of Vietnamese society. The high mark accorded to the economic policy of the current
government relative to past administrations may also be controversial.

But these quibbles do not in any significant way reduce the value of the book. The main
message is that middle income traps are diverse, and we cannot offer a one-size-fits-all answer
to it. Pragmatic policy makers and researchers must classify causes, phases and solutions of
the trap across time and places. The book stresses the difference between traps experienced
during quantitative growth and traps caused by inability to shift to high domestic value.
Certainly, this is not the only way to separate and group traps, but it gives us a good start. We
can come up with other differentiating principles as long as we keep an eye on both general
theory and country-specific uniqueness.

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*Militants, criminals, and warlords: the challenge of local governance in an age of disorder*, by Vanda Felbab-Brown, Harold Trinkunas, and Shadi Hamid, Washington DC, Brookings Institute, 2017, 192 pp., ISBN 9780815731894

It is widely accepted that nonstate actors contribute to the successful maintenance and development of the sovereign state. Indeed, the World Bank’s discourse on good governance and social accountability has for decades acknowledged – and placed increasing importance on – the benefits of engaging with a range with nonstate entities. However, a facile and pernicious logic has divided these groups into the opposed categories of “civil/good” and “armed/bad” actors.

On one hand, it is regarded as axiomatic that, for functioning civil states, nonstate actors including the private sector, the media, and nongovernment organizations (NGOs) enhance development and public spending; strengthen transparency and oversight of budgetary resources; provide useful services; and help to check and balance institutions. On the other hand, evidence supporting such claims for weak or absent states, where access to resources, opportunity, faith in government, and basic security can be scarce, is harder to come by.

In *Militants, Criminals, and Warlords*, Felbab-Brown, Trinkunas, and Hamid ask how we should evaluate the nature of a range of heterogeneous, armed nonstate actors from the Middle East and South America, and – by extension – unstable regions across the world. They question the reductive notion that all such groups are merely “bad” actors, exploring how
varied militias and gangs in select post-conflict countries contribute to and/or destabilize local order. The authors ask what we can make of the alternative services and protections these and other groups provide in the vacuum of state power and whether, if armed, they can merit consideration in our models of “good governance.”

To this end, the authors define governance as the ability of actors to develop and enforce binding decisions upon others within the social and territorial context in which they operate. Such decisions include how to provide order (resolving social conflict or establishing rule of law), and who has access to economic opportunity. It is a broad definition that helps explain how nonstate armed actors are often seen as legitimate rulers by local communities. The book outlines a course for interacting with weak-state leadership at the local level, arguing that interventions by the international community must have firm and coherent policies that understand – and, if necessary, can work to undermine – the legitimacy of these nonstate groups.

This finding is important as-such, and it is informed by a wealth of research on governance in post-conflict states that considers nonstate armed organizations as a threat to peace-building and, simultaneously, a provider of community security. The book’s core contributions, though, begin with its careful attention to the role of political elites. The authors clearly differentiate states-as-institutions from elites-as-individuals, demonstrating how elites have intentionally hindered public services in particular communities to advance their own economic interests.

The picture they paint is that of a vicious cycle. Extending government services to jungles, inner cities, refugee camps, and minority communities is inherently more expensive than catering to local/urban populations. Ruling elites tend to look past such poor and remote areas where political (votes) and economic (tax income) benefits are disproportionately costly to secure. In turn, the overlooked communities develop a reputation for reluctant cooperation with state power, giving elites even less incentive to build or maintain government presence or provide education, public health, and welfare support.

The authors argue that nonstate actors assert themselves in the absence of these services, delivering both public “goods” (governance) and public “bads” (coercion). They protect “in-group” members of the community from “out-groups,” such as other armed organizations, warlords, and political elites. Once they establish effective territorial control and gain support from the local population, they are more willing to invest in local de facto governance. Quoting the analogy of “roving bandits” and “stationary bandits” by Mancur Olson, the authors argue that nonstate armed groups often shift from the former to the latter, recognizing the benefit of setting and obeying rules, respecting local customs and tradition, and pursuing a democratic consensus. They create community solidarities and local hierarchies. For these reasons, even armed militias can be considered fairer than other rulers – including their state-sponsored counterparts.

In the book’s final act, Felbab-Brown, Trinkunas, and Hamid insist that the US-led international community must develop a coherent policy for sustainable engagement in the Middle East, South America, and other regions featuring weak or absent states. The authors stand out for offering a more detailed and reasoned approach than scholars who have advanced the concept of “hybridity” or “hybrid security” as a model for understanding political orders in the Global South. While a full discussion of this model falls outside the scope of this review, Bagayako helpfully summarizes the fundamental question of whether or not the “hybrid” solutions imagined in analytical scholarship could one day become a guide for action.

In contrast, this book provides concrete goals for international intervention: weakening the legitimacy of armed groups governing a given territory while strengthening the presence

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8Boehe et al., “Hybrid Political Orders, Not Fragile States”; Schroeder et al., “Security Sector Reform and the Emergence of Hybrid Security Governance.”
of the de jure sovereign authority until it is considered the region’s legitimate provider of public goods. Insightfully, the authors posit that indirect influence exerted by international donors will yield the best results. Direct intervention, such as building schools or taking responsibility for counterinsurgency efforts from state forces, may well attract interest from local populations and temporarily dry up support for armed groups. It will not, however, legitimize the state or change the fundamental mechanism by which governing elites abandon their neediest territories and constituents.

Felbab-Brown, Trinkunas, and Hamid point the way forward with open eyes and realistic expectations. They emphasize that any capacity-building programs promoting state elections must be carefully designed, that we cannot expect large or immediate effects from limited interventions, and that sustainable, inclusive engagement is necessary for success. While the course of action they suggest for U.S.-led engagements is specific to the Middle East and South America, the analytical framework that they use to describe the logics and realities of local order is applicable beyond the scope of this study.

For one, it readily explains the state of governance in some of the new democracies in Southeast Asia. Even after decades of democratization and the institutionalization of national and local elections, armed groups, such as pro-government militias, anti-government militias, vigilantes, and gangs run rampant in capital cities, including Jakarta, Bangkok, and Manila. Certain areas outside these capitals remain “ungoverned,” allowing armed groups to behave as (relatively) legitimate rulers. The causes of these symptoms run parallel to those in the Middle East and South America: from the perspective of local elites, expanding state welfare programs to rural communities and densely populated urban slums is not cost-effective. While area studies scholars have bemoaned “pork-barrel” patronage and quick-impact projects (such as building basketball courts, waiting shades, multipurpose halls, or classrooms) meant to entice voters, it is clear that elites would rather hand the governance of these areas to a range of nonstate actors – including religious organizations, NGOs, and activists – than work to establish long-lasting state presence.

Until we address these types of practices from the Middle East and South America to Asia and beyond, it will prove difficult to field sustainable international interventions in areas of need. Thankfully, Militants, Criminals, and Warlords provides useful frameworks and suggestions that scholars, aid agencies, and NGOs can use to deal with armed nonstate actors, improving our chance at contributing to the good governance of weakened and at-risk states.

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Unfortunately, the book has few suggestions for assuring sustained and coordinated cooperation among old and new donors in Asia. From the perspective of Asian scholars, it is also increasingly unclear whether the United States, in particular, will maintain its level of commitment and resources to weak states and compatibility with other international actors. In January 2020, a Singapore-based thinktank published a poll of more than 1,000 Southeast Asian opinion leaders on the regional outlook. The results demonstrated that the region’s confidence in the United States is low. Forty-seven percent of responders said that they have little or no confidence in the U.S. as a strategic partner. See ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, *The State of Southeast Asia*. 

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Religion and Nationalism in southeast Asia, by Joseph Chinyong Liow, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2016, 282 pp., $29.99 (Paperback), ISBN-13: 978-1316618097

In May 2017, the establishment of a wilayat (province) by militants who pledged allegiance to ISIS shook not only the Philippines and its neighbors but also the rest of the world. The Merdeka Center, a Malaysian opinion research firm, published a study on extremism in November 2018. Their reports noted that support for global and regional terror groups such as Jemaah Islamiyah was present across Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines and that intolerance among Muslim respondents toward other religious groups was high in all countries except Thailand. Even before the establishment of the wilayat hit the headlines, Joseph Chinyong Liow, the author of “Religion and Nationalism in Southeast Asia,” had examined the relation between religion and political violence in these four countries. This book was also the first major scholarly book in the 21st century to undertake a comparative study of religion and nationalism in Southeast Asia after Fred von der Meden’s work with the same title was published in 1963. Liow’s work is quite ambitious in that it tries to overcome the excessive focus of Area Studies on parochial details. At the same time, it tries to avoid the overgeneralization we see in the flourishing terrorism research that tends to regard religious extremism as an explanatory factor. The major contribution of this book is that, while explaining the complex political and social context of each case, it also materializes a comparative study.

Liow first establishes the conceptual basis for religious nationalism and its mobilization based on studies of religious conflicts, nationalism, and social movements before he transitions to a series of case studies from chapter 2 to 5. Liow argues that religion is not merely a matter of faith but that it provides a framework for national imagination through which the issue of legitimacy is understood. It also serves as a means of mobilization for collective action. The book maintains that nationalism is an ideology that is constructed and that the role of religion in the conception of nationhood changes over time and context. Having said that, Liow does not take the Eurocentric linear conception that secular nationalism is the outcome of historical evolution and that modernity will replace religion. However, the conception of nationhood arises as a result of negotiations and contestations of the relationship between religion and the state for the stakeholders. In the context of Southeast Asian

1Krugman, “The myth of Asia’s miracle.”