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NON-STATE ACTORS AND THE STRUGGLE FOR RECOGNITION IN CONTEMPORARY INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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Introduction. To be or not to be… This question is no longer only for individuals, in contemporary international relations, it is also a question for the state. The modern state claims to defend territory, control violence and represent political life. Yet recent crises show that actors without sovereignty can still force states and institutions to react. This paper asks whether non-state actors seriously challenge the centrality of the state. It argues that they do, but not by replacing states. Their challenge is practical recognition: they become actors that states, markets and international organizations cannot ignore. The Houthis disrupt maritime trade, SpaceX/Starlink supports Ukraine's wartime communication, Wagner/Africa Corps blurs private violence and Russian strategy, and ISIS-K reorganizes counter-terrorism agendas. The result is not a post-state world, but a more hybrid order in which state centrality is no longer exclusive. This argument is important because debates about non-state actors often move between two extremes: either states are still the only real actors, or globalization has made them obsolete. The evidence below suggests a middle position.

Theory. Hedley Bull's English School view helps clarify what is being challenged. International society exists when states recognize common rules and institutions, even without world government; diplomacy, law, war and balance of power remain organized mainly through states (Bull, 1977, pp. 13–15). Non-state actors therefore matter because they disturb the assumption that order is produced only by states.

The paper's main theoretical lens is Erik Ringmar's recognition approach. Ringmar argues that political actors do not act only according to material interests, but also according to who they believe they are and the identity they seek to have recognized (Ringmar, 1996, p. 4). Modern statehood itself is based on recognition: after Westphalia, the state became the "only legitimate political entity" (Ringmar, 1996, p. 10). In "The Recognition Game," Ringmar adds that world politics is better understood as a struggle for recognition than simply as a prisoner's dilemma (Ringmar, 2002, pp. 115–116).

Recognition here does not mean moral approval. A terrorist organization, corporation or mercenary network may lack legitimacy, but it becomes politically significant when states respond to it. Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde's securitization framework supports this point: issues become security matters when they are presented and accepted as existential threats requiring extraordinary response (Buzan et al., 1998, pp. 23–26). Hall and Biersteker also show that authority in global governance can be exercised by private actors when others treat their rules, services or practices as authoritative (Hall & Biersteker, 2002, pp. 3–6).

Methodology. This paper uses a qualitative comparative case-study method. It examines four cases: the Houthis, SpaceX/Starlink, Wagner/Africa Corps and ISIS-K. The cases are selected because they represent different forms of non-state power: armed disruption, private technological infrastructure, privatized coercion and transnational terrorism. This selection is not intended to

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measure all non-state actors statistically. It is designed to compare different mechanisms through which non-state actors become politically visible. Each case is evaluated by three questions: does the actor perform or disrupt state-like functions; does it force states or institutions to respond; and does it still depend on state frameworks? These criteria make it possible to avoid both exaggeration and dismissal. The paper can show that non-state actors matter without claiming that they have replaced states as the basic institutions of international order.

Empirical analysis. The Houthis show recognition through disruption. Since November 2023, their attacks in the Red Sea have affected a major maritime corridor. The UN Security Council condemned at least two dozen attacks on merchant and commercial vessels and demanded that they stop (United Nations Security Council, 2024). The economic effects were visible: the IMF reported that Suez Canal trade fell by 50 percent in the first two months of 2024, while rerouting around the Cape of Good Hope lengthened delivery times (Kamali et al., 2024). The Houthis were not recognized as a state, but shipping firms, insurers, naval coalitions and the UN had to treat them as a strategic actor. At the same time, the response remained state-centred through resolutions, naval deployments and strikes.

SpaceX/Starlink shows recognition through dependence. Reuters reported that Ukraine had around 42,000 Starlink terminals used by the military, hospitals, businesses and aid organizations (Reuters, 2024). The Pentagon also contracted SpaceX for Starlink services, describing satellite communication as a "vital layer" in Ukraine's communications network (Stone & Roulette, 2023, para. 2). Kaplan and Brown (2025) argue that commercial technology firms are increasingly moving onto the front line of international security. Starlink confirms this: a private company did not replace the Ukrainian state, but it became part of the practical infrastructure through which the state fought and survived.

Wagner and Africa Corps show recognition through hybrid coercion. Private military firms sell services connected to war, including training, logistics and operational support (Singer, 2002, pp. 186–190). Bátora and Ovádek (2026, p. 479.) add that private security actors reframe war through ambiguous vocabularies such as risk management and stabilization. CSIS reports that Russia used private military companies in Ukraine, Syria, Libya, Sudan, the Central African Republic, Madagascar and Mozambique (Jones et al., 2021). After Prigozhin's death, Russian mercenary activity did not disappear; Serwat and Nsaibia (2024) report that activity in Africa doubled in late 2023. Wagner therefore challenges state centrality by blurring private force and state strategy, but it also depends on Russian logistics, protection and political objectives.

ISIS-K shows recognition through threat. It has no legitimacy, but it forces states to organize security around it. The U.S. Mission to the OSCE described the Crocus City Hall attack as an ISIS-K terrorist attack that killed more than 130 people (U.S. Mission to the OSCE, 2024). ISIS-K also claimed responsibility for the Kerman bombings in Iran, which killed nearly 100 people (Al Jazeera, 2024). The United Nations Office at Geneva (2024) warned that ISIL-Khorasan had raised threat levels in Europe. This is negative recognition: ISIS-K becomes an actor because states fear, track and fight it. It also shows the difference between recognition and legitimacy. Recognition can be hostile, coercive or preventive. A group may be rejected morally and legally, while still shaping agendas, budgets, border controls and intelligence cooperation. For this reason, excluding non-state actors from the category of "real" international actors misses how contemporary security politics actually works.

Discussion. Taken together, the cases show two patterns. First, non-state actors become important when their behaviour changes the calculations of states and markets. This is practical recognition, not legal recognition. The Houthis are recognized through disruption, Starlink through

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dependency, Wagner through deniable coercion and ISIS-K through fear. Second, this recognition remains relational. These actors matter because states, firms and organizations react to them, fund them, fight them or depend on them. In that sense, non-state actors do not abolish the state, they expose how much modern state power now works through networks, contractors, platforms and security partnerships. The state remains the centre of international order, but it increasingly shares the production of security outcomes with actors outside formal sovereignty.

Conclusion. The four cases show that non-state actors challenge the exclusivity, not the existence, of state centrality. The Houthis redirect trade routes, Starlink sustains wartime communication, Wagner-type networks blur coercion, and ISIS-K forces transnational security responses. Yet states remain the main legal and coercive framework: the UN responds to the Houthis, the Pentagon contracts Starlink, Russia reorganizes mercenary networks, and governments coordinate against ISIS-K. Contemporary international relations is therefore not post-state. It is state-centred but no longer state-exclusive, because practical recognition increasingly gives non-state actors real political weight.

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