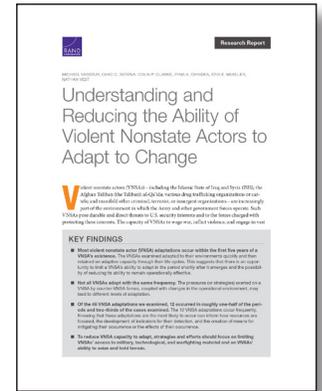# Understanding and Reducing the Ability of Violent Nonstate Actors to Adapt to Change

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Violent nonstate actors (VNSAs) are increasingly part of the security environment. Such organizations pose durable and direct threats to U.S. security interests, in part because of their ability to adapt. This report summarizes research into how VNSAs adapt to changes in their operational environments and provides recommendations on how the Army might anticipate such adaptations and mitigate them before they occur.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How do VNSAs adapt to changes in their operational environments?
- What kinds of adaptations do they make?
- How might the Army anticipate such adaptations and take steps to mitigate them before they occur?

KEY FINDINGS

The most VNSA adaptations occur within the first five years of a VNSA's existence

- The VNSAs examined adapted to their environments quickly and then retained an adaptive capacity through their life cycles. This suggests that an opportunity to limit a VNSA's ability to adapt shortly after it emerges and, possibly, reduce its ability to remain operationally effective.

Not all VNSAs adapt with the same frequency

- The pressures (or strategies) that counter-VNSA forces exert, coupled with changes in the operational environment, may lead to different levels of adaptation.

Of the 46 VNSA adaptations examined, 12 occurred in roughly one-half of the periods and two-thirds of the cases examined

- The 12 adaptations occur frequently. Knowing that these adaptations are the most likely to occur can inform how resources are focused, the development of indicators for their detection, and the creation of means for mitigating their occurrence or the effects of their occurrence.

Limiting access to warfighting assets could hinder VNSA's ability to adapt

- To reduce VNSA capacity to adapt, strategies and efforts should focus on limiting VNSAs' access to military, technological, and warfighting materiel and on VNSAs' ability to seize and hold terrain.

To Do

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Identify, monitor, and take proactive steps to limit VNSAs' evolution in the first few years following their emergence.
- Incorporate operational environment and organizational variables related to higher levels of VNSA adaptation into operational assessment frameworks, such as political, military, economic, social, information, and infrastructure, environment, and time.
- Focus strategies and efforts on limiting VNSAs' access to military, technological, and warfighting materiel and on VNSAs' ability to seize and hold terrain.

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