Dan Miodownik and Oren Barak


This ambitious book tackles an amorphous subject—non-state actors and their impact on intrastate conflicts, specifically in the Middle East. The categorization is potentially vast, and can include non-governmental organizations (NGOs), international companies, private contractors, and so on. But this book focuses on two subcategories of non-state actor: foreign volunteers in Middle Eastern regional conflicts and the role of diasporas in influencing the trajectory of conflict. The problem is hardly a new one, the authors remind us, as “armed activists who arrive in a disputed state (or in a region within it) either before or after the outbreak of violence to take part in hostilities,” include pirates, terrorist organizations, and foreign legions that historically have challenged state consolidation and long intervened with ideological, religious, or mercenary objectives in support of local allies. The so-called Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) and the knock-on effects of the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq followed by the “Arab spring” have simply prompted scholars of late to focus on the implosion of the post-colonial Arab state and the rise of “violent trans-border non-state actors” that began in Lebanon in 1975. Arab regimes like Egypt, Algeria, and Saudi Arabia have proven oblivious to the fact that the face an unpleasant homecoming when activists exported abroad invariably return as hardened Islamist militants to challenge regime legitimacy. Likewise, Washington and Islamabad’s sponsorship of 10,000 to 15,000 “Afghan Arabs” in the 1980s, saw the phenomenon snowball through Chechnya and Bosnia to Iraq and now Syria. The result, according to Oren Barak and Chanan Cohen, has been the creation a “modern Sherwood Forest” of stateless territories filled with self-reverential heroic outlaws, which in an unexplained desire to Disneyfy and acronyze they call “violent trans-border non-state actors” or “VITNAS.” “Ungoverned spaces” has served us perfectly well as a description of the phenomenon up to now. Nor does their solution that these failed states need to be “reconstructed” seem particularly appealing, or even feasible, in the wake of the costly interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The two foci of the book—the links between state decomposition, international terrorism, and ideological extremism, and the impact of diasporas on foreign policy—do not mesh easily, which challenges the cohesion of the chapters. However, the individual contributions often succeed on their own, despite the book’s weak conceptual framework. In an optimistically titled chapter “Framing to Win,” David Mallet explains that “Afghan Arabs” and their successors are often recruited by “watchers” in mosques who persuade young
men to embark on jihad by kindling fears that creeping secularization poses a threat to community cohesion. While some of these men might belong to diaspora communities in the West, most are recruited from Middle Eastern states unable to deliver a future for their citizens. Mallet’s antidote to the “universal values” appeal of Islamists is to “reframe” identity to emphasize national or host-nation values to thwart an appeal to an Islamist “global consciousness.” Unfortunately, one has the sinking feeling as one ventures deeper into this chapter that we are being proffered yet another unconvincing, superficial “Information Operations” remedy for a region’s profound structural problems.

In one of the strongest contributions in the book, Avraham Sela and Robert A. Fitchette explain the United States’ contribution to the creation of al-Qa’ida via the surge of thousands of “Afghan Arabs” into Afghanistan at the very moment that the region was exhibiting signs of disintegration. The 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan occurred in a year that also witnessed the fall of the Shah, an inspiration to those who wished to topple secular regimes; the peace agreement between Egypt and Israel that resulted in Egypt’s expulsion from the Arab League and the subsequent murder two years later of Anwar Sadat at the hands of Islamists; finally, Saudi militants occupied Mecca’s Grand Mosque in an attempt to trigger a revolution against the House of Saud. Feeling threatened, Arab regimes sought to leverage popular discontent with the Soviet invasion by temporarily allying with Islamist groups. For instance, in Egypt Husni Mubarak freed members of the Muslim Brotherhood from prison to join the small tsunami of Yemenis, Saudis, Algerians and others to fight in Afghanistan. In cahoots with Saudi Intelligence, Osama bin Laden used his family construction firm to build fortifications, hospitals, and so on in Pakistan and Afghanistan and buy arms. With the Soviet retreat from Afghanistan, radicalized “Afghan Arabs” returned home to fuel insurgencies like the G1A in Algeria, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, or to continue the struggle in Chechnya, Kashmir, or Bosnia. Allegedly furious when Riyadh refused to allow him to launch a crusade against Saddam in Iraq, from 1998 Osama focused his ire on the United States, which, in his eyes, was the main prop of the “artificial regimes” in the Middle East.

The second part of the book deals with “ethno-national-religious diasporas” defined by Gabriel Sheffer as, “a cultural-social-political-economic entity of people who are united by the same ethno-national origin and permanently reside as minorities in one host-land or in a number of host lands.” Other authors advance slightly modified definitions, but this one will serve as a base line. Of course, in an attempt to be comprehensive, this definition allows for a huge degree of variation, “imagined” kinship, sub-groupings by class, region