

BOOK REVIEW

Violent Non-State Actors and the Syrian Civil War: The ISIS and YPG Cases

By Özden Zeynep Oktav, Emel Parlar Dal and Ali Murat Kurşun (eds.)

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The 21st century commenced with an asymmetrical assault of a VNSA (Violent Non-State Actors) against the sovereign power of the U.S., and an asymmetrical backlash against this assault. The characteristics of the Westphalian world order, the Weberian state, as well as the wars that are being conducted and the international actors that engage in them have all begun to change. VNSAs, many of which have become especially visible with the U.S. occupation of Iraq, have gained significance as a new type of geopolitical actor that influences regional and global policies, especially after the Arab Uprisings and the Syrian civil war. In fact, the civil war in Syria has opened the Pandora's Box for all VNSAs. The growing turmoil, chaos and crisis in the Middle East has caused the rise of various VNSAs to the top of the global political agenda and aroused the interest of intellectual and military circles.

Violent Non-State Actors and the Syrian Civil War: The ISIS and YPG Cases seems to be born out of such a curiosity. As a well-written manuscript, which contains 11 chapters, each with in-depth analyses, it aims to explain various aspects of the emergence and expansion of VNSAs under changing global and regional circumstances. It focuses especially on the Syrian civil war and the two specific VNSAs involved in it, namely the jihadist ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), in other words DAESH (ad-Dawlah al-Islamiyah fil-'Iraq wa ash-Sham), and the YPG (People's Protection Units), while providing empirical, analytical and conceptual discussions of these two examples. Since it is not easy to comment on the multifaceted and multi-dimensional behavior of VNSAs, observing them empirically in the war environment where they act is important in understanding them. This book thus attempts to provide a

framework for understanding and positioning DAESH and the YPG within the framework of the Syrian civil war.

Even though VNSAs have existed throughout history, they have never had their current structure and influence while conducting quasi-state operations. During the wars in Iraq and especially in Syria, VNSAs have gone through a great transformation; they may be called “the new generation VNSAs” due to their changing nature, hybrid strategies, and the impact they have on state authority, the geopolitics of the region, and the world. Their evolution has also led to significant changes in the conflict and security literature as well as the international relations discipline. This transformation of VNSAs was most notable during the Kobani events in September 2014. These events proved that the war in Syria is not only between the regime and its opponents, but also between the VNSAs themselves, as every one of them pursued a different goal. It has also become obvious that the fight between these VNSAs is also between many other interfering regional and global actors.

Violent Non-state Actors and the Syrian Civil War is one of the rare works that analyses VNSAs within the framework of the Middle East. Studies on VNSAs are generally factual and actor-oriented, and are conducted within the framework of general descriptions. In these studies, the theoretical, conceptual and empirical approach are not used and, consequently, it becomes difficult for the reader to understand and position these actors, which need to be examined on a multi-dimensional and interdisciplinary basis. It is good to see that the contributors to this work have taken these issues into consideration and tried to assess the topic with an extensive approach. With this aim, they first conceptually classify VNSAs and point out the differences of DAESH and the YPG from previous VNSAs in the Middle East through a three-layered perspective, built on “actorness,” powerfulness, and effectiveness, which also give us the main sections of this manuscript.

In adopting this approach, the editors offer an appropriate way to understand the new generation of VNSAs, making a valuable contribution to the IR (International Relations) literature. While assessing the “actorness” of DAESH and the YPG, territorial dominance, geopolitical codes, independence and the ability to establish a community are used as useful parameters. Four of the book chapters are included in this first section. The second section, “Powerfulness,” on the other hand, focuses on the independent provision of finances and human resources, while offering an interesting chapter on the control of water resources. Finally the last section, “Effectiveness,” which contains five

of the book chapters, reflects on the global and regional connections, impacts and interactions of DAESH and the YPG with an up-to-date approach.

In the first section of the book, “Actorness,” contributor Akın Ünver examines the relationship between the “weak state” and the “powerful VNSAs” on the basis of DAESH and YPG dominance in the “No-Go Zones” in Syria. Hakan Mehmetçik and Ali Murat Kurşun scrutinize geopolitical codes of DAESH, relying on the concepts of autonomy, representation and influence, which were used by Ersel Aydınli before, and emphasize the regional and global impacts of DAESH as a new, non-state form of domination in the civil war environment. Özlem Kayhan Pusane examines the hybrid character and ‘actorness’ of the new generation of VNSAs on the basis of the YPG, which appears to be a non-state actor with quasi-state features. According to Pusane, as a complex, hybrid non-state actor, the PYD has the potential to compel the political unity of Syria in the future. Fred H. Lawson, on the other hand, claims that the mutual interactions of the VNSAs between security dilemma and conflict cycle have significance for building up their actions.

In the second section, “Powerfulness,” İbrahim Mazlum addresses DAESH as an actor which has control over water resources in Syria and Iraq, and claims that the Iraqi crisis and the civil war in Syria have shown the capacity of the new generation VNSAs to instrumentalize natural resources to gain power.

In the last section, “Effectiveness,” the reader can find the position of leading global powers such as the U.S., Russia and the EU, as well as regional ones such as Turkey and Iran, regarding the rise of DAESH and the YPG in the region. Helin Sarı Ertem relates the diverging and unstable attitude of the U.S. toward VNSAs to Washington’s pragmatic approach, and argues that this tendency pushed the U.S. to pursue “surrogate warfare” in the Syrian civil war by relying on the YPG to eliminate DAESH. According to Ertem, using one VNSA as a surrogate against another will increase instability in the region and thus -bring negative outcomes for the U.S. in the long run, such as ruining its relations with traditional allies including Turkey. Doruk Ergun asserts that the VNSA policies of the U.S. and Russia, which want to limit each other’s global impact without being party to an open conflict, are considerably pragmatic. Yonca Özer and Fatmanur Kaçar state that the EU countries are not able to pursue an effective strategy with regard to VNSAs due to their limitations of agency, and thus remain “paper tigers,” particularly in respect to counterterrorism measures. Özden Zeynep Oktav explains in detail how the rapid expansion of DAESH in Syria and Iraq has threatened Iran’s geostrategic

interests and that Iran has become “the last best hope” for the West, instead of being an alleged member of the “axis of evil” with regard to its attitude against VNSAs. Emel Parlar Dal theoretically and empirically examines how the Syrian Civil War has spread to Turkey through DAESH and the YPG, relying on the conditioning factors and diffusion mechanisms of this outcome.

As can be seen, every section of the book aims at presenting and understanding different components of the new generation of VNSAs, and offers clear arguments and theoretical frameworks for the DAESH and YPG cases. Moreover, the book offers a less state-centric approach. Disconnections and repetitions are refrained from and the book adheres to its assertion of providing new discussions on the new generation VNSAs.

Especially after the Arab Uprisings, the Middle East has fallen into an environment of chaos and disturbance that often reminds us of the pre-World War I atmosphere. When we look at this environment from a broad perspective, the most noticeable and effective change seem to be the countless number of VNSAs in the region. These VNSAs have eroded the international system based on the sovereignty and centrality of the state, and have endangered the future of the international system due to their hybrid character. The pragmatic approach of the major powers toward VNSAs and their intention to use them for their own purposes have significantly changed the balance of power in the region, increased conflicts and consequently, prolonged the wars in the region. The attitude to be pursued by the states and the international community against VNSAs is very important for the future. This makes new and qualified academic studies on VNSAs quite significant.

In this respect, *Violent Non-state Actors and the Syrian Civil War*, which addresses the emergence and expansion of VNSAs in the Middle East in multiple aspects, is a valuable contribution for students, academicians and researchers studying global politics in general and conflict, security, geopolitics and regional politics specifically. The theoretical, empirical and conceptual discussions in this book will further improve readers’ understanding of the contemporary political problems of the Middle East.

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