Transnational, violent non-state actors operate in weak states for a number of reasons. These circumstances are necessary but not sufficient for the proliferation of these groups, or for the success of their operations. It is simply the first of several conditions that create an ideal refuge for terrorist or guerrilla groups.

Boaz Atzili considers the lack of a monopoly of force a prerequisite of residence in a third-party host state as well, but looks deeper into the ways these actors take advantage of the lack of control the state has over its land and people. He posits that the conventional wisdom on the vacuum of power in weak states is “grossly underspecified.” In an attempt to supplement the conventional understanding, he explores several more specific facets of state weakness and their implications in regards to transnational, violent non-state actors. This article, on the other hand, argues that state weakness opens the door for violent non-state actors, but does not independently provide an environment in which these actors flourish or even carry out their basic functions absent the marginalized populations necessary for support and, subsequently, access to illicit economies.

In the case of the PKK, Iraq’s state weakness is not the sine qua non to the organization’s success. State weakness is, however, a precursor to the PKK’s decision to utilize Iraqi territory in order to launch cross-border attacks into Turkey. While Northern Iraq is one of the few regions of the country with little violence, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), not the central government, holds a monopoly on force there. Had the Republic of Iraq continuously controlled their northern territories, the PKK would not have had the option to rally in the Zagros Mountains. Nevertheless, in their search for a refuge from Turkish forces, PKK leadership did not relocate their forces into neighboring Armenia, Syria, or even Georgia, despite those states’ fragility. Clearly state weakness and the state’s lack of a monopoly on force is only one of the factors that influenced their decision to go to Iraq.

Marginalized Populations

Beyond the basic capacity of a transnational violent non-state actor to penetrate a state’s territory and seek sanctuary there, a second element is essential to a violent group’s success: the presence of a relevant marginalized population that is readily co-opted into the violent action. Atzili cites the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon as the marginalized population essential to the operations of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), the parallels between the PLO and the PKK are undeniable in this respect. Palestinian refugees in Lebanon were not only displaced and dissatis-
government is unable to offer them protection. In states where the central government lacks a monopoly on the use of force, fringe groups have few choices; they must either flee or seek protection from a secondary source. This is especially true for marginalized groups who are excluded from state patronage networks. They must consequently build relationships with non-state actors and, as a result, are able to maintain some normalcy and a measure of control. This type of alignment happens in Pakistan, where the residents of unquestioned tribal areas seek protection from the Pakistani Taliban, and in Colombia, where isolated rural populations are protected by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).

The PKK did, of course, find marginalized populations in Iraq, specifically the populations of Iraqi Kurdistan. Their affiliation, however, was never as straightforward as the PLO’s relationship with the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. While the Kurds of Northern Iraq certainly were marginalized within their state and identified more with Greater Kurdistan than with the government in Baghdad, they never depended on state patronage networks. They must exist under the radar of the central government, an easier task in Iraq, Turkey, the PKK, the KRG and even political parties within the KRG make controlling for outside influence challenging and comparisons difficult to draw. What is clear, however, is that the PKK’s presence in Iraq is based upon more than the weakness of the Iraqi state; it is dependent on the sympathy and support of marginalized Iraqi Kurds and the help they can offer in utilizing illicit economies.

The PKK, like many other non-state actors, has been able to develop illicit economies to fund its own operations and provide support to other groups. This is not unique to the PKK, as similar networks have been established by the violent non-state actors throughout the world. The PKK’s ability to develop such economies is due in part to the weakness of the Iraqi state and the inability of the central government to offer protection to marginalized populations. As a result, the PKK has been able to establish links with local marginalized groups and use them as a source of funding and support. This has allowed the PKK to continue its operations and expand its influence in the region.

The PKK’s illicit economy is based on the use of force, fragmentation of resources, and the establishment of a monopoly of the legitimate use of force. The PKK has been able to use this system to its advantage, controlling access to resources and providing for the needs of its members. However, the PKK’s reliance on this system has also made it vulnerable to outside influence and control. As a result, the PKK has had to be constantly vigilant and adapt to changing circumstances in order to continue its operations.

In summary, the PKK has been able to develop illicit economies to finance its operations and provide support to other groups. This is due in part to the weakness of the Iraqi state and the inability of the central government to offer protection to marginalized populations. The PKK’s ability to develop such economies is due in part to the use of force, fragmentation of resources, and the establishment of a monopoly of the legitimate use of force. The PKK has been able to use this system to its advantage, controlling access to resources and providing for the needs of its members. However, the PKK’s reliance on this system has also made it vulnerable to outside influence and control. As a result, the PKK has had to be constantly vigilant and adapt to changing circumstances in order to continue its operations.


Multiple Causes

State weakness, specifically the lack of a monopoly of the legitimate use of force, is not enough to support transnational, violent non-state actors. The loss of control over territories and other aspects of statehood are only the most basic attributes of a weak state that invite terrorist and guerilla groups. In more important to the success of these groups is the presence of relevant marginalized populations and the ability of those populations to provide the non-state actor access to illicit economies. These economies can be either pre-existing as a result of state weakness or established by the violent non-state actor as a funding mechanism with the tacit or active assistance of the marginalized population.

The case study of the PKK and its incursion into Iraq supports this model, albeit not as forthrightly as Azzam’s example of the PLO in Lebanon. The complex web of interactions between Iraq, Turkey, the PKK, the KRG and other states seek protection from the Pakistani Taliban, and in Colombia, where isolated rural populations are protected by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).