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Violent Non-State Actors in the Middle East - A Conversation with Dr. Carmit Valensi

Fletcher Security Review: Could you talk a little about your work?

Carmit Valensi: Please allow me to start by addressing the importance of recognizing non-state actors as major players from a theoretical and an empirical perspective.

Violent non-state actors (VNSAs) are not a new phenomenon; they have been part of world politics in various forms even prior to the establishment of nation-states in the 19th and 20th centuries. Lately (some will refer to 9/11 as a turning point), the increasing dominance of VNSAs in the political landscape has partly undermined nation-states and their place in politics. Nevertheless, it is interesting to see that academic and professional discourse continue to give dominant weight to state actors and state practices. A good example is recent analyses of various scholars of the Syrian crisis in general and its proposed solutions in particular. These are being conducted from a state-centric point of view, which hardly recognizes the important role of the multiple VNSAs operating there.

Another theoretical problem that I identify is our tendency to create a sharp and rather binary distinction between non-state actors and state actors and ignore many cases in which the boundaries between the two are blurred.

In the past few years, I have been exploring this gray area, focusing on VNSAs who operate similarly to states: Like classic state actors, they have created welfare and educational service systems, and demonstrated advanced military capabilities and conducted significant political and diplomatic affairs, sometimes with the intention of integrating into existing political institutions. In addition, they enjoy substantive legitimacy in their areas of operation.

So when we are facing arenas in which VNSAs are playing certain roles, we have to acknowledge not only their violent, military aspects but also their ideological, social and political activity and the way these complex entities challenge states' dominance and sovereignty. This understanding has a crucial impact on the way we perceive these entities and, more importantly, on the ways in which we deal with them.

I would like to emphasize that no matter how widespread it is becoming, the phenomenon of VNSAs is yet too young to make us eulogize the nation-state, which is expected to remain the dominant unit of organization in the Middle East. Even in areas like the Middle East, where VNSAs have become more and more prevalent since the so-called Arab Spring, it seems that nation-states will continue to serve as the basis of regional governance in the period ahead —certainly in those countries where the national base is strong, such as Egypt and Tunisia. Nonetheless, it is important to understand that the familiar nation-states are no longer the sole organizing model in international relations, either in the Middle East or the rest of the world.

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Dr. Carmit Valensi

Dr. **Carmit Valensi** is a research fellow at the **Institute for National Security Studies (INSS)** and a consultant for various research and security groups. She specializes in contemporary Middle East, strategic studies and terrorism. Her Ph.D. thesis explores Hamas, Hezbollah, and FARC as "violent hybrid actors."

For full interview, see:

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