

BSAMUN 2025

**Addressing the rising
threat of violent
non-state actors.**

Security Council

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Introduction

Violent non-state actors (VNSAs) represent one of the most pressing challenges to global peace and security. Operating outside the jurisdiction of recognised governments, these groups employ violence to achieve political, ideological, or economic goals. Ranging from terrorism to organised crime, their activities undermine sovereignty, disrupt social cohesion, and exacerbate humanitarian crises. Holding such groups accountable for their actions is often extremely difficult due to their lack of affiliation with a recognised state, while in some cases having comparable power and influence. They are often also covertly connected or financed by states looking to further their political or military agendas. In some cases, people are forced to depend upon such organisations, creating a complicated web of perspectives that must be considered. The rise of VNSAs has been fueled by factors such as globalisation, technological advances, weak governance, and socio-economic disparities. Addressing the issue of such actors is of paramount importance to international security and socioeconomic welfare.

Key Terms

Violent Non-State Actors (VNSAs): Entities using violence for political, economic, or ideological purposes without the formal authority of a state.

Terrorism: Acts of violence intended to instil fear and achieve political objectives, usually against civilians.

Insurgency: Armed rebellion aimed at challenging an existing government.

Hybrid Warfare: The combination of conventional military tactics with irregular methods, including cyber-attacks and propaganda.

Radicalization: The process through which individuals adopt extreme ideologies, often leading to violence

Illicit Networks: Organized systems facilitating illegal trade, arms or human trafficking or financial transactions

Proxy Warfare: A conflict where external powers support VNSAs to achieve strategic objectives indirectly.

Counter-Insurgency: Military or political action taken to combat insurgencies.

Cyberterrorism: The politically motivated use of computers and information technology to cause extreme disruption or widespread fear in society.

Guerrilla Tactics: A combat strategy which focuses on avoiding head-on confrontations with enemies, typically due to inferior forces.

FTFs: Foreign Terrorist Fighters, those who travel to conflict zones to engage in terrorist acts.

Safe Havens: An area providing safe refuge or asylum to terrorists.

Soft Targets: A person, location or thing that is easily accessible to the general public and relatively unprotected, making it vulnerable to military attacks.

State Sponsorship: The support and funding provided to non-state actors by a government, often in secret to further its political agenda in a particular region.

General Overview

Violent non-state actors (VNSAs) exploit a convergence of socio-economic inequalities, technological advancements, weak governance and ideological extremism to further their objectives, presenting a significant challenge to global peace and security. Such actors, ranging from transnational terrorist networks like al-Qaeda and ISIS to insurgent groups such as the Taliban, thrive in fragile states where institutional capacity is inadequate to provide basic services or maintain law and order. They use asymmetric warfare and hybrid tactics to target soft targets and critical infrastructure while leveraging safe havens and recruitment pipelines fueled by socio-economic grievances and marginalisation. The recent rise of globalisation and digital platforms has amplified their reach, enabling sophisticated propaganda campaigns and the recruitment of FTFs on an international scale. Prolonged conflicts, such as those in Syria and Yemen, exacerbate instability and create power vacuums that VNSAs exploit to establish territorial control and expand their influence. VNSAs also finance their operations through illicit networks, including drug trafficking, human trafficking and arms smuggling. These entities destabilise economies and erode state sovereignty. The humanitarian toll from their activities is immense, with millions displaced, human rights abuses rampant and social fragmentation deepened by ethnic and ideological divisions. Recently emerging methods employed by VNSAs such as cyberterrorism, the use of drones and alliances between VNSAs further complicate counterinsurgency efforts, while urban warfare strategies in densely populated areas heighten civilian casualties. Finding an internationally accepted solution to VNSAs will prove difficult due to the fact that VNSAs are often indirectly and covertly funded or even sponsored by state governments, seeking to further their political agendas. The rampant increase of proxy warfare in recent times has also fueled the expansion and development of VNSAs, resulting in regions where people are forced to rely upon VNSAs who fill gaps left by dysfunctional governments. These include the provision of services, security or economic opportunities, and often come at the cost of increased violence, exploitation and instability. This sort of reliance upon VNSAs is a symptom of deeper systematic failures and tends to perpetuate cycles of violence, poverty and instability in affected regions. Finding an international solution to violent non-state actors is therefore of immense global importance.

Major Parties/Countries Involved

United States: The US is central to global counterterrorism efforts, particularly targeting al-Qaeda and ISIS through military operations, intelligence sharing and policy leadership.

United Kingdom: Is actively involved in countering international VNSAs through NATO and coalition missions, focusing on combating ISIS, al-Qaeda and related extremist threats. It also provides critical intelligence and logistical support for African and Middle Eastern counterterrorism efforts.

Turkey: Faces the challenge of combating Kurdish insurgent groups like the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) while addressing extremist threats from groups operating in neighbouring Syria, including ISIS and al-Nursa Front. Turkey's role is further complicated by balancing geopolitical alliances and border security.

Russia: Addresses VNSAs in the Caucasus region, such as Islamist separatist groups, while simultaneously accused of supporting separatist movements in proxy conflicts such as in Ukraine's Donetsk and Luhansk regions. Its involvement shapes the security of the region and has wider impacts on global security dynamics.

India: Confronts persistent cross-border terrorism, particularly from groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed, operating from Pakistan. These groups target Indian security forces and civilians, especially in the disputed Kashmir region.

Iran: Simultaneously a target of groups such as ISIS and a supporter of proxies like Hezbollah, Iran strategically leverages VNSAs to expand its influence in the Middle East, particularly in conflicts across Syria, Yemen and Iraq.

ISIS: A Transnational extremist group formerly operating as a pseudo-state in Iraq and Syria that is now conducting guerrilla operations globally.

Al-Qaeda: A global jihadist network responsible for major attacks, including 9/11, maintaining influence in regions like Yemen and the Sahel.

Taliban: Governs Afghanistan post US withdrawal while maintaining ties with groups like al-Qaeda and Haqqani Network.

Yemen's Houthi Rebels: Operate as a dominant faction in Yemen's civil war, leveraging political and military control despite international opposition.

Timeline of Key Events

1979: The Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan leads to the rise of the mujahideen, setting a precedent for modern violent non-state actors.

1988: Al-Qaeda is founded by Osama bin Laden. This is widely recognised as the start of the Jihadist movement, and the global Jihadist network.

1944: The Taliban emerges in Afghanistan, establishing itself as a significant VNSA and later taking control of most of Afghanistan by 1966.

2001: September 11 attacks orchestrated by al-Qaeda prompted the US-led War on Terror, targeting VNSAs globally.

2003: The US-led invasion of Iraq destabilises the region, contributing to the emergence of insurgent groups like ISIS.

2011: The Arab Springs uprisings lead to state collapse in Libya, Yemen and Syria, creating opportunities for VNSAs to thrive such as ISIS and AQAP.

2014: After capturing Mosul in June, ISIS formally declares a caliphate in Syria and Iraq, attracting foreign fighters and expanding its global operations.

2015: Al-Shabaab carries out the Garissa University attack in Kenya, highlighting the reach of East African VNSAs. This high-profile attack showcased Al-Shabaab's ongoing regional threat.

2017: The United Nations adopts Resolution 2396, addressing the issue of returning and relocating foreign terrorist fighters.

2019: The loss of Baghouz in Syria marked the territorial defeat of ISIS in Syria and Iraq although the group continues to operate underground as an insurgency.

2020: The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbates the instability and poor socioeconomic conditions in fragile states, creating opportunities for VNSAs to exploit.

2021: The US withdrawal from Afghanistan enables the Taliban to regain control of the country, impacting regional security.

2023: Increased use of advanced technologies, including drones, cyberattacks and encrypted communications by VNSAs to enhance their operations.

UN Involvement & Relevant Resolutions

UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy (2006): This comprehensive strategy provides a framework for addressing, combating and preventing terrorism, building state capacity and ensuring respect for human rights.

[UN Security Council Resolution 1373 \(2001\) \(hyperlinked\)](#): Adopted following the September 11th attacks, this resolution established the Counter-Terrorism Committee (CTC) and required member states to criminalise terrorist financing, deny safe havens to terrorists and enhance information-sharing mechanisms.

[UN Security Council Resolution 1540 \(2004\) \(hyperlinked\)](#): Focused on preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction to non-state actors, this resolution obliges states to implement domestic controls and enhance border security.

[UN Security Council Resolution 2178 \(2014\) \(hyperlinked\)](#): Addresses the threat posed by foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) by requiring member states to adopt measures to prevent travel, recruitment and funding of such individuals. It highlights the need for states to enhance border security and monitor communications, and links back to resolution 1373.

[UN Security Council Resolution 2396 \(2017\) \(hyperlinked\)](#): Builds on previous resolutions by introducing measures to tackle the challenges of returning and relocating FTFs. It urges member states to develop and implement effective prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration strategies.

UNODC (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime): Addresses the connection between organised crime and terrorism, focusing on disrupting illicit trafficking networks used by VNSAs for financing their operations.

UN Peacekeeping Operations: In conflict zones like the Democratic Republic of Congo or Mali, UN peacekeepers strive to mitigate the influence of VNSAs by stabilising regions, protecting civilians and supporting state institutions.

Further, the UN collaborates with regional organisations, such as the African Union (AU), the European Union (EU) and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to combat VNSAs through joint initiatives and regional security frameworks, such as but not limited to;

Capacity Building: Training programs for border security, law enforcement and judicial officials to enhance member states' ability to counter VNSAs effectively.

Cybersecurity and Safety Measures: Developing strategies to counter the use of the internet and social media by VNSAs for recruitment and propaganda, particularly among younger individuals.

Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE): The UN emphasises addressing the root cause of extremism, such as poverty, inequality and lack of education through its PVE programs.

Previous attempts to solve the issue

Previous efforts to address the threat of VNSAs have ranged from military interventions and international coalitions to legislative reforms and socio-economic initiatives. However, the complexity of this issue has often resulted in varied outcomes. Notable attempts to solve this issue include:

1. Military Interventions and Counterinsurgency Campaigns:
 - a. The U.S.-led War on Terror initiated in 2001 following the September 11th attacks, targeted major VNSAs such as al-Qaeda and the Taliban. It was successful in dismantling key networks and leaders, but often resulted in prolonged conflicts and unintended civilian casualties.
 - b. France's Operation Barkhane in the Sahel region targeted groups like AQIM and ISGS through joint military efforts with African nations. Limited progress has been made, highlighting the persistence of VNSAs.
2. International Coalitions and Partnerships:
 - a. The Global Coalition to defeat ISIS, comprising of over 80 countries coordinated efforts to eliminate the territorial control ISIS held in Iraq and Syria. It combined military action with financial sanctions and counter-propaganda campaigns.
 - b. Regional alliances such as the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) have worked to eliminate al-Shabaab, achieving some success in reclaiming territories but struggling with resource constraints.
3. Humanitarian and Developmental Aid:

- a. Many International organizations, including the UN and NGOs, have provided humanitarian aid in conflict zones to address the socio-economic conditions exploited by VNSAs. The largest struggle with aid is usually financial, limiting its reach and effectiveness.
- 4. Legislative and Security Reforms:
 - a. National anti-terrorism laws in nations such as India, The United States and France have empowered law enforcement to act decisively against VNSAs, even though human rights concerns persist.
 - b. The adoption of UN Security Council Resolutions, including 1373 (2001) and 2396 (2017) has strengthened international legal frameworks to combat terrorism. Among others, such resolutions mandate member states to criminalize the financing of terrorism, improve border security and monitor the movement of FTFs.

Possible solutions

There are a myriad of possible solutions for this issue, the most effective likely being a mix of multiple. Possible solutions include:

1. Strengthening Governance
 - a. Supporting fragile and conflict-affected states to enhance governance and reduce corruption will effectively reduce their vulnerability to VNSAs. Further, building effective institutions and basic infrastructure that can provide basic services and maintain law and order will foster public confidence and contribute to state security.
2. Enhancing International Cooperation
 - a. Strengthening regional alliances to address cross-border challenges posed by VNSAs, as well as improving existing information-sharing frameworks and joint operations between nations will effectively disrupt VNSA networks and agendas. While many international efforts are already in place, their effectiveness could be improved through the participation of more states as well as the development of newer strategies to fit the modern day. One of the many examples of this would be utilising deep learning models to improve cyber safety and monitor potential threats by VNSAs on social media.
3. Countering Ideological Narratives
 - a. Developing counter-propaganda campaigns that undermine extremist ideologies and promote inclusive ideals would also be an effective strategy. In addition to this, implementing inclusive education and teaching critical thinking to younger people would be an effective way to limit the reach of VNSAs.
4. Prosecution, Rehabilitation and Reintegration
 - a. Implementing international legal frameworks for prosecuting individuals involved with VNSAs while ensuring due process and respect for human rights would serve as a path towards justice, as well as an effective deterrent from terrorism and associated crimes.
5. Targeting Financial Networks
 - a. Enhancing financial intelligence, ideally on an international level, to disrupt funding channels used by VNSAs would help limit their power as well as uncover any potential state sponsorship or other illicit networks. Strengthening regulations on

money laundering and illicit financial flows along with increased international cooperation between financial institutions to trace this would also be beneficial.

6. Cybersecurity Measures

- a. Monitoring and disrupting the online platforms used by VNSAs for recruitment, fundraising and communication would further limit their reach and growth. Collaborating with technology companies to remove extremist content or reduce its spread as well as prevent cyber attacks in a balanced way that respects freedom of speech would further help.

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