

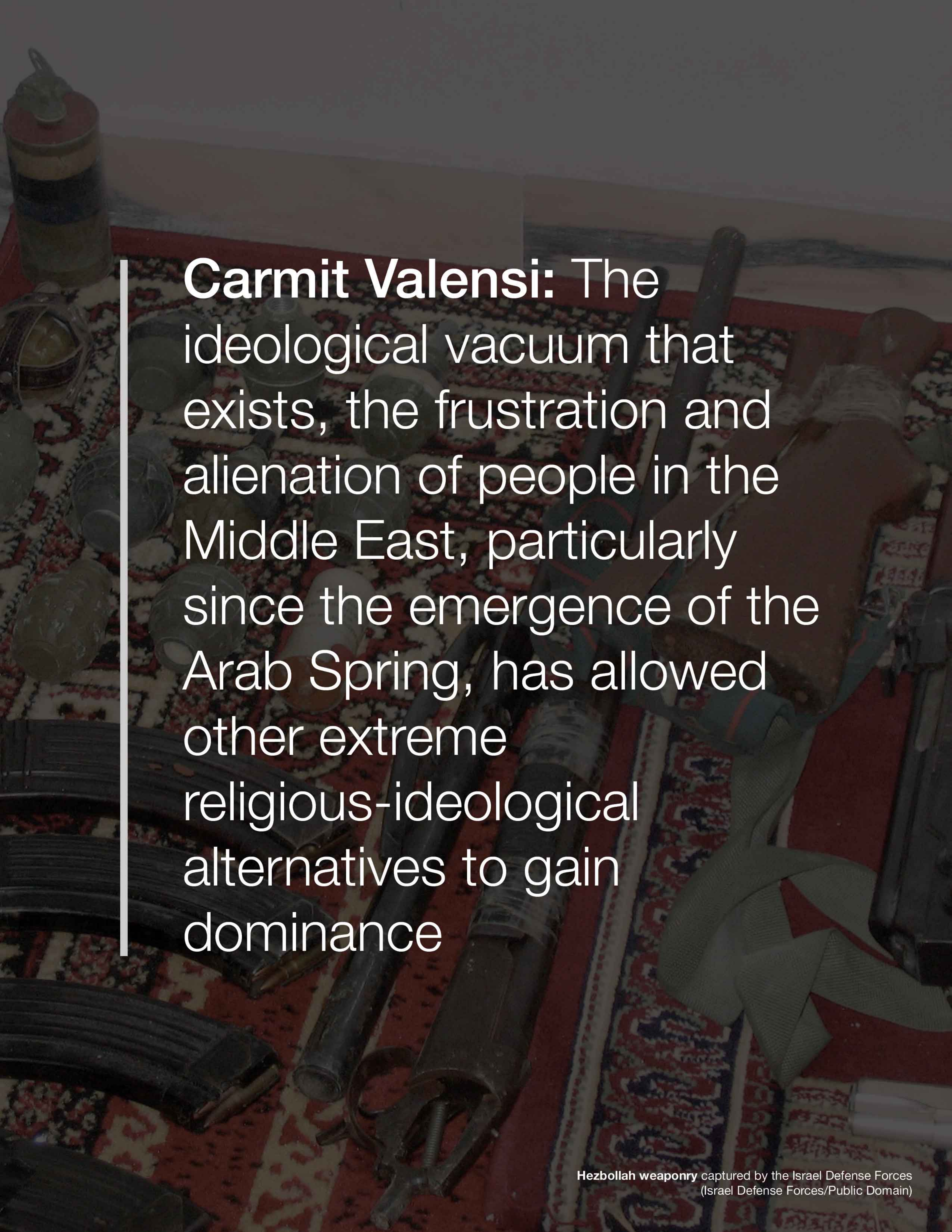
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Violent Non-State Actors in the Middle East: A Conversation with Dr. Carmit Valensi

Interviewed by Robert Pulwer



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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.

FSR: Given developments over the last few decades and what is currently happening in Syria, how might we conceptualize how VNSAs be used as proxies by states?

CV: I think that it has to do a lot with the type and characteristics of the organization as some of them never functioned as proxies. Hamas, for instance, whatever its ties to Iran in the past, managed to keep its independence regarding its decision-making process. It would therefore be inaccurate to see Hamas as a proxy actor. ISIS is another example of a VNSA who does not exclusively rely on any state for its existence. I find it hard to believe that even if ISIS were to lose power and traction due to the military campaign against it that it will become a proxy of any state in the region. In the Syrian context, even rebel groups that are being sponsored by states like Saudi Arabia or any other Gulf states maintain a type of autonomy in their practices and ideologies.

Regarding actors who functioned as proxies in the past, I argue that given current conditions, in order to be influential and sustainable, VNSAs cannot limit their

practices and act only as proxies. Rather, they will have to maintain independent activities that go beyond their relationship with a sponsor state. They will also have to juggle their various obligations, contradictory as they may be, as in the case of Hezbollah. So to sum up, I tend to think that VNSAs, in spite of their ties to larger states, are becoming more and more independent than in the past.

FSR: In your article “Non-State Actors: A Theoretical Limitation in a Changing Middle East,” you note that Hezbollah’s strategy and role changed with different pressures. Given the importance of Hezbollah to Iran and Russia, and in the Syrian war, what pressures do you see it facing in the future, and how do you think the group might respond?

CV: Compared to other VNSAs, Hezbollah has a more limited area of operation in some respects, due to its multiple identities (national-Lebanese, Pan-Islamic, and Shiite) and obligations (social-*dawa*, military-*muqawama*, and political practices). This state of affairs raises the need to constantly maneuver between these identities and to give varying intensity to each one of them according to the circumstances and needs.

Hezbollah’s deep involvement in Syria generates a significant tension between its various identities that is likely to persist in the near future.

Politically, the organization’s image as a non-sectarian, national-Lebanese organization has been undermined. Its role in the Syrian war increased the internal criticism of the group, both among Hezbollah’s political rivals and in Lebanon and in the region in general. Hezbollah is being perceived as a Syrian-Iranian proxy who risks Lebanon’s security situation rather than as an independent and responsible actor.

Financially, due to its involvement in Syria in the past five years, which stems from its commitment to the Syrian-Iranian axis, Hezbollah will have to find a way to increase its resources in order to balance its extensive military expenses with its political and social activities in Lebanon. This will become even more acute as Hezbollah finds itself under growing international financial pressure. Another crucial challenge that Hezbollah will have to cope with is its loss of manpower during the course of the war.



A Hezbollah poster in Ba'albek, Lebanon
(Yeowatzup [https://flic.kr/p/8Jndr4]/CC BY 2.0
[https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/egalcode])

I believe that in the future the movement will work to restore its relations with the state of Lebanon and its people. Securing the Syrian-Lebanese border would be an important step for Hezbollah in that regard. It would create strategic depth against external enemies (such as Salafi-jihadist groups); allow the group to generate a positive image towards its constituency, and to depict its involvement in the Syrian war as a success.

FSR: We often hear about the Middle East as the focal point of non-state actors. Are there any other parts of the world where VNSAs are likely to become more widespread and powerful? Sub-Saharan Africa? Latin America?

CV: As I mentioned earlier, VNSAs are not a new phenomenon in the Middle East or in other places in the world. Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America are good examples of theaters in which there is a history of VNSA activity. In fact, VNSAs have emerged from other post-colonial and developing countries, which are usually characterized by low levels of human and social de-

velopment, low governance capacity, and lack of control over internal disputes that reduce the ability of the central government to provide basic services and security to citizens.

So regardless of events in the Middle East, as long as central governments are weak, VNSAs will likely emerge and fill in this governmental gap.

Having said that, it is not always a materialistic cause but also an ideological one that leads to the widespread of VNSAs. In this case, recent events in the Middle East are actually playing an important role.

The ideological vacuum that exists, the frustration and alienation of people in the Middle East, particularly since the emergence of the Arab Spring, has allowed other extreme religious-ideological alternatives to gain dominance (as represented most prominently by the notion of global jihad and ISIS in particular). One of the consequences of this situation is an "ideological spillover" to other arenas outside the Middle East. This is being manifested either by increasing formal affiliations of ISIS and Al-Qaeda in other countries or by lone-wolf attacks, which have become more and more prevalent and hard to deal with.

This is for another talk, but unless we will adopt a better strategy against them, we can probably expect to face a growing number of either VNSAs or violent individuals not only in developing countries but also in developed countries as recent years have demonstrated. An effective solution cannot be confined to a military operation, for it will also require the creation of a just civil infrastructure in order to provide good governance, as well as the promotion of more moderate ideologies in order to dissuade people from the attraction of radical ideas.

FSR: Does the case of Israel's response to the Syria conflict (low-profile communication with combatants, clear red lines established by Moshe Ya'alon, etc.) have

any lessons or insights to offer other states?

The way I see it, so far, Israel has maintained a wise and responsible policy of non-intervention, except when faced with tangible threats, including the transfer of advanced weapons from Syria to Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Nevertheless, current reality as well as any future solution in Syria requires Israel to demonstrate a more proactive strategy due to potential threats and instability that might spill over into its territory. Israel, as well as other states that are facing similar conflicts, should maintain operational freedom through coordination with other states involved, as in air activity. Regarding the situation on the ground, it is important to broaden coordination with neighboring countries—as in the case of Jordan—as well as cooperation by aiding, even with a low profile, rebel organizations operating in the war zone.

At the same time, it is important that Israel, and other states for that matter, develop and expand their leverage with local communities (especially in the Syrian Golan Heights), through economic, security, and humanitarian assistance to those interested in a connection with Israel.

An important lesson that we might learn from the Syrian conflict is to acknowledge that there is not always a complete solution for either Syria or other conflict-stricken areas in the world. Syria serves as a field where the rules of the game are not clear to many of the myriad actors, both internal and external, who are driven by opposing rationales. In this reality, there is no point in looking for clear-cut solutions or long-term arrangements. A good strategy will be to seek opportunities by generating new relations with states and VNSAs that can help to reduce the challenges and risks posed by the conflict.

FSR: Thank you for taking the time to elaborate on these complex and important

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."