — it would, however, be invidious to generalise and extend these insights to South Asia / Sub-Saharan Africa. The generalizability of the repression–factionalism–radicalization model could be supported by additional cross-regional tests.[118]

Furthermore, firm-level variables are the focus of the study. Further studies may elaborate the role of individual level radicalization drivers vis a vis trauma,

[118] Phillip Smyth, "The Shiite Jihad in Syria and Its Regional Effects," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 2, 2015, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/shiite-jihad-syria-and-its-regional-effects.

humiliation, charismatic authority and personal identity crises. Such micro-dynamics can perhaps provide an explanation for intra-organizational heterogeneity despite similarity in external conditions.[119]

Finally, the increased role of digital infrastructures, transnational ideological transfer, and diaspora mobilization indicate the erosion of traditional, predefined models of controlling movements from above. New manifestations of radicalization, born from decentralized, networked dynamics, must be integrated into the next generation of theoretical frameworks.

[119] McCauley, Clark, and Sophia Moskalenko. *Friction: How Radicalization Happens to Them and Us*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

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