

Beyond State-Centrism: A Group-Level Framework for Security Analysis in Fragmented Political Orders

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Abstract: This article introduces the **Group Level of Analysis (GLA)** as a theoretical framework that addresses a critical lacuna in contemporary security studies. While traditional analytical frameworks privilege the individual, state, and international system as primary levels of analysis, they inadequately capture security dynamics in contexts characterized by state fragility, contested sovereignty, and hybrid governance arrangements. Through systematic analysis of empirical cases from Libya, Yemen, and Syria—with particular attention to the institutional evolution of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham under Ahmed al-Shar'a (Abu Mohammad al-Jawlani)—this study demonstrates that collective actors function as autonomous security providers, governance mechanisms, and legitimacy-producing entities independent of formal state structures.

The GLA framework operationalizes group-level security provision through five analytical dimensions: **identity construction, threat perception and security logics, governance institutionalization, legitimacy generation, and external network formation**. By positioning groups as meso-level actors that mediate between individual agency and structural constraints, this framework bridges micro-macro analytical gaps while providing conceptual tools for understanding security production in non-Westphalian contexts.

The article contributes to critical security studies by challenging state-centric epistemologies and offering empirically-grounded theoretical innovations. It argues for analytical pluralism that recognizes multiple, overlapping sources of authority and security provision. The framework's policy implications extend to conflict resolution, post-conflict reconstruction, and international engagement strategies, suggesting that effective interventions must account for group-based legitimacy structures rather than imposing externally-designed institutional arrangements.

Keywords: Security governance, non-state actors, fragmented sovereignty, post-conflict societies, hybrid political orders, Middle East politics

1. Introduction

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The contemporary security landscape presents analytical challenges that exceed the explanatory capacity of traditional theoretical frameworks. In numerous contexts—from the Horn of Africa to the Levant, from Central Asia to the Sahel—security provision operates through mechanisms that neither conform to Westphalian state models nor align with individualist liberal assumptions about political organization. Instead, collective actors—tribes, militias, religious movements, ethnic communities—function as primary sources of protection, governance, and political identity for substantial populations.

This phenomenon exposes a fundamental limitation in security studies: the absence of adequate conceptual frameworks for analyzing **group-level** security dynamics. Kenneth Waltz's influential three-level framework (individual, state, system) has dominated international relations theory for decades, yet it systematically excludes the meso-level collective actors that constitute the primary locus of political life in much of the non-Western world (Waltz, 1979). This exclusion reflects not merely theoretical oversight but epistemological bias—a privileging of European state-formation experiences that obscures alternative forms of political organization and security provision.

1.1 Research Problem and Theoretical Innovation

This article addresses the conceptual gap by proposing the **Group Level of Analysis (GLA)** as a fourth analytical level that complements rather than replaces existing frameworks. The central research question asks: *How can security studies better account for collective actors that function as autonomous security providers in contexts of state fragility or contested sovereignty?*

The theoretical innovation lies in reconceptualizing groups not as sub-state actors or spoilers of formal political processes, but as **autonomous security-producing entities** with distinct logics of operation, legitimacy generation, and governance provision. This approach draws on insights from critical security studies, postcolonial theory, and governance scholarship while maintaining analytical rigor suitable for comparative case analysis.

1.2 Empirical Foundation and Case Selection

The framework's empirical foundation rests on systematic analysis of three paradigmatic cases: **Libya** (post-2011), **Yemen** (post-2014), and **Syria** (2011-present). These cases represent instances of state collapse or extreme fragility where group-level actors have assumed primary responsibility for security provision and governance. The selection criteria emphasize: (1) documented state incapacity or absence, (2) emergence of alternative governance arrangements, and (3) variation in group characteristics and institutional forms.

Particular attention focuses on **Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)** in Syria, which exemplifies the analytical potential of GLA through its transformation from a jihadist insurgent movement to a quasi-state entity exercising territorial control, providing public goods, and engaging in diplomatic relations. Under the leadership of Ahmed al-Shar'a (Abu Mohammad al-Jawlani), HTS demonstrates how groups can institutionalize authority, generate legitimacy, and perform state-like functions while maintaining distinct identity-based logics of operation.

1.3 Contribution to Security Studies

This research contributes to security studies scholarship in three primary ways. First, it expands the theoretical architecture of the field by introducing a systematically theorized fourth level of analysis. Second, it provides empirically-grounded analytical tools for understanding security dynamics in non-Westphalian contexts. Third, it offers policy-relevant insights for international engagement with fragmented political orders.

The article proceeds through five main sections: a critical review of existing levels of analysis, theoretical development of the GLA framework, empirical application through case studies, comparative analysis of findings, and implications for theory and practice.

2. Theoretical Foundations: Critiquing State-Centric Security Analysis

2.1 The Westphalian Bias in Security Studies

Contemporary security studies remains fundamentally shaped by assumptions derived from European state-formation experiences. The Westphalian model—emphasizing territorial sovereignty, centralized authority, and monopolization of legitimate violence—provides the analytical template for understanding political organization and security provision (Krasner, 1999). This model assumes that states constitute the primary referent objects of security analysis and that alternative forms of political organization represent either developmental stages toward statehood or pathological deviations from normal political order.

However, this assumption proves problematic when applied to contexts where the European state-formation trajectory never occurred or where imposed state structures lack legitimacy, capacity, or territorial reach. In such contexts, the state-centric analytical framework produces systematic blind spots, rendering invisible the actual mechanisms through which security is produced, authority is exercised, and political life is organized.

2.2 Limitations of Traditional Levels of Analysis

Waltz's three-level framework, while analytically elegant, reflects specific historical and geographical assumptions that limit its universal applicability. The **individual level** emphasizes psychological factors and decision-making processes but fails to account for collective identity formation and communal security logics. The **state level** privileges formal institutions while marginalizing informal governance arrangements and hybrid political orders. The **systemic level** focuses on inter-state relations but overlooks transnational networks and non-state actor interactions that increasingly shape security dynamics.

These limitations become particularly pronounced in contexts characterized by:

- **Fragmented sovereignty** where authority is dispersed among multiple actors
- **Hybrid governance** combining formal and informal institutional arrangements
- **Identity-based mobilization** that transcends state boundaries
- **Alternative legitimacy sources** rooted in tradition, religion, or ethnicity

2.3 Critical Security Studies and the Opening to Non-State Actors

The emergence of critical security studies in the 1990s began challenging state-centric assumptions through concepts like **securitization** (Buzan et al., 1998), **human security** (UNDP, 1994), and **societal security** (Wæver et al., 1993). These approaches expanded the analytical scope beyond military threats to include economic, environmental, and identity-based security concerns while recognizing non-state actors as legitimate subjects of security analysis.

However, even critical approaches have insufficiently theorized the group level as an autonomous analytical category. While acknowledging non-state actors, these frameworks typically treat them as either sub-state entities or components of broader societal processes rather than as distinct levels of analysis with their own operational logics and legitimacy sources.

2.4 Postcolonial Perspectives and Fragmented Authority

Postcolonial scholarship offers crucial insights into the limitations of European-derived political models when applied to non-Western contexts. Achille Mbembe's concept of **fragmented sovereignty** highlights how authority in postcolonial societies operates through multiple, overlapping, and often competing centers of power rather than centralized state institutions (Mbembe, 2001). Similarly, Mahmood Mamdani's analysis of **decentralized despotism** demonstrates how colonial legacies created dual power structures that continue to shape contemporary political organization (Mamdani, 1996).

These insights suggest that analytical frameworks must accommodate multiple forms of authority and legitimacy rather than assuming state supremacy. The challenge lies in developing systematic theoretical tools that can analyze these complex arrangements without losing analytical precision.

3. Conceptualizing the Group Level of Analysis

3.1 Defining the Group as an Analytical Unit

The **group**, as conceptualized within the GLA framework, refers to collective actors characterized by: (1) **shared identity** based on kinship, ethnicity, religion, ideology, or territorial affiliation; (2) **organizational capacity** for collective action and resource mobilization; (3) **security functions** including protection provision, threat assessment, and governance activities; and (4) **autonomy** from state control in decision-making and operational procedures.

This definition distinguishes groups from both individuals and states while avoiding overly broad categorizations that would include all forms of social organization. Groups, in this analytical sense, occupy a meso-level position that mediates between individual agency and structural constraints while maintaining distinct collective identities and interests.

3.2 Five Dimensions of Group-Level Security Analysis

The GLA framework operationalizes group-level analysis through five interrelated dimensions:

3.2.1 Identity Construction

Groups generate and maintain collective identities that define membership boundaries, establish behavioral norms, and create solidarity mechanisms. Identity construction processes involve both internal socialization and external differentiation, often through adversarial relationships with other groups or state authorities. These identities provide the foundation for security logics and legitimacy claims.

3.2.2 Threat Perception and Security Logic

Groups develop distinct threat assessments and security strategies based on their particular vulnerabilities, capabilities, and value systems. Unlike state-level security logics focused on territorial integrity and regime survival, group-level security often emphasizes identity preservation, resource access, and community protection. These logics may conflict with state-defined security interests.

3.2.3 Governance Institutionalization

Many groups develop governance mechanisms including dispute resolution systems, resource allocation procedures, and behavioral regulation mechanisms. These institutions may operate parallel to, in competition with, or in absence of state institutions. Governance institutionalization represents a key indicator of group autonomy and state-like functionality.

3.2.4 Legitimacy Generation

Groups develop legitimacy through various mechanisms including service provision, identity representation, traditional authority, ideological appeal, and coercive capacity. Legitimacy sources often differ significantly from state-based legitimacy, drawing on local knowledge, cultural practices, and community relationships rather than legal-constitutional frameworks.

3.2.5 External Network Formation

Groups engage in relationships with other actors including states, international organizations, diaspora communities, and transnational networks. These relationships provide resources, information, and recognition while potentially constraining group autonomy. External engagement patterns reveal how groups navigate between local legitimacy and broader political contexts.

3.3 Theoretical Positioning and Analytical Advantages

The GLA framework positions itself within the broader landscape of security studies while maintaining analytical distinctiveness. Unlike state-centric approaches, it recognizes multiple sources of authority and security provision. Unlike individualist approaches, it acknowledges

collective identity and communal organization. Unlike systemic approaches, it focuses on meso-level dynamics and local contexts.

The analytical advantages include: (1) **bridge-building** between micro and macro levels of analysis; (2) **context sensitivity** to non-Western political arrangements; (3) **empirical accuracy** in describing actual security provision mechanisms; and (4) **policy relevance** for engagement with fragmented political orders.

4. Empirical Analysis: Group-Level Security Dynamics in Libya, Yemen, and Syria

4.1 Libya: Tribal Militias and Fragmented Governance

Libya's post-2011 political trajectory exemplifies the analytical utility of GLA in contexts of state collapse. Following Gaddafi's overthrow, the central government's authority effectively disintegrated, creating space for numerous group-level actors to assume security and governance functions. Rather than descending into anarchic violence, various regions developed alternative governance arrangements based on tribal, regional, and ideological affiliations.

The **Zintan tribal confederation** in western Libya illustrates group-level security provision. Following 2011, Zintan militias established territorial control over strategic locations including Tripoli International Airport, developed independent command structures, and maintained security within their areas of influence more effectively than nominal state institutions. The confederation's governance mechanisms combined traditional tribal consultation (majlis) with modern administrative procedures, creating hybrid institutional arrangements that generated local legitimacy while remaining autonomous from central authority.

Zintan's identity construction emphasized tribal honor, revolutionary legitimacy, and anti-Islamist positioning. Their security logic focused on territorial control, resource access, and resistance to rival militias from Misrata and Islamist groups. Governance institutionalization included checkpoint management, local policing, and dispute resolution through tribal elders. Legitimacy derived from service provision, traditional authority, and military effectiveness. External engagement involved relationships with UAE, Egypt, and various Libyan political factions.

4.2 Yemen: Houthi Movement and Sectarian Governance

The Houthi movement (Ansar Allah) in Yemen demonstrates how groups can challenge state authority while developing alternative governance arrangements. Beginning as a cultural organization defending Houthi identity within the Yemeni state system, the movement evolved into a military-political actor controlling significant territory and population centers in northern Yemen.

Houthi identity construction combines Zaydi sectarian identity with anti-imperialist rhetoric and social justice appeals. Their security logic emphasizes sectarian protection, resistance to Saudi influence, and territorial expansion. Governance institutionalization includes tax collection, court systems based on Zaydi jurisprudence, and social service provision. Legitimacy sources include

traditional Zaydi authority structures, anti-corruption appeals, and military effectiveness. External engagement involves alliance with Iran, relationships with other regional actors, and limited international diplomatic engagement.

The Houthi case illustrates how groups can simultaneously challenge state authority while performing state-like functions. Their governance arrangements in areas under their control often prove more effective than the internationally-recognized government's institutions, creating complex legitimacy dynamics that traditional state-centric analysis struggles to capture.

4.3 Syria: HTS and the Evolution from Insurgency to Governance

The transformation of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham under Ahmed al-Shar'a represents perhaps the most dramatic example of group evolution from insurgent movement to quasi-state entity. Originally emerging from the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra, HTS underwent systematic rebranding and institutional development that culminated in its assumption of de facto governmental authority over Idlib Governorate.

4.3.1 Identity Transformation and Strategic Reframing

Al-Shar'a's leadership involved systematic identity reconstruction that distanced HTS from its jihadist origins while maintaining Islamist credentials. This process included: (1) formal disaffiliation from Al-Qaeda; (2) adoption of nationalist rhetoric emphasizing Syrian territorial integrity; (3) pragmatic engagement with international humanitarian organizations; and (4) suppression of more radical jihadist elements within the movement.

The identity transformation served multiple strategic purposes: legitimizing HTS governance among local populations, reducing international pressure, and positioning the organization as a potential partner in future political settlements. This evolution demonstrates how group identities can undergo substantial change while maintaining organizational coherence and legitimacy.

4.3.2 Governance Institutionalization and State Mimicry

HTS developed extensive governance institutions that mirror state functions while maintaining distinct organizational characteristics. These institutions include:

- **Salvation Government:** Administrative structure overseeing public services, infrastructure, and economic policy
- **General Security Service:** Intelligence and internal security apparatus
- **Judicial system:** Courts applying modified Sharia law with appellate procedures
- **Educational system:** Schools and curriculum development emphasizing Islamic values
- **Economic regulation:** Tax collection, import/export controls, and business licensing
- **Diplomatic engagement:** Relationships with international organizations and humanitarian agencies

This institutional development represents systematic state mimicry—adopting the functions and structures of statehood while maintaining group-specific ideological and organizational characteristics. The result is a hybrid entity that combines insurgent movement dynamics with governmental responsibilities.

4.3.3 Legitimacy Paradox: Service Provision and Repression

HTS's legitimacy strategy involves simultaneously providing public services and employing repressive measures against opposition. This paradox reveals the complex relationship between governance effectiveness and authoritarian control in group-level political orders.

Service provision includes healthcare, education, infrastructure maintenance, and security provision that often exceeds the quality available in government-controlled areas. However, this governance facade coexists with systematic repression of civil society organizations, independent media, and political opposition. Human Rights Watch documentation reveals patterns of arbitrary detention, enforced disappearance, and suppression of dissent that contradict HTS's public governance rhetoric.

This duality suggests a sixth dimension for GLA analysis: **internal contradiction management**—the mechanisms through which groups maintain legitimacy despite conflicting practices. HTS manages this contradiction through: (1) strategic communication emphasizing external threats; (2) selective repression targeting specific opposition elements; (3) service provision demonstrating governance capacity; and (4) ideological justification framing repression as necessary for community protection.

4.4 Comparative Analysis: Patterns and Variations

Cross-case analysis reveals both common patterns and significant variations in group-level security dynamics:

Common patterns include:

- Institutional development in response to state weakness or absence
- Hybrid governance arrangements combining traditional and modern elements
- Legitimacy strategies emphasizing service provision and community protection
- Identity construction through opposition to rival groups or state authorities
- External engagement for resource acquisition and recognition

Significant variations include:

- **Identity basis:** Tribal (Libya), sectarian (Yemen), ideological (Syria)
- **Governance scope:** Limited territorial control (Zintan) versus extensive administration (HTS)
- **State relationship:** Parallel institutions (Houthis) versus replacement ambitions (HTS)
- **International recognition:** Isolation (HTS) versus limited engagement (Houthis)

- **Internal organization:** Traditional consultation (tribes) versus centralized command (HTS)

These patterns suggest that while group-level security dynamics share common characteristics, their specific manifestations depend on local contexts, historical trajectories, and strategic choices made by group leadership.

5. Implications for Security Studies Theory and Practice

5.1 Theoretical Contributions and Framework Development

The GLA framework contributes to security studies theory by providing analytical tools for understanding political organization and security provision in non-Westphalian contexts. Rather than treating group-level actors as anomalies or transitional phenomena, the framework recognizes them as legitimate subjects of security analysis with distinct operational logics and legitimacy sources.

This theoretical innovation addresses several limitations in existing approaches:

1. **Analytical completeness:** Adding the group level creates a more comprehensive framework that captures meso-level dynamics between individual agency and structural constraints.
2. **Empirical accuracy:** The framework better describes actual security provision mechanisms in fragmented political contexts.
3. **Cultural sensitivity:** Recognition of group-level dynamics acknowledges non-Western forms of political organization without imposing European-derived models.
4. **Policy relevance:** Understanding group dynamics provides foundation for more effective international engagement strategies.

5.2 Methodological Implications and Research Agenda

Adopting GLA requires methodological adaptations that can capture group-level dynamics while maintaining analytical rigor. Key methodological considerations include:

Data collection challenges: Group-level analysis requires access to local knowledge, informal networks, and community perspectives that may be difficult for external researchers to obtain. This necessitates collaboration with local researchers, extended fieldwork periods, and triangulation across multiple sources.

Temporal dynamics: Groups undergo identity transformation, institutional development, and strategic adaptation over time. Longitudinal analysis becomes essential for understanding group evolution and stability.

Network mapping: Understanding group-level dynamics requires analysis of relationships among multiple actors including rival groups, state institutions, and external partners. Social network analysis and relational approaches provide valuable analytical tools.

Legitimacy assessment: Measuring group legitimacy requires indicators that may differ significantly from state-based measures. Community surveys, behavioral indicators, and institutional effectiveness metrics become crucial data sources.

5.3 Policy Implications: Toward Group-Sensitive International Engagement

The GLA framework suggests several policy implications for international engagement with fragmented political orders:

5.3.1 Recognition and Engagement Strategies

Traditional diplomatic approaches that recognize only state-level interlocutors prove inadequate in contexts where groups exercise de facto authority. Effective engagement requires developing flexible frameworks that can interact with group-level actors while maintaining consistent principles regarding human rights and international law.

This does not imply uncritical acceptance of group authority but rather recognition that ignoring de facto power arrangements undermines policy effectiveness. Engagement strategies should include:

- **Conditional recognition** based on governance performance and human rights compliance
- **Multi-track diplomacy** involving both official and unofficial channels
- **Local ownership** principles that respect community preferences and legitimacy sources
- **Graduated engagement** that provides incentives for institutional development and norm compliance

5.3.2 Peacebuilding and Conflict Resolution

Group-level analysis suggests that sustainable peace processes must incorporate group-based legitimacy structures rather than focusing exclusively on state-level agreements. Key implications include:

- **Inclusive negotiations** that involve group representatives alongside state officials
- **Decentralized implementation** that accounts for local power dynamics and governance arrangements
- **Identity recognition** that addresses group concerns about cultural preservation and political representation
- **Security arrangements** that may involve power-sharing or autonomy agreements rather than centralized control

5.3.3 Development and Humanitarian Assistance

Aid programs that ignore group-level dynamics risk ineffectiveness or unintended consequences. Group-sensitive approaches should include:

- **Local partnership** with legitimate community representatives

- **Context analysis** that maps group relationships and power dynamics
- **Conflict sensitivity** that avoids exacerbating inter-group tensions
- **Capacity building** that strengthens positive governance functions while addressing harmful practices

5.4 Limitations and Future Research Directions

The GLA framework faces several limitations that suggest directions for future research:

Scope conditions: The framework may prove more applicable in certain contexts (fragmented states, identity-based conflicts) than others (consolidated democracies, interstate conflicts). Research should explore the boundary conditions for GLA applicability.

Normative considerations: Recognition of group-level authority raises complex questions about human rights, minority protection, and democratic governance. Future research should explore how to balance respect for local legitimacy with universal principles.

Dynamic interactions: Groups exist within complex webs of relationships with states, international actors, and other groups. Understanding these interactions requires sophisticated analytical tools that can capture multi-level dynamics.

Measurement challenges: Developing reliable indicators for group-level analysis remains a significant challenge. Future research should focus on operational measures for legitimacy, governance effectiveness, and institutional development.

6. Conclusion

This article has introduced the Group Level of Analysis as a theoretical framework that addresses critical gaps in contemporary security studies. By recognizing groups as autonomous security-producing entities with distinct operational logics, the framework provides analytical tools for understanding political organization and security provision in non-Westphalian contexts.

The empirical analysis of Libya, Yemen, and Syria demonstrates the framework's utility in capturing dynamics that traditional state-centric approaches systematically overlook. These cases reveal how groups can function as effective governance providers, legitimacy generators, and security actors while maintaining distinct identity-based characteristics that differentiate them from state institutions.

The theoretical contributions include expanding the analytical architecture of security studies, providing empirically-grounded tools for non-Western contexts, and offering policy-relevant insights for international engagement. The framework challenges state-centric epistemologies while maintaining analytical rigor suitable for comparative research.

However, significant questions remain regarding scope conditions, normative implications, and methodological challenges. Future research should explore these limitations while developing the framework's analytical potential. The ultimate goal is not to replace existing analytical tools

but to supplement them with approaches that better capture the complexity of contemporary security dynamics.

In an era marked by fragmented sovereignty, hybrid governance, and identity-based mobilization, security studies must develop theoretical frameworks that can analyze these phenomena systematically. The Group Level of Analysis represents one contribution to this ongoing effort, offering conceptual tools for understanding security production in contexts where the Westphalian state model proves inadequate. The framework's success will ultimately depend on its ability to generate insights that advance both theoretical understanding and practical policy effectiveness in addressing the security challenges of the twenty-first century.

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