The Peril of Ignoring the Legitimacy of Violent Non-State Actors

Description

Looking around the world today, there is a glaring gap in both national and international approaches to non-state actor violence. There is little engagement with the idea that susceptible populations will come to support, sympathize with, or tolerate insurgency in the absence of credible authorities. Too often, the United States and like-minded democratic countries fixate on the tactics of violent actors and the uncompromising positions of extreme personalities while ignoring what gives violent actors legitimacy among local populations. This approach often makes foreign assistance ineffectual and sometimes counterproductive, creating suitable conditions for authoritarian systems supported by US competitors, such as Russia and China.

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To effectively compete for influence in areas experiencing non-state actor violence and to mitigate its destabilizing effects, the United States must emphasize an approach that addresses the grievances of the populations that enable such actors to be effective.

Appeal of the Alternative Authority

Violent non-state actors cannot be effective solely based on the direct support of hardliners. Rather, these groups must build legitimacy among the populations they control. While some groups rely primarily on coercion of local populations to establish such legitimacy, this is by no means the norm. Coercion-centric approaches are most commonly used by state-sponsored militias. In other instances, violent actors work intentionally to build active support, sympathy, or tolerance among the populations they control.

Whether a civilian population sympathizes with or tolerates a violent actor depends on how civilians view competing authority options. Civilians make this judgment based on their own interests and their opinions may change over time and as alternative authorities emerge.

For example, ISIS in Iraq and Syria enjoyed substantial support from Sunni Arabs during their expansion in 2014-2015. In this period, many Sunni Arabs viewed ISIS as a better alternative to the brutal Alawite and Shia-dominated regimes in Damascus and Baghdad, respectively. ISISâ??s

expansion was initially supported (or at least tolerated) by hundreds of thousands of Sunni Arabs. While many disagreed with ISISâ??s extreme interpretation of Islam, they saw the opportunity to restore the personal dignity, social standing, security, and economic opportunity that had been stripped away under the Syrian and Iraqi regimes.

However, in just two short years ISIS lost 70 percent of its territory in Iraq, 50 percent of its territory in Syria, and control of over 5 million people in the region. Much credit should be given to the US-led global coalition, yet it is also clear that local support for ISIS also fell severely during this time as the sheer depravity of their tactics became clear.

While it is difficult to tie ISISâ??s territorial losses directly to declining Sunni support, available evidence suggests that support among Sunnis fell dramatically during ISIS occupation and correlates to ISIS territorial losses. Not only did sentiments among Iraqi Sunnis change quickly under occupation, but reports of Sunni tribal fighters joining the Iraqi government to fight ISIS emerged within months of ISISâ??s occupation of significant Iraqi territory.

Without the tolerance, sympathy, and support of Sunni Arabs, ISIS became a group of fighters on the run from a global coalition with few places to hide. A Sunni tribal leader in Iraq summed it up when speaking to the Washington Post in 2016: â??If there was no support here, they wouldnâ??t have survived one hour. The Sunnis were very happy in the beginning. They did not know who they were, and they welcomed them as saviors,â?• he said. â??Now we consider them a disaster.â?•

Today, key issues driving the appeal of alternative authorities persist across the world. In 2023, the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project recorded 17 countries that experienced 500 or more fatalities from conflict between rebel and government forces. Eight of the 17 countries are rated as â??closed autocraciesâ?• while another six are rated as â??electoral autocraciesâ?• by the Varieties of Democracy dataset (V-DEM), which is a dataset measuring democratization. 14 of 17 countries are also rated four or five out of five on the Political Terror Scale (PTS), which measures the degree to which a state imposes terror on its population. State repression is one of the strongest empirical drivers of violent extremism.

Beyond direct abuse, most of these states fail to provide for basic needs of citizens in an equitable manner. In 15 of 17, exclusion of services by social group is rated as â??extremeâ?• or â??unequalâ?• by V-DEM, meaning that a significant proportion of one or more social groups are denied access to services based on their identity. In a majority of these cases, conditions are rife for an alternative governance model that violent non-state actors could provide.

A Failing Approach

While the literature on insurgency and terrorism identifies the drivers of violence and the importance of legitimacy among local populations, the importance of these factors is often ignored by domestic and international actors. The immediate desire to reestablish security in areas contested by violent non-state actors usually takes precedence over solutions that address the conditions that incentivize civilians to see violent actors as legitimate.

For example, since 2019, Salafi jihadist violence has engulfed Mali and Burkina Faso and spread into neighboring states like Togo and Benin. The most formidable and active group, Jamaâ??at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), draws support from a complex set of grievances and interests that regional states and the international community have failed to address. JNIM, an al-Qaeda affiliate, has made inroads among Fulani communities and other rural populations since 2017. Fulanis, about a third of whom are nomadic, often experience political marginalization.

At the local level, the disappearance of grazing routes has fueled grievances among pastoralist Fulani communities and has led to intercommunal violence. Repression and even large-scale killings by security forces and local ethnic militias have further alienated Fulanis. According to the PTS, Mali is evaluated at the highest level, which indicates that â??Terror has expanded to the whole population,â?• while Burkina Faso is evaluated at the second highest level, which indicates â??Murders, disappearances, and torture are a common part of life.â?•

At the national level, opportunities to legitimately adjudicate grievances have disappeared, with Mali and Burkina Faso now rated as â??closed autocraciesâ?• according to V-DEM. Surrounding countries like Togo and Benin, where JNIM is now active, have also experienced pronounced democratic deterioration.

At the international level, countries such as Russia have aggravated the conflict by providing mercenary forces that engage in extrajudicial killings, while China and Turkey have supplied millions of dollars worth of weaponry. The United States has refrained from selling weapons to these regimes following recent coups, but it is insufficiently focused on the needs of the regionâ??s communities most vulnerable to violent extremist recruitment. For example, the newly released 10 Year Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability in Coastal West Africa makes no references to the unique vulnerability of Fulani communities in the Sahel and neighboring coastal West African states.

In southeast Nigeria, the insurgency by ethnic Igbo separatistsâ??the Indigenous Peoples of Biafra (IPOB) movementâ??has been growing. At the local level, security force abuses continue to fuel perceptions of deliberate ethnic marginalization. ACLED data shows more than 30 incidents of violence by security forces against civilians resulting in more than 70 fatalities in 2023 in the southeast. Nigeria is rated a four on the Political Terror Scale due to widespread abuses by government forces. According

to Afrobarometerâ??s latest survey in 2022, more than 72 percent of Igbos in Nigeria say the government sometimes or always treats their ethnic group unfairly.

Continued democratic backsliding compounds perceptions that opportunities for legitimate political adjudication are shrinking. The 2023 Nigerian elections were marred by violent voter suppression against Igbos in Lagos State as well as substantial logistical delays that disenfranchised hundreds of thousands of Igbos from voting in the South East region. A subsequent off-cycle election in the southeast state of Imo in November 2023 experienced such high levels of irregularities that independent Parallel Vote Tabulations were unable to confirm the results and forensic analysis of the election results pointed to outcome-changing levels of fraud.

At the international level, the IPOB movement has received little attention. Even an attack on a US convoy by likely separatists in May 2023 generated little interest in addressing the root causes of the violence. The US continues to downplay Nigeriaâ??s democratic deterioration and provide weapons to Nigeriaâ??s government with limited conditions. While the US has been a strong proponent of democratic growth in Nigeria on paper, it often fails to acknowledge the local and national conditions that fuel groups like IPOB.

Implications for Irregular Warfare

An approach that ignores the issues that give non-state violent actors legitimacy among local populations puts the democratic international community at a disadvantage. Russia, China, and other foreign actors find it relatively easy to push a model of repressive authoritarianism as a solution to violent non-state actors (a dynamic currently on full display in the African Sahel) while the US and its allies waffle between providing security assistance or emphasizing process legitimacy, such as long shot elections, while generally ignoring local issues.

Ultimately, such an approach tends to be frustrating for the United States and its allies, as well as ineffectual, leading to disengagement. Worse, the result may appear in hindsight to support malign foreign narratives that the West is disinterested when it comes to solving conflicts and that the real solution was always repressive authoritarianism. This is a dangerous cycle that expands the constellation of autocratic forces arrayed against the democratic world and fuels the rise of violent non-state actors, many of whom see the United States and its allies as legitimate targets for violence.

Ten years ago, the number of countries with conflicts between the government and non-state actors was 38, according to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program. The average liberal democracy score in these countries, according to V-DEM, was .25 (on a 0-1 scale, with 1 being the most democratic). By 2023, the average liberal democracy score in those same 38 countries had fallen to .17. At the same

time, the influence of China increased in 77 percent of these countries, according to the Formal Bilateral Influence Capacity (FBIC) Index. Russia, even under the strain of the war in Ukraine and international sanctions, increased its influence in 36 percent of these countries.

While the causal directionality between conflict, authoritarianism, and foreign malign influence is murky, what is clear is that all three factors are interwoven and mutually exacerbating. In 2023, the number of conflicts between governments and non-state actors reached a record high of 57, while the average global democracy score reached a 10-year low.

So, what sort of support should the United States and other democracies give partners struggling with these challenges? First, security assistance should be conditioned on limited and legitimate use of military force against violent non-state actors that does not result in disproportionate use against civilian populations. Reasonable thresholds can be set by the State Department and Defense Department who can make assessments on a regular basis as to whether such thresholds have been objectively violated.

This could be similar to the process of Leahy Vetting which sets standards for allowable behavior of US-funded foreign security units. Unlike Leahy Vetting, which restricts aid to specific units based on credible allegations of human rights abuses, this policy would be broader in scope, and connect the net effect of a governmentâ??s security forcesâ?? actions on civilian populations with the general provision of security assistance.

Second, the United States should support partners to ensure there are legitimate political avenues for all civilians to address their grievances, including open political spaces and free and fair elections. This is a challenging recommendation because it requires not just a high standard of electoral conduct, but also a suitably enabling environment, including freedom of the press, fair political competition, and rule of law. These efforts should be specially targeted at marginalized ethnic, religious, and regional communities.

Currently, democracy and governance assistance from the US is much smaller than humanitarian or military assistance and is often scattered across a wide range of activities, from supporting election bodies to increasing the capacity of civil society organizations. It is rare to see democracy and governance foreign assistance targeted specifically toward the political inclusion of marginalized communities who frequently form the basis of support for violent non-state actors. This is short-sighted, given how critical the inclusion of such communities can be to the long-term stability of a country.

The United States should also conduct routine assessments of a countryâ??s progress on metrics related to political and civic activities. Backsliding in these areas should be noted and countered as

quickly as possible, using available leverage.

Conclusion

Understanding the key role that sympathy and tolerance play in enabling violent non-state actors to be effective must be central to the strategies of both national and international actors. In an era of escalating great power competition, irregular warfare, and proxy conflicts, this strategic omission is dangerously counterproductive.

A continuous stream of failures in dealing with violent non-state actors in US partner countries reinforces the idea among autocratic elites that the only real answer is force and repression. This view draws them closer to actors like Russia and China while fueling cynicism among marginalized populations in these countries who increasingly believe that the democratic world has never been serious about political inclusion.

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Main Image: Iraqi Army and Hashed al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilization Forces of Iraq) fighting against the Islamic State in Saladin Governorate. (Photo via Wikimedia Commons).

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