Inside Insurgency: Nonstate Armed Groups in Syria and Iraq

July 2020 • 37:22

SUMMARY KEYWORDS
ISIS, irregular warfare, foreign fighters, Syria, Syrian Civil War

SPEAKERS
Dr. Vera Mironova, Dr. Daniel Milton, Nick Lopez, Kyle Atwell

Dr. Daniel Milton 00:00
I think if Syria teaches us anything, it's that this particular challenge is not going to go away. Right? We're seeing the emergence of different organizations in places like Afghanistan and throughout a variety of places in Africa. Understanding the organizational structure behind these groups, I think is going to be a strategy that yields benefits.

Dr. Vera Mironova 00:27
A successful armed group is like successful business, right, in terms of human resources, and you know, one of the groups that was extremely popular in terms of getting fighters, they will even providing their fighters diapers for the kid. So all those small things that they provide as benefits to their fighters actually increases how competitive this group is in hiring.

Kyle Atwell 00:50
Welcome to episode five of the Irregular Warfare Podcast, your hosts today or myself, Kyle Atwell, and my co-host, Nick Lopez. In today's episode, we examined the inner workings of non-state armed groups in the Syrian Civil War, such as ISIS and the Free Syrian Army.

Nick Lopez 01:06
We talked with two researchers who have conducted interviews with fighters on the front lines and studied official documents captured from groups like ISIS. By taking a deep look at how insurgent groups actually function day to day, our guests argue that these groups face the same bureaucratic challenges as any other organization. This research uncovers hidden rifts within these groups with powerful implications for how to either destroy them, or how to identify potential partner forces in an unconventional warfare campaign.

Kyle Atwell 01:37
Dr. Vera Mironova is a Russian-American academic and a visiting research fellow at Harvard University. She is the author of the book "From Freedom Fighters to Jihadists: Human Resources of

Non-State Armed Groups", which is based on more than 600 interviews with local civilians and fighters on the frontlines in Syria and Iraq.

Nick Lopez 01:56
Dr. Dan Milton is the director of research at the Combating Terrorism Center and an associate professor in the Department of Social Sciences at West Point. He has published multiple articles which examined captured ISIS documents, and he regularly briefs the US government intelligence community and Department of Defense.

Kyle Atwell 02:14
You are listening to the Irregular Warfare Podcast, a joint production of the Princeton empirical studies of conflict project and the Modern War Institute at West Point, dedicated to bridging the gap between scholars and practitioners to support the community of irregular warfare professionals. Here's our conversation with Vera and Dan. Vera and Dan, welcome to the Irregular Warfare Podcast. And thank you for joining us today.

Dr. Daniel Milton 02:42
It's good to be here. Thanks.

Nick Lopez 02:44
Thanks for inviting.

Kyle Atwell 02:45
So I would like to jump straight into it. What motivated you to study non-state armed groups in Syria and Iraq?

Dr. Vera Mironova 02:51
So I was interested in what people who are actually participating in armed groups think. We're used to assuming what they think but no one actually cared to ask them. And not only, you know, it's a problem for us to figure out what they think. But you know, while I started doing this research, I understood that that's the same problem that is faced by their command, so we assume that this armed group is very stable and very strategic, well, no, they have the same problems inside as we do in any organization, and understanding that helps, you know, combat them, or support them, depending on what we particularly want to do with this particular group.

Nick Lopez 03:28
Dan, how about you? What sparked your interest? And what type of approach did you take to your research?

Dr. Daniel Milton 03:35
You know, one other approach. And this is more where some of the work that I've done comes in is to look at the materials that they produce, whether that's propaganda, whether that's spreadsheets, and bureaucratic documents, all of these things, when put together can provide a really illuminating picture of why organizations function the way that they do, and alternatively, what we can learn about their

strengths and weaknesses, and hopefully, how we can kind of craft policy to go after them more effectively. You know, the US government or in general, as nations that are interested in this subject, dedicate significant time, effort, resources, to understanding the warfighting capabilities of our adversaries, what we fail to understand, and this is particularly true in the space of irregular warfare is that by definition, warfighting capabilities are only a fraction of what we're trying to counter. And so when you think about the holistic picture, right, when you think about trying to counter not just what happens on the battlefield, but what happens in the office, what happens in the online space, what happens in recruitment, fundraising and all these different areas. If we're not dedicating our efforts to try to understand the organization itself, then we're really only looking at a small fraction of the picture and we're likely to miss some of the more important things going on behind the scenes.

Kyle Atwell 04:52
So can you describe the context of the Syrian Civil War and why you chose this as a case study to dig into?

Dr. Vera Mironova 05:00
So I chose it because it has many different armed groups. So it gives you like large and that you could look at comparing organization of different groups. And particular was the most interesting thing to me is that in the past, we had like, one group against another group, right? One group against the government. So there was not this developed market. And you know, when you have monopoly, you could, you could be not very successful, you are a monopoly anyway, so who cares. But in Syrian civil war, and even in Ukraine, they actually had to compete between themselves. So they actually had to perform not only against the enemy, but also, you know, to win fighters to join their own group.

Dr. Daniel Milton 05:40
You know, as I think about what Vera was saying, the amount of variation in the Syrian landscape in the Syrian Civil War is incredible, right. Because of the nature of the conflict, you've got, you know, an established government versus an opposition, you've got an opposition that is fractured among different ideological perspectives, you've got outside nations who are involved either through their own proxy groups, or sometimes directly on the ground, you've got individuals traveling from abroad, when you think about a place where you might want to study interesting variation. There it is.

Kyle Atwell 06:11
Yeah, and you both have suggested it. But the thing that struck me about this civil war, is the number of non-state actors involved, I mean do we have a kind of idea of how fractionalized the non-state actor, the rebel group opposition actually was?

Dr. Vera Mironova 06:25
I had no idea what's going on there until I actually started counting them. So the thing is that we were actually joking that they, on the second first two months of the Civil War, they ran out of names for armed groups, you know, it's just a very small set of like, the words of religious meaning like Dahiya, jihad, and of the words like you need army. So they literally ran out of them. So we had to, to identify a particular group, we need to say its name and the name of the leader. And then even for fun, some students I know, from NYU, they actually made a random generator of names for ISIS fighters. You

know, just to help folks out because they were so you know, that's how many, you know, there were that we could not come up with unique names of groups and leaders.

Dr. Daniel Milton 07:16
Yeah, I mean, I don't know that I have anything to add in terms of the specifics. And that's probably an answer unto itself, the fact that we don't really have any way of saying "this is how many groups there are", suggests that there's quite a large number of them.

Dr. Vera Mironova 07:30
But also they used that on their benefits. For example, they use that to trick, you know, Western Coalition. So for example, one group, they would try to kind of separate into two, then one group was going to ask for money from CIA, and the second one from DI or one from Qatar, the second one from Saudi. And they were like, really, it was that they were game foreigners, and they were absolutely, proudly, openly talking about that.

Kyle Atwell 07:56
Yeah, the thing that struck me the most about both of your research is understanding these organizations as exactly that: just real organizations that have normal, mundane organizational challenges.

Nick Lopez 08:06
Right, thinking of terrorist organizations dealing with forms, trackers, approval processes, all those things that really slow organization down, that struck me as well. Dan, you've dug into the Islamic State in detail at the Combating Terrorism Center, you took part in writing report on the group early on in 2014, and sort of tracked organization since. Can you talk to us about your project working through all the ISIS captured documents?

Dr. Daniel Milton 08:36
The Islamic State is headed at the top by a delegated committee, right. So a group of individuals who essentially set the policy and tone for a lot of what the organization does at the ground level. And this project is looking at several hundred documents that were issued by this committee. And I think it's so interesting to look at those documents and see that they are dealing with the highest of ideological objectives, and the most kind of boring and mundane issues that you would expect an organization to have to deal with. And they're doing it within the space of the same day. So on one morning, they're going to be sending out something that talks about the strategic objectives of the organization, and they're gonna follow it up with, by the way, pay your parking tickets or make sure that you release cars from impound, right. I mean, there's just such interesting disparity in the kind of things that these groups are dealing with. And I think it's a good reminder that at the end of the day, one of the primary mistakes that we can make when trying to engage with these groups is simply to assume that they are all of one mind, right, united towards a purpose. I wouldn't expect that any more at any other organization. And yet, somehow I tend to levy that against an organization like ISIS or Al-Nusra, or one of these non-state groups when as Vera points out, they're dealing with a lot of the same kind of challenges that we might.

Nick Lopez 09:51
Kyle and I were actually talking about this a bit before the recording on how both of your works changed how we look at non-state groups, and how there's potential, there's, I guess, a possibility to expose some of these bureaucratic fault lines within non-state armed groups, just exploiting some of their systems and processes, where they have operational efficiencies.

Dr. Daniel Milton 10:20
I mean, when we think about trying to understand these groups, it's so easy to get wrapped up in the five-meter target. And it's not because the five-meter target isn't important, you have to find the individuals, you have to fight the battles, you have to do those things. But at the end of the day, the war is about that kind of broader 20-meter perspective, the individual that you're seeing at the five-meter perspective has been produced by a process and an organization that is operating behind the scenes, right, that kind of 20-meter perspective. And so when you take the opportunity to look beyond the near term focus points, I think you can see a lot more of that. And hopefully, it's useful, right at that five-meter perspective.

Dr. Vera Mironova 10:57
But also talking about like, you know, killing persons at five range, maybe by understanding the organization, we're gonna realize that a particular person in an enemy group should not be killed just because he is like, the worst person they have in this chair. So maybe, you know, it's very beneficial to actually leave him in this chair and protect him with you know, all our force, just because he's so dysfunctional, that he's actually you know, benefiting us.

Nick Lopez 11:21
Just leave him in place.

Dr. Vera Mironova 11:22
No, I mean, in all organizations, guys, think about your own offices you work in right? You, definitely there is some guy who is sitting on some chair that you're like, organization would be so much better without him. And the same thing was in ISIS and then like miracle, you know, the bomb. Yeah, the bomb, you know, hits and the whole ISIS were like "thank you America,"

Dr. Daniel Milton 11:44
Just to be clear we're making the, the figurative correlation between Hellfire missiles and pink slips, right?

Kyle Atwell 11:55
Yeah. And from the external perspective, we kind of just look at them as here's a bad guy, we got to, you know, remove him. But what you're saying is the level of analysis should go way deeper than that, essentially,

Dr. Daniel Milton 12:06
The decision shouldn't just be positioned based, right, you got a guy in a chair, I guess we're gonna come out of the chair, and in some cases, to Vera's point, we may actually enjoy having him in the

chair, or at least it might yield some more benefit to us by his ineffective abilities than, than anything else.

Kyle Atwell 12:22
Okay. Yeah. So I'm gonna switch to your findings, which is how do rebel groups in Syria manage internal organizations, particularly their human resource policies?

Dr. Vera Mironova 12:35
Well, the short answer is not much different from any successful organization. A successful armed group is like successful business, right, in terms of human resources. And you know, one of the groups that was extremely popular in terms of getting fighters, they were even providing their fighters diapers for the kids, because you do understand it's not like only about money. So all those small things that they provide as benefit to their fighters actually increases how competitive this group is in hiring.

Dr. Daniel Milton 13:06
Yeah, so I think that one of the things that's been so interesting to me about some of the work that I've been doing recently is particularly within the Islamic State, the entire apparatus that was designed to cater to the fighter, essentially, is what Vera is describing. And so think about it in this perspective, right? If you, you know, join a normal kind of multinational corporation, you would expect to have health benefits, you would expect to have some paid time off, you would expect to have maybe a gym membership, whatever the case might be. And so within the Islamic State, and this organizational style has been mirrored in a number of other places, you have a Department of War spoils that is responsible for cataloging, but also distributing things that are taken from the battlefield. You have the Department of Soldiery if you will, that is responsible for fighters' well-being that's called the Mujahideen Affairs Office, right. And they're responsible when an individual comes in, not just to make sure that they know where the mess hall is, but also to make sure that from a family perspective, they are "taken care of".

Dr. Vera Mironova 14:14
Just to follow up on Dan's point, a lot of foreign fighters were complaining about the bureaucracy that they have to deal with in ISIS like to get everything. So I just want to, you know, congratulate Dan, that has now to work with all this paperwork that no one could, basically it's so complicated that even the guys inside the group are not able to figure it out.

Dr. Daniel Milton 14:35
You know, it's funny, Vera, you make a great point, I really despise, despite the fact that they're all wonderful people, dealing with my own organizations' human resources, and yet here I am gleefully going through the Human Resources records of someone else.

Nick Lopez 14:49
I don't think anyone enjoys dealing with their own bureaucratic systems. So one of the things I've been thinking about, is if an insurgent candidate wants to join our group, what does that future fighter look for after interest alignment?

Dr. Vera Mironova 15:06
If we're talking about local fighters or foreign fighters: for local fighters, it is, first goal is to combat Bashar Assad. And then choosing groups, you know, who are fighting for this particular goal, it is who is more successful in doing so and who is going to provide more to, to me when I'm doing that, and to my family when I'm dead, because they do expect to be dead, because their first goal is to kill Bashar Assad, and not you know, collect benefits.

Dr. Daniel Milton 15:33
Vera points out, and I think this is really important, that distinction between the foreigners and the locals. Again, there's still a lot of nuance within those two categories. But what are some of the other differences, Vera that you saw in some of your work between those two groups?

Dr. Vera Mironova 15:47
I mean, to be fair, it's very hard to understand, like, the difference is easy to talk to, I had problems finding similarities, they have so many differences that, you know, they ended up fighting and hating each other, like they hate each other. So foreign fighters, for example, first of all, foreign fighters is a mafia, right, and they're mafia by ethnicity. Second of all, let's face it, they are, they're not very big fans of Arabs. Third, a lot of them came to exercise power, and who could they exercise power on? Of course, non-armed civilians. And that led to enormous problems between ISIS as an organization with all those clowns, foreign fighters, and local tribes. So in some places, they literally had to collect all foreign fighters, and put them in some kind of a village asking never, you know, to live only to go to the battle, because the relationships were like, terrible.

Kyle Atwell 16:41
Yeah so this divide between foreign fighters and local fighters is super interesting. Vera. In your book, you identify a whole bunch of benefits and a whole bunch of costs to them. Can you explain, you know what the costs and benefits are for you, as a leader of a non-state violent actor in Syria, when you are considering recruiting foreign fighters?

Dr. Vera Mironova 17:01
Benefits are usually like you think about expat worker, right. So to make it easy for you to understand the structure, consider yourself opening a bank in Indonesia some investment bank, right. And you know, there are no local people who could do it. So you bring bunch of expats, that's exactly the setup that those groups have thinking about bringing in foreign fighters. So benefits that they're bringing in are connections, again, for recruitment or for buying weapons, what's not, then experience, they could actually teach locals how to, let's say, run a bank or fight. And you know, for propaganda purposes, they look really great on TV, saying that oh, we're Western organization, or what's not. But then it comes with really serious costs. So those guys they're experienced, they know what they're doing, and they know it better than you who hired them. So they could get absolutely not controllable, very fast, then, you know, their problems was locals, just again, think about yourself being sent to some kind of African country, even if your family was African country, you know, it's totally different. And you're getting very tired very soon, and very pissed that you could not get your Starbucks in the morning, that internet sucks. And so on. Same thing here. And local speak different language, you don't understand it, you're getting pissed. Then also, if you have many foreign fighters from different countries, and they

do not care about your structure and command that you build for them. Like they really don't, they have their own leader of their ethnicity. But the biggest thing for ISIS was actually a problem with like foreign fighters, because half of them wanted to do outside missions. And half of them were like, guys, you know, we have a country here, maybe we would spend this money to, you know, build the road, you know, or a school just because we live here, you know, and they had a real problem was that, so half of foreign fighters said, oh, let's go and conquer everything, you know, and put Islamic flag everywhere. And half were like, no, we're not going to spend a dime doing that. And you understand that this reminds us a lot about US, where half of voters were like, we're not going to give a dime to US to send people to Iraq anymore. And then you know, everyone else like, oh, no, we need to go and you know, be more involved in the world. So their problems were absolutely no different from any other problems that countries or groups face.

Nick Lopez 19:23
In your book, you talk about some of the conversations you've had with former ISIS fighters. Can you tell us anything from those conversations that struck you?

Dr. Vera Mironova 19:32
What I wrote in the, in my book is just a minor problem of like any organization, right? That you need to tell everyone what to do. And that was before they got suicide bombers. When they got people who were interested in suicide, you could just, you know, close the door and turn on the light. So I was talking and interviewing or hanging out with a guy who was a small, he's Uzbek and he wasn't like a small emir. So he was complaining. So when he's asking why he left ISIS, he's back home now, he said that so I got this position of being an emir of 25 people, and all of those people were like, you know, 17, 18, 19, who wanted to, you know, suicide become a martyr. So he said, it was absolutely impossible for us to get anything done. Because could you imagine, like, we're getting an order to go and capture this village and everything they want to do is to die? Absolutely, they're not thinking how to do it, how to best do it. And even if we take it, how we're going to hold it if they all want to die.

Kyle Atwell 20:32
So their goal was martyrdom?

Dr. Vera Mironova 20:35
Yes.

Kyle Atwell 20:36
Their goal is to die. But they're not thinking about the political objectives of the actual fighting

Dr. Vera Mironova 20:40
Well even tactical objective, nothing. So he said we could not have, we could not reach anything. So after that, they started separating those folks outside and just bringing them whenever they needed a suicide guy, they would bring them on the field.

Nick Lopez 20:53
Vera this is an interesting point, I think it's worth digging into a little bit more, which is the Islamic State had its own challenge. Challenges were it recruited people that were too ideologically zealous, and ISIS eventually had to tamp down their ideology.

Dr. Vera Mironova 21:12
So yeah, they recruited, when they were recruiting, they didn't, they could not check who is actually into ideology and who is not. So they got a bunch of people that were fine in the beginning, because in the beginning, everyone was busy fighting, right. So you know, even they didn't quite care about anything other than to stay alive. So but then when they actually controlled the territory and started living life, those folks who were into ideology, they started spending more time being into ideology, and they got to the very, you know, just basically talking to each other about it, they developed their own concept. And those concepts were not anywhere close to the ISIS', you know, official opinion. But the most important thing about those guys that those guys came to die what they believe in, so when they are accusing ISIS leadership of not being Muslim, you know, that's what their point is, right? They are actually not, they're not gonna go home, no, no, no. They actually going to kill non-Muslim. That's their goal. So that's why they became dangerous because they were actually attacking members of ISIS Internal Security, they were killing them. That was the issue not only to say that they had a problem with ISIS rules, which is actually funny in itself. So for example, one of the things they did was, you know, ISIS, one of the most successful ISIS tactics was to put uniform of Iraqi military on, right? Put a fake checkpoint and kill everyone there, right? Super successful. But those guys, they found out somewhere in their own readings, they found out the following sentence: that if you look like one, you're the one, or something like that in English. And basically, from that they interpreted it, is that, doing this type of operations is against Islam, because you could not put Iraqi uniform on, it makes you non-Muslim. And then they came with this beautiful, gorgeous idea to ISIS' military leadership, and propose to them their opinion that they think that this tactic is against Islam. You know, I rarely take the position of ISIS leadership. But right now, I'm like, I just want to be in this room to see the face of ISIS military leader, when he's basically been told that the most successful tactic that allows him to win the battles is apparently against Islam. And apparently, they could not do it.

Kyle Atwell 23:47
So this is so interesting, because, you know, I think the average American would think the Islamic State is very radical, and extremist, and yet, what you're saying is that within their own organization, they were having to tamp out people that were even more radical than they were, and they couldn't accomplish their own political objectives because of that.

Dr. Vera Mironova 24:08
In terms of religion, ISIS has nothing to do with radicalism at all. But like one of my favorite example, one of the, let's say, top people in Deir ez-Zor, whom they really needed. He was a local, but he has a particular knowledge. And ISIS really, really needed him to be a friend, but he was a member of a Communist Party back before the war. So ISIS allowed him to have a Communist Party meetings once a week in Deir ez-Zor which was an ISIS stronghold, just so he does not leave. So they will literally bring him alcohol and cigars to his Communist Party hangout, but ISIS as an organization, they didn't

care about their radical whatever they're talking about. They had a strategical goal, they had to fight a war, they had to control territory, you know, they had to work.

Dr. Daniel Milton 24:55
You know what some of the other documents that we have document oil sales between ISIS and the Syrian regime. How do you justify those kinds of things. And to viewers point, right, there is a level where you can say this is necessary for security or for the good of the organization. But on some level of individuals, those explanations are going to ring hollow, because they've been promised something pretty high and lofty. And to find out that it's less than what it is. And I'm not saying that this is unique to ISIS, of course, this is what all organizations struggle with. But in the case of ISIS, it's not always possible to measure up, right, and you're trying to, from an organizational perspective, control both the desire of people to consistently increase the value of that ideological signal versus the fact that by definition, the further you go out to the periphery, the more people are not willing to make that journey. And for the guys who are out on the periphery, sure, you're, you're happy to lose those other folks. But from an organizational perspective, you need people and you need people to stay. And it can be a difficult balance for any organization. But particularly for an organization like ISIS, where the consequences of that increasing ideological zealotry is you might get, you might get imprisoned or killed if you're not along the train.

Nick Lopez 26:11
Shifting gears a bit, I'd like to ask the both of you based on your analysis of the different groups working in Syria, what were the key implications for policymakers and practitioners, based off of your findings?

Dr. Daniel Milton 26:24
I want to emphasize the importance of looking at the non-kinetic side of the equation, you know, as you think about what it is that it takes to recruit, train, indoctrinate, field, supply, and direct a soldier or a fighter, there's an immense amount of behind-the-scenes action going on. And each of those pieces are critical points where some sort of interdiction might yield that fighter actually being able to be on the field. And so as we think about studying these organizations, it's important that we continue to extract whatever insights we can from interviews, from documents, from whatever sources we cannot just about who was important, right? That's a targeting question, but about why the organization functioned the way that it did, because I think if Syria teaches us anything, it's that this particular challenge is not going to go away. Right, the Syrian conflict rages on, the Syrian armed groups, in many cases are there although in different forms and shapes. We're seeing the emergence of different organizations in places like Afghanistan, and throughout a variety of places in Africa, understanding the organizational structure behind these groups, I think is going to be a strategy that yields benefit.

Kyle Atwell 27:44
How do you fix that? Is that a policy issue? Or is that part of military doctrine? Like, what do you see as the way forward to taking advantage of these internal organizational cleavages within these groups?

Dr. Daniel Milton 27:55
From an organizational perspective, in terms of structure and culture, we're, we're pretty far behind what some of these groups have put in place to try to exploit the information side of the battle. And it's

not about being more fancy, it's not about putting out more products, it's about creating a structure that allows you to have kind of an enduring, sustainable contribution to that area. And with all my engagement on the information side of our efforts in Iraq and Syria, I don't see that, I see people who are passionate about it, but they're in for four months, and then they're gone. Or six months, and then they're gone. And then we start that wheel over again. And so I think that there's a lot of organizational changes that need to happen for us to be more effective at competing in that side of the equation. When it comes to the information, perspective, we care so much about a body count. And that's not to say that an individual operator cares about that. But as kind of an organization, that's something that we care a lot about is being able to say, We killed this many bad guys, or we took back this percentage of territory. And consequently, we dedicate a lot of resources to doing just that. I've read a lot of interrogation reports. And it's so interesting to me how much time they spend focusing on, finding the next individual to go after. So when I'm sitting down and talking to this high value target, I'm sitting there saying, hey, you know, what can we do to figure out who the next high value target is? At one point, I sent some questions to some of the interrogators that were more information oriented, more strategic oriented, more exploiting the fishers, if you will. And the response that I got was, we don't have time to ask those kinds of questions. Okay. I understand that. And I'm not, I'm not, you know, I'm not ignorant of the pressures that we're under. But at the end of the day, if we're not willing to engage in asking those types of questions to people, then we're not going to learn and we're going to continue to be really excellent at finding the next target.

Kyle Atwell 29:59
So you're both saying that we're too focused on the kind of fine-fix decapitation strategy cycle and not focused on a larger, how do we deconstruct this organization type of process?

Dr. Daniel Milton 30:13
Although there certainly are exceptions. Yeah, I would agree with that.

Dr. Vera Mironova 30:17
I think we just, because we need to report short term gains.

Dr. Daniel Milton 30:21
And to your point earlier, Kyle, I think that a lot of these changes are at the policy or the kind of the strategic level, if you will, and that the individuals who are doing the tough work are often doing it as best they can, given the constraints that they operate in.

Kyle Atwell 30:38
If we're trying to pick a local actor to support as the US did in Syria, with the Free Syrian Army, what are kind of the implications of your research on who we should be looking at to support and how to approach them?

Dr. Vera Mironova 30:51
I was really, really having fun when I heard the first time when we were supporting someone in Syria that we need to vet them. But no one in the discussion used, like actually specified on what. What we started doing is checking that they never had involvement with, let's say, Jabhat al-Nusra. But the

problem is that, I don't know, we didn't know, we didn't care, that basically the most dedicated to fighting against Assad, people were in Jabhat al-Nusra. So what we had to do was to compete with them for the best people. And membership in Jabhat al-Nusra should have been a symbol of people being dedicated, right? So thank you for doing screening for us, basically. Instead, we said no one who had any affiliation with Jabhat al-Nusra. And whom did we get? The lowest of the low, whom Jabhat al-Nusra didn't want to see anywhere next to its ranks ever. So no, no wonder, you know, when we send them back to Syria, the minute you know, Jabhat al-Nusra came in and took all of their weapons, like because they by definition, were the lowest of the lowest. And I think what they just said, I guess it's like imprisonment for 10 years, right? Like, you know, of supporting terrorist organization or something like that.

Dr. Daniel Milton 32:03
Don't worry, they'll post a disclaimer that nobody on this podcast supports terrorism.

Nick Lopez 32:08
Disclaimer is great. It's all encompassing?

Kyle Atwell 32:12
Well, this is, this is a super important question, though, because the US did support the Free Syrian Army. For looking back for policymakers and practitioners, understanding the lessons learned from that is a valuable contribution.

Dr. Daniel Milton 32:23
When it comes to who we're going to partner with, it might be really tempting to focus on the organizations that either have the most capability or whose interests are strictly aligned with ours. And yet, what we've seen from this conversation is that once you peel back the first couple of layers and look at the inside of an organization, there's actually a tremendous amount of nuance related to its future trajectory, and to its actual structural capability to survive. Understanding those pieces, in addition to the capability question is an important part of picking the right partners. The second thing that is going to require a little bit of a mental journey for all of us here is one of the things that Vera illustrated very well, both in her comments here and in her book is that distinction between foreign and local, and how it introduces tension. When it comes to partnering, we have to recognize that we are the foreigners, and that the people we're partnering with are the locals. And it is unlikely that we are all going to line up on what is the most important mission, or what is the most important priority, regardless of what we say at a negotiating table. And so designing partnerships so that they can endure and adapt to those changing circumstances is important. And to not just assume that when we make partnerships that we're going to continue to be aligned or alternatively, that once our interests don't align, we can simply discard our partner or they can discard us. ISIS failed to appropriately manage that foreign versus local dynamic. Is there a way that we can learn in building our own partnerships how to better manage that dynamic? I think there probably is.

Dr. Vera Mironova 34:00
I would also add that we could not assume that they are like our pets or something. So the minute we partner with them, they're going to do whatever we want. Do you know in theory, it seemed like you

know US wanted exactly this, you know, like to tell them today we're fighting this tomorrow, we're fighting that.

Dr. Daniel Milton 34:15
Vera's comments make me think exactly of even the terminology that we sometimes use. We describe partners as proxy forces. In some cases, the word proxy implies some sort of a subordinate relationship. Now, whether that's true in a global or in a military capability sense, clearly, there's something to partnership that is not well served by referring to each other as proxies or pets, right? You know, the title of the podcast is the Irregular Warfare, right, Podcast and as we think about irregular warfare, and we think about the definition of what irregular warfare is right? It's conflict between state and non-state for legitimacy and influence, over a population, and I think about all that Vera and I have shared and kind of learned about the internal nuances of organizations, how they manage talent, how they recruit, how they try to manage disparate parties. And I think about the actions that we took in the theater designed to exploit those differences in nuances. And I don't know that I can come up with as many examples as I would like to. I can come up with lots of examples where we called in air strikes, or where we trained partner forces to take the fight one to one.

Nick Lopez 35:34
More so kinetic.

Dr. Daniel Milton 35:35
Right, but think about what we could have done if we understood the dynamics between local and foreign fighters and then used either whatever, you know, signals intelligence, or whatever captured enemy material to try to influence those dynamics a little bit more, to drive wedges between them. And I don't know that that's a place where we're at. But that's a question that we need to engage with. And it's not just related to ISIS, or al-Nusra, or Syria, but to the broader kind of landscape of irregular warfare. And I think that, unfortunately, when we look back on what's happened over the past six or seven years, we're gonna, we're gonna find that we're still, we're still lacking in that area.

Kyle Atwell 36:16
And this is a good place to stop, but I want to thank both of you for coming on to the Irregular Warfare Podcast today. This has been a great conversation.

Dr. Daniel Milton 36:24
Thank you for the time it was enjoyable.

Dr. Vera Mironova 36:26
Thank you.

Kyle Atwell 36:31
Thanks again for listening to episode five of the Irregular Warfare Podcast.

Nick Lopez 36:35
We release a new episode every two weeks. In our next episode, we will discuss proxy forces in Africa, with Dr. Eli Berman and Major General Hicks. After that, we will continue the conversation with Dr. Berman and we will be joined by Ambassador Ryan Crocker to focus on proxy warfare in the Middle East.

Kyle Atwell 36:52
Please be sure to subscribe to the Irregular Warfare Podcast so you don't miss an episode. You can also follow and engage with us on Twitter, Facebook or LinkedIn.

Nick Lopez 37:02
One last note: what you hear in this episode are the views of the participants and don't represent those of West Point, the army, or any other agency of the US government.

Kyle Atwell 37:13
Thanks again and we will see you next time.