

# American Antifa: The Tactics, Culture, and Practice of Militant Antifascism

Stanislav Vysotsky, New York, Routledge, 2021,  
ISBN: 978-0367210571

Hakan Kiyıcı\*

Despite the fact that the issue of far-right extremism is not a new phenomenon, it has sparked further discussions given the last dramatic terror attacks. Since the 9/11 terror attacks, both literature of terrorism and implementations of counter terrorism approaches have focused on al-Qaeda and DAESH related terrorism. However, the realized terror attacks by far-right groups and individuals have shown that violent capacity and extremist ideological framework should be taken as seriously as the terror groups abusing religions in the Middle East. Studies on far-right terrorism can be described as a new epistemic and ontological area for many experts. With the penetration terror attacks of the far-right groups and their members at the global level, scholars, counter terrorism practitioners and policy makers have started to discover violence capacity of far-right extremism. The terrorist threat potential of far-right terrorism has also influenced anti-fascism, which emerged as a reaction to it and has inspired various far-left groups, including today's anarcho anarchism.

Currently, both states and also scholars appear to experience confusion on the definition of far-right and anti-fascist terrorism or militarism. The ideological sides of far-right have been nourished from different perspectives, from esoteric mysticism, fascism to populism and conspiracy theories. Anti-fascism addresses similar discourses with a Marxist/Leninist method and tries to re-systematize the realization of historical materialism according to the conditions of the time. Conflicts between these two competing and at the

\*Dr. | Police Academy

kiyicihakani@yahoo.com | ORCID: 0000-0001-5655-8060

DOI: 10.36484/liberal.1342560

*Liberal Düşünce* Dergisi, Yıl: 28, Sayı:111, Yaz 2023, ss. 281-284.

Gönderim Tarihi: 13 Ağustos 2023 | Kabul Tarihi: 16 Ağustos 2023

same time hostile ideologies are not defined as terrorism by the security services. This is mainly due to the lack of objective criteria for terrorism and the post-9/11 focus on groups such as al-Qaeda and DAESH, which often exploit the misinterpretation of Islam. Hence word of terrorism is not commonly used for the attacks and plots of these groups. When we compare their capacity of violence, organizational structure, recruiting, financial sources and target selection process, far-right and anti-fascist groups have also behaved just like the framework of al-Qaeda and DAESH.

As most of the academicians in terrorism studies indicates that terrorist organizations are learning-organization, and effect of copy-cat is commonly observed with any kind of extremist and militant groups. However, even when states recognize these groups as extremist, the consequent strategies and approaches for countering terrorism also appear to be different. For instance, despite many prosecutions of white supremacist terrorists in the USA, these groups are not listed as terrorist organizations by the state. The terrorist threat potential of far-right and anti-fascist groups is therefore tend not to be focused on by the security services. This is evidenced by the deadly attacks carried out by the members of these groups. The 2011 attack by a far-right terrorist in Norway and the following various lone actor attacks have led to both an increase in academic studies on the radical right and a greater focus on the issue by the security services. However, this does not appear to be a case in relation to anti-fascist militancy.

In this context, *American Antifa: The Tactics, Culture, and Practice of Militant Antifascism* by Stanislav Vysotsky, published by Routledge in 2021, provides important framework for analyzing the current situation of terrorist threat. Stanislav Vysotsky is working as an associated professor of sociology and criminology at the University of Wisconsin. Another publication of him is *The Anarchy Police: Militant Anti-Fascism as Alternative Policing Practice* was released by Critical Criminology in 2015. Vysotsky has adapted to the critical criminology for decontextualizing of current criminal issues. Given methodological perspective, he allows the reader to discern the problem from a broad perspective. The language of the work is fluent and gives the reader a detailed account of the evolution of the anti-fascist movements in America from social movement to militant structure without breaking away from the historical process.

Vysotsky begins his study by drawing attention to the relationship between anti-fascist and radical right movements. *“Antifa activism lends itself much more to the latter framework than the former; however, it may be useful to make an additional distinction between non-militant and militant antifascism.*

*While both forms of antifascism involve some type of action in response to fascist movements, militants are defined by their willingness to use confrontational means, including violence, as part of their tactical repertoire*"(p.2). At this point, it analyzes the violent discourse, repertoire of actions and the process of in-group identification of antifascist militant individuals and groups by addressing two different ideological groups with the theory of radical social movement organization (RSMO). Through this theoretical perspective, it comparatively analyzes the anti-fascist militancy that emerged in opposition to far-right extremism, especially the main ideological arguments that gave rise to anti-fascism such as Dualism, Conspiracism, Populism, Apocalypticism, Authoritarianism, Ethnic Claims-making and Intellectualization (pp: 29-32).

Vysotsky discusses the development of anti-fascist militancy as a counter-radical social movement in the United States in the mid-1980s, focusing on Anti-Racist Action (ARA), the Torch Antifa Network and Old City Antifa (Antifascist Action). Vysotsky emphasizes that although these groups have different names, they act in common in acts of violence. *"Militant antifascist blocs in public protest often consist of a diverse grouping of left-oriented activists motivated to confront fascist mobilizations. Like the historical antecedents to contemporary militant antifascist movement discussed earlier in this chapter, Marxist organizations are keen to mobilize in opposition to fascists for many of the reasons as anarchists or other leftist"*(p. 59). Although the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s is thought to have broken the influence of Marxist and Leninist thought, today anti-fascist groups are able to make a new ideological reading from the local points to the global perspective. Consequently, the anti-fascist groups remain active in the U.S.

At this point, Vysotsky analyzes the extremist (unarmed) and armed (militant) actions of anti-fascist groups that are ideologically united on a common front. According to him, extremist actions include organizing meetings and demonstrations in educational institutions, as well as actions such as public shaming (p. 88). In armed actions, *"militant antifascists assert the use of force in repressive and defensive activity against fascists, which usurps the state's claim to a monopoly on violence. They do so in a manner that is driven by and reflects anarchist principles which represent a radical framework for proactive community defense"* (p. 158). This underlines the fact that two different ideological groups in America constantly see each other as enemies and that mass movements that start as social movements can easily turn into terrorism.

The author also outlines the methods and tactics that anti-fascism should employ to counter the process of mutual radicalization. Because through the

process of mutual radicalization, different identities living in the same social environment can see each other as enemies, which can trigger identity conflict, mass demonstrations and even terrorism. If this process gets out of control, radical groups may influence the social base for their capacity for violence. Vysotsky also emphasizes cultural codes in preventing the violent capacity of anti-fascist groups and preventing its transformation into a mainstream social thought. “*Antifascist representations are manifested in expressions of subcultural style, the content of music, and even in the performance of subcultural gathering in a manner that severs as both a covert and an overt form of resistance to fascist activity and ideology*” (p. 170). Therefore, the discourses, narratives and ways and methods against cultural codes that shape the anti-fascist cultural value judgment cause these groups to lose their function in the social base. It is very difficult to apply classical counterterrorism methods to the repertoire of actions that anti-fascism has. Therefore, the development of new and alternative discourses against extremist ideology should prevent such groups from establishing influence on the social base.

The weakest aspect of Vysotsky’s treatment of militant anti-fascism in the US is that he ignores the individuals and groups that joined the Antifa front in the Syrian civil war of 2010. By recognizing the issue only as a challenge against fascist groups, he ignores the potential terrorist threat at the other end of the ideological spectrum. In 2011, with the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, antifascist militarism, which had been silent for a long time, resurfaced. In the areas of Syria where the regime withdrew, the terrorist camps created by the separatist terrorist organization of PKK and its Syrian branch, the PYD, has become an important attraction for antifascists. The anti-fascist organization, which established four different military brigades in the region under the control of the PKK terrorist organization, gained experience in urban warfare and conflict, consequently has begun to pose a serious security problem. The fact that Western countries do not recognize antifascist militarism as a serious security threat as al-Qaeda or DAESH due to its secular image has encouraged the mobility of these group towards the region. Given that some people recognize the issue of foreign terrorist fighters limited to individuals and groups that exploit religion and that those in antifascist fronts are seen as freedom fighters, these violent groups pose an extra risk for public safety in Europe and around the world. Despite this drawback, Vysotsky’s *American Antifa: The Tactics, Culture, and Practice of Militant Antifascism* is an important research in depicting anti-fascism threat in America today. In this context, the work can be instructive for those who are interested in the theory of radical social movements, mutual radicalization processes, far right, and terrorism.