

# Non-State Conflict and the Transformation of War

Written by Sharanya Ravichandran

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

## Non-State Conflict and the Transformation of War

<https://www.e-ir.info/2011/08/29/non-state-conflict-and-the-transformation-of-war/>

SHARANYA RAVICHANDRAN, AUG 29 2011

Non-state conflict has added a new dimension to the nature of war. Before the rise of non-state conflict, conventional war was predictable, and most importantly, focused on legitimate players, namely state actors. These state actors used common methods, tactics and weaponry. With the rise of non-state conflict, the ways in which war is fought has become unpredictable to a great extent. Within the changes, elements of continuity are still visible, as non-state actors use a mix of new and conventional tactics. However, non-state conflict has made the characteristic of war much more asymmetrical.

There are many forms of irregular war; however, this essay will focus on two specific ways in which non-state conflict has made war asymmetrical: one, the rise of non-state actors and their alternative methods such as suicide bombing have made it difficult for state actors to prepare for impending attacks. Two, the use of cyberspace to execute attacks has lent an element of uncertainty to war: attacks can be planned on a less concrete level, thus taking states by surprise and rendering them unpreventable.

The perceived traditional elements of warfare have changed due to the emerging presence of non-state conflict. Conventionally, powerful state actors went to war with one another because they had the clout, support and most importantly, resources to mobilise and execute operations. State actors knew what to expect in terms of patterns, and therefore "relied on professional, uniformed, hierarchically organized warriors to resolve external conflicts arising with other nation-states." [1] As Brenner accurately points out, they were fighting mirror images of themselves. [2] As more non-state actors emerged, they discovered that to truly make a significant impact, they must exploit the powerful states' weaknesses, wherever present [3]. Though many non-state actors use similar methods, their objectives can vary vastly. The overarching point is to make state actors give the same respect to their standpoints, as they would to other state actors' views. Historically and specifically in the moral context, discussions of war have tended to strengthen the belief that states are allowed to wage war, while non-state actors are not. [4] While Steele and Amoureux's argument points out a key reason for rise of non-state actors, it is problematic in that it is very simplistic. It is not that non-state actors are not *allowed* to wage war; it is generally believed that they do not possess the capabilities to do so. Ultimately, such negative rhetoric goads non-state actors even more into destructive action, which increases the potential for the number and intensity of attacks.

Methods such as suicide bombing and use of cyberspace have become increasingly popular, as they are viewed as beneficial for non-state actors to reach their goals. Non-state groups can develop extreme independence vis-à-vis civil society. [5] These emergent non-state actors have transcended the normal boundaries of everyday society, both of norms and legality. They have chosen the global stage so they can maximise their impact and destructive tendencies; combating them cannot be done simply by the use of traditional military methods. [6]

### Suicide Terrorism

One major alternative method that non-state actors such as extremist groups and terrorist organisations have utilised is suicide bombing. Suicide bombing was not an originally used method because conventional methods of war prevailed in the global sphere. Over time, and especially since the events of 9/11, non-state conflict has increased on the playing field of developed states because of these states' tendency to label non-state actors as "the other...an inferior being..." [7] Ciccarelli correctly points out that taking on this view exaggerates conflict, as non-state actors will

# Non-State Conflict and the Transformation of War

Written by Sharanya Ravichandran

increase the frequency and intensity of their attacks in response. State actors retaliate in a way they know how, since they cannot necessarily punish the perpetrators; they are compelled to use more powerful rhetoric against non-state actors; this essentially turns it into a vicious cycle of violence between the two parties.

Suicide bombers carry out their attacks to inflict panic and fear amongst civilians in an everyday setting. The element of panic in mass civilian society is not new. In fact, Hitler utilised this element to a certain extent to inject fear among the Jewish population in Germany. However, it is different with suicide bombing in that it is difficult to predict *how* or *when* these actors will carry out their attacks, which has made warfare significantly unpredictable. Suicide bombing, while seemingly erratic and random, is almost never without strategy in mind.[8] The precise goal of suicide bombers is that states can no longer even identify the perpetrators, much less prepare to take action against them.

Moreover, suicide bombers have a tendency to alternate between conventional and alternative methods[9]. The mixing of conventional tactics, such as forming “troops” to attack an establishment with weapons, is to confuse states; this is a key element of continuity within the change in the characteristic of war. With this mix, states are unable to prepare for the attack from non-state actors because they can never identify and follow an established pattern. This combination does not play out in the execution of their suicide bombing campaigns alone. Suicide bombers devise innovative blends of both conventional and postmodern components of warfare around their ideologies, objectives and designs[10] to maximise the impact of the campaigns. The increasing recruitment and involvement of women and children in suicide bombing campaigns has also transformed the characteristic of war. Traditionally, women may be involved in helping out with war efforts but never fight; children would not be involved at all. Recruiting female suicide bombers and children to participate[11] in campaigns adds a new dimension to war. States cannot identify the basics of these campaigns, such as what the actor could look like, because it could be anyone, anywhere. Finally, one of the ultimate goals of suicide bombing campaigns is to create fear and panic on a wider level than conventional warfare. Each civilian thinks that they could personally be in danger, which is not always the case with conventional war. Continuity is present in that civilians still fear for their own lives. However, change is due to the fact that it suicide bombing targets civilians widely and the perpetrator is difficult for state actors to identify.

Religion and nationalism have also played a key role within the realm of suicide bombing campaigns. Groups like Hezbollah utilise nationalism as their main rhetoric, while groups like the Taliban employ religious extremism. Regardless, they use this type of rhetoric to justify their alternative methods, regardless of how aggressive these methods might be. Non-state actors feel that peaceful tactics and traditional military methods fail, because of an imbalance of power[12] between the states and themselves. Because non-state actors do not hold enough legitimacy or clout as state actors do, states do not generally listen to their demands; ergo, these actors result to alternative methods such as suicide bombing to make their point. Methods become unpredictable and there is no plausible way for states to prepare a defence against attacks they cannot see coming.

## Cyber War

The use of cyberspace to launch attacks is not war by definition of traditional war, since traditional war involves physical force. However, when used jointly with more hands-on methods of warfare, cyber war has the detrimental effect of crippling state actors from attacks they are unable to anticipate. With the development of modern technology, specifically the expansion of cyberspace, it has become faster than ever to communicate, plan and mobilise regardless of where these actors are present in the world. While modern technology has generally been regarded as positive, advances within cyberspace have exacerbated non-state conflict. With the utilisation of cyberspace to mobilise and plan their attacks, non-state actors primarily seek to undermine state actors and challenge their authority.[13] This is one similarity between traditional warfare and non-state warfare: the methods have changed with time, but the aim to cripple state actors' power has remained the same.

Cyberspace is opaque and “yet to be subjected to effective regulation.”[14] Conventionally, any element of war cannot be regulated completely. With cyberspace, the amount of regulation is drastically reduced, a significant change in the characteristic of war. It becomes much harder to monitor different aspects of regrouping or mobilisation, regarding who, where, when, and how these actors plan to meet and execute their plans. It is harder to

# Non-State Conflict and the Transformation of War

Written by Sharanya Ravichandran

determine what their plans are and how detrimental they are; as a result, war is now asymmetrical and states cannot protect their territory from whatever these attacks might constitute.

An inherently problematic element of cyberspace is that identities can constantly be changed and concealed; therefore, state actors find it extremely difficult to trace the mobilisation and planning to its true source. With their identities concealed, non-state actors can launch their campaigns from “almost any point on the globe to almost any other point”[15], combining these new tactics with traditional methods such as weapons and bombs. With proper mobilisation in traditional war, attacks could be launched by one state on another state; the concept of proxy wars also widened this sphere of attack to different geographic points on the globe. Cyberspace is similar in that it can also use proxy actors to make a point to a main actor; however, it differs in that while the non-state actors can launch attacks against states, states cannot symmetrically match these actors in offence or defence. Unlike traditional warfare, states do not have the opportunity to form their own alliances to fight the threat jointly. Yet another problem that arises here is that it is much more difficult for state actors to organise into alliances, and takes a lot more time and work, than for non-state actors to do so; with the use of cyberspace and anonymous communication in mere seconds, non-state actors can organise themselves into widespread networks much more readily.[16]

For non-state actors, cyberspace is a gold mine of information to acquire previously unknown information, even without Internet proficiency because instructions on how to construct bombs and how to increase member recruitment are available at their fingertips in moments. Non-state actors utilise the Internet to acquire proficiency in new methods of war, though they combine these methods with more traditional methods before execution. However, the ease of accessibility of “information technology that stimulate[s] networked organizational forms [is] changing the nature of conflict and crime.”[17] Conventionally, it has not been so simple to access such complex information. Now, it is easy to communicate, plan attacks and mobilize to execute attacks, so non-state conflict on the cyberspace platform has made war more asymmetrical. In this context, non-state actors can take the more ‘powerful’ states by surprise and essentially cripple them, all with a very slim chance of discovery or persecution.

The mere fact that cyberspace can be used to cripple states’ internal functions has also made the characteristic of war highly unpredictable. Similarly, conventional war also aimed at weakening a state; to halt the everyday processes that take place within the country; and make it highly vulnerable. Change is visible in that non-state actors increase recruitment of individuals who are extremely proficient in hacking, to attack states’ mainframes. In a highly computer-dependent world, this can be very dangerous. It brings state actors to their knees in an effective and most importantly anonymous, manner. Due to the interconnectedness of the infrastructures of many of the more powerful states[18], one carefully planned and executed attack could topple multiple states simultaneously. This supports the idea of many ‘new war’ scholars, who claim that globalization plays a significant part in asymmetrical warfare. Technology serves as both a blessing and a curse within the global community. States feel that they can reinforce security and protection for themselves against non-state actors; therefore, they have traditionally used technology and even cyberspace to reinforce protection on their technology infrastructure and war strategy planning. However, the non-state element changes the scenario because non-state actors recruit individuals with the ability to attack states without states’ knowledge, and in a brutal fashion that destroys their infrastructure.

## Conclusion

The face of conventional warfare has come a long way since the post-Cold War days, when state actors relatively on the same power level fought with one another using conventional methods of military warfare. War has not changed inherently; it remains political in nature, and its desired outcomes remain political in nature, as it always has. The emergence of non-state conflict has added a new dimension to war, transforming it into more unpredictable and asymmetrical warfare. The use of many aggressive alternative methods, albeit in conjunction with traditional methods, has served to enhance the view that warfare has taken on asymmetrical characteristics. War will continue to adopt new characteristics and evolve; for better or worse, we must wait and see.

[1] Brenner, S.W. (2009) *Cyberthreats: The Emerging Fault Lines of the Nation State* New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 23.

# Non-State Conflict and the Transformation of War

Written by Sharanya Ravichandran

- [2] Peters, R. (1996) 'The Culture of Future Conflict' *Parameters*.
- [3] Dubik, J.M. (2002) 'Has Warfare Changed? Sorting Apples from Oranges' *Institute of Land Warfare* no. 02-3, p. 4.
- [4] Steele, B.J. and Amoureux, J.L. (2009) 'Hizbollah, Israel and the Perversity of Just War' in Eric J. Heinze and Brent J. Steele (eds.), *Ethics, Authority, and War: Non-state Actors and the Just War Tradition*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 179.
- [5] Harpviken, K.B. (1997) 'Transcending Traditionalism: The Emergence of Non-State Military Formations in Afghanistan' *Journal of Peace Research* vol. 34, no. 3, p. 284.
- [6] Dal Lago, A. and Palidda, S. (2010) 'Introduction' in Alessandro Dal Lago and Salvatore Palidda (eds.), *Conflict, Security and the Reshaping of Society: The Civilization of War*. Oxon: Routledge, p. 4.
- [7] Ciccarelli, R. (2010) 'Norm/Exception: Exceptionalism and Governmental Prospects in the Shadow of Political Theology' in Alessandro Dal Lago and Salvatore Palidda (eds.), *Conflict, Security and the Reshaping of Society: The Civilization of War*. Oxon: Routledge, p. 66.
- [8] Brym, R.J. and Bader, A. (2006) 'Suicide Bombing as Strategy and Interaction: The Case of the Second Intifada' *Social Forces* vol. 84, no. 4, p. 1973.
- [9] Bloom, M. (2005) *Dying to Kill: The Allure of Suicide Terror* New York: Columbia University Press, p. 2.
- [10] Arquilla, J. and Ronfeldt, D. (1997) *In Athena's Camp: Preparing for Conflict in the Information Age*. Washington DC: Rand, p. 4.
- [11] Sheehan, M. (2007) 'The Changing Character of War' p. 222.
- [12] Kydd, A. and Walter, B.F. (2006) 'The Strategies of Terrorism' *International Security* vol. 31, no. 1, p. 60.
- [13] Walsh, L. and Barbara, J. (2006) 'Speed, International Security, and "New War" Coverage in Cyberspace' *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* vol. 12, no. 1, p. 205.
- [14] Wegner, A. (2001) 'The Internet and the Changing Face of International Relations and Security' *Information and Security* vol. 7, p. 7-8.
- [15] Brenner, S.W. (2009) *Cyberthreats: The Emerging Fault Lines of the Nation State* New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 29.
- [16] Bunker, R.J. (2003) *Non-State Actors and Future Wars*. New York and Oxon; Frank Cass & Co., p. xvi.
- [17] Bunker, R.J. (2003) *Non-State Actors and Future Wars*. New York and Oxon; Frank Cass & Co., p. 40.
- [18] Echevarria, A.J. II (2003) *Globalization and the Nature of War* Washington DC: Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, p. 4.

---

Written by: Sharanya Ravichandran  
Written at: University of Edinburgh  
Written for: Claire Duncanson

# **Non-State Conflict and the Transformation of War**

Written by Sharanya Ravichandran

*Date written: April 2011*