

The logo for New America, featuring a stylized graphic of three horizontal bars of varying lengths to the left of the text "NEW AMERICA".

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# TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY PROXY WARFARE

Confronting Strategic Innovation in a Multipolar  
World Since the 2011 NATO Intervention

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## **About Future of Proxy Warfare**

The Future of Proxy Warfare Initiative is a joint project of New America's International Security program and Arizona State University's Center on the Future of War.

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## Executive Summary & Key Findings

Proxy warfare will shape twenty-first century conflicts for the foreseeable future. Cold War norms, however, no longer apply in a highly networked, multipolar world. The erosion of state power, rise of transnational social movements, and proliferation of advanced military and communications technology are shifting the horizons of strategic surprise. The enhanced military capacity of former Cold War client states to engage either covertly or overtly in conflicts is erasing front lines, transforming alliances, and reshaping battlefield dynamics. Whereas Moscow and Washington once set the rules of the game, the number of state and non-state sponsors of proxy forces is growing in today's globalized market. Today a complex mesh of partnerships among states, corporations, mercenaries, and militias is changing the way wars are fought and won.

The devastating impact of proxy war is keenly felt in the Greater Middle East and its periphery. While conflicts in Ukraine and Afghanistan appear stuck, for the moment, in a precarious status quo, Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen stand out as ground zero in multi-sided proxy wars that are testing international norms. From U.S.-backed Kurdish forces and Russian private military security contractors in Syria, to Iranian-backed Houthi rebels and UAE-supported militias in Yemen, proxy fighters today play an outsized role in the grand strategy of multiple states. They have developed relationships with a diverse range of sponsors for their own, often divergent, ends—at times apocalyptic and revolutionary—while creating their own networks of sub-state proxies.

U.S. policy—in flux since the Arab Spring—has yet to integrate this new reality. Unable and unwilling to commit to direct military intervention after long, costly wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the U.S. national security establishment is doubling down on proxy warfare, gambling on a strategy that advances U.S. interests “by, with, and through” local partners. This is a risky wager and it is still unclear whether it is a winning bet. Civil wars raging in the so-called “arc of instability” spanning littoral zones of the Mediterranean Middle East, Black Sea, and Persian Gulf regions today remain among the greatest threats to international security. Conflict there has displaced tens of millions of people, killed hundreds of thousands, and devastated large swaths of the region's economy and infrastructure. Competition among Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Israel for regional primacy and renewed rivalry with Russia and China are forcing Washington to reconfigure its grand strategy.

Current conceptions of proxy warfare do not account for the paradigm shift underway. Proxy warfare today is best defined as sponsorship of conventional or irregular forces that lie outside the constitutional order of states. In the Greater Middle East and its periphery, multiple states have adopted limited war strategies predicated on murky command structures that allow sponsors and proxies to cross red lines and bend international legal norms seemingly without

consequence. This raises serious questions about command responsibility and has implications for states that provide direct material support to proxy forces or allow their citizens to support proxy groups with impunity. Proxy warfare needs a clear-eyed cost-benefit analysis to make U.S. strategy more effective.

## Key Findings

**Today's conflicts are more complex and more intertwined than those of the Cold War era** when the term proxy warfare became a staple of international affairs. Today proxy warfare is best defined as sponsorship of conventional or irregular forces that lie outside the constitutional order of states.

- Analytical attention on conflict has generally fixated on outdated Cold War models or focused on state-sponsored terrorism, the impact of external support in civil wars, and the efficacy of counterinsurgency campaigns.
- State-centric definitions of proxy warfare do not sufficiently reflect the tightly networked nature of post-Cold War conflict and the ability of new types of actors to project power beyond traditional borders.
- Failure to accurately define the parameters of twenty-first century proxy warfare poses policy challenges, especially when the interests of sponsors and proxies diverge on the battlefield and at the negotiating table.

**Multipolarity has supplanted bipolarity.** Globalization has transformed the role of sponsors and proxies, elevating transnational social movements, an array of armed actors enabled by interconnected supply chains, and conflict entrepreneurs.

- Transnational social movements have redefined front lines and erased the borders of conflicts once geographically bound by territorial limits imposed by a Cold War order.
- Many of these transnational social movements have revolutionary or apocalyptic ideologies that hardly fit the vision of proxy warfare as the “great game” of old, with great powers moving proxies like chess pieces on the global map.
- Paramilitaries, militias, and private military security forces play an outsized role in the grand strategies of the United States, Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and regional actors in the Greater Middle East and its periphery.

- Globalization, with its attendant liberalization of markets and currencies and integration of transportation, information, and economies, is knitting together a new network of state, corporate, and individual interests that have a stake in proxy conflict outcomes.

**In the Greater Middle East and its Eurasian periphery, proxy warfare is back with a vengeance**, rivaling and perhaps exceeding the threat it posed during the late Cold War. Several prevailing trends are driving the shift.

- Inter-state competition between a resurgent Russia, a rising China, and the United States is intensifying, along with regional rivalries stoked by sectarian divides.
- Military modernization and expanded access to remote targeting capabilities among many former Cold War client states in the Greater Middle East and its periphery have shifted the regional balance of power.
- The proliferation or threat of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, standoff capabilities, and weaponization of narratives among regional rivals such as Israel, Turkey, Iran, India, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf States is reshaping alliances.
- Successive shifts in communications, electronics, and computing have produced profound acceleration in technological synthesis that has transformed the ways ideas and goods are distributed.

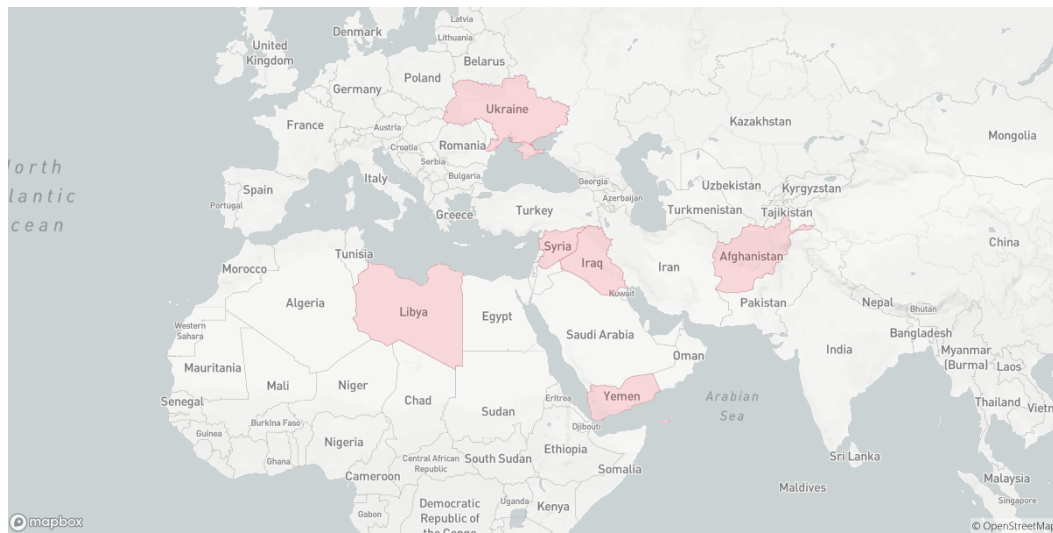
**Analysis of proxy warfare has suffered from politicization** and a “good for me but not for thee” problem that fails to question prevailing U.S. policy assumptions.

- Much of the English-language research on the subject takes a distinctly Western viewpoint and rarely draws on field data and primary source analysis in other languages.
- While some case studies have been examined in depth, like U.S. support for the Afghan mujahideen and the Contras in Nicaragua, other more recent cases, such as current wars in Syria, Iraq, and especially Libya and Yemen, have not received enough attention.
- Much of the field-based case study work that does exist has been journalistic, leaving other methods—including the use of open source intelligence and analysis of social media data and satellite imagery—ripe for further exploitation.

# Proxy Warfare in the Greater Middle East and its Periphery: An Atlas

This report focuses on proxy warfare in a region we have termed the “Greater Middle East and its periphery.” This region spans littoral zones bordering the Eastern Mediterranean, the Persian Gulf, and the Black Sea, all of which have long been at the center of competition between the great powers. The countries in the Levant, North Africa, South Asia, and the Black Sea region that constitute the so-called “arc of instability” have been the site of repeated and often interconnected conflicts due to their proximity to trading hubs along one of the world’s busiest maritime routes.

## Locations of Major Proxy Wars in the Greater Middle East and its Periphery



**Participants in Today's Major Proxy Wars**

**Filter By**

**Principals**

- United States
- Iran
- Israel
- Saudi Arabia
- Russia
- Turkey
- Qatar
- UAE
- Pakistan

**Locations**

- Syria
- Iraq
- Yemen
- Libya
- Afghanistan
- Ukraine

Showing 23 of 23

**2013 - Present**

**PRINCIPAL**  
**United States**

**LOCATION**  
**Syria**

**AGENTS BACKED**  
**Syrian Rebels, Kurdish Groups**

The United States began to engage in a strategy of proxy warfare in Syria in 2013, when President Obama authorized CIA support to Syrian rebels operating against the Assad regime in an effort codenamed Timber Sycamore. That program ran until 2017 when the Trump administration ended it. However, in 2014, the United States began supporting Syrian rebels and Kurdish groups against ISIS. Prior to 2013, the United States engaged in more limited activity seeking to monitor and shape the support of other actors.

Sources: [New York Times](#), [Al Jazeera](#), [Foreign Policy](#)

**2012 - Present**

**PRINCIPAL**  
**Iran**

**LOCATION**  
**Syria**

**AGENTS BACKED**  
**Hezbollah, Liwa Fatemeyoun, Iraqi Shi'a Militias, Other Militias**

As the Syrian uprising escalated, Iran provided support to the Syrian government universally seen as a key

To view the interactive atlas, please visit [newamerica.org/proxywarreport](https://newamerica.org/proxywarreport)

# Rethinking Proxy Warfare

## Surveying the Literature

Great power competition is on the rise, and rivalries among regional powers in the Greater Middle East and its periphery are intensifying. In this new era of proxy warfare, the diffusion of technology, information, and weapons has loosened the state's monopoly on the use of force. This is occurring against a backdrop of a faltering Euro-Atlantic alliance and deadlock in the United Nations Security Council that has undercut attempts to mitigate the adverse effects of conflict in the region. The use of third-party armed forces that lie outside the constitutional order of states directly or indirectly engaged in hostilities in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Libya, Afghanistan, and Ukraine, in particular, has upended established international norms in the realm of international law and raised serious questions about the efficacy of current U.S. policies.

As successive White House administrations have shown in grappling with decisions ranging from whether to support Libyan militias in their fight against ISIS, to a possible withdrawal of support to rebel forces in northern Syria, or assistance in the Saudi air campaign in Yemen, there are few easy solutions. Little has been written about the changes wrought by strategic innovations in proxy force deployment and the use of weapons, communications, and information—all of which have transformed the nature of strategic surprise, made proxy forces more numerous, and in some case made proxies more lethal. The potential peril of these strategic choices is exceedingly high, but all too often policy claims about proxy warfare are made with limited data and insight about what is actually occurring on the ground.

Proxy wars often escalate into brutal conflicts that spill across borders. Rival sponsors commonly employ strategies that support the use of ever more questionable and lethal tactics by their own proxies. In each instance, murky sponsor motivations and covert proxy connections raise barriers to attributing actions to actors. Intelligence sharing, air campaigns, battlefield detentions, joint strikes, and targeted kill/capture operations supported by principals and executed by agents blur lines of command responsibility. Reliance on proxies has simultaneously precipitated and reinforced a feedback loop of ever more expansive state secrecy, predatory corruption, and lack of transparency in the realm of global finance, arms, and energy trading.

As a result, when drones strike, ballistic missiles cross boundaries, chemical weapons explode, and bots attack, “command and control” takes on a whole new meaning. The tangle of relationships between irregular proxy forces and their sponsors often obscures how orders are issued and who sets the rules of engagement. When a proxy combatant operating outside the constitutional order



of a state involved in conflict provides targeting coordinates for air strikes, supplies intelligence that leads to chemical weapons attacks, or mobilizes bots to amplify disinformation campaigns, “red lines” are often crossed without consequence. Under these circumstances, the potential for misattribution, escalation, and blowback raises the stakes for sponsors considerably. With the five permanent members of the UN Security Council frequently deadlocked in a 3-2 split when something goes wrong on the battlefield, the procedures for redress are uncertain and sanctions increasingly unenforceable. All these factors add up to a profound change in the global order, one that will test the United States, its allies, and the international community in new ways.

The dominant analysis in Washington focuses on direct and indirect military support to combatants on the premise that such approaches lower costs and risks. Inadequate attention is paid to the strategic innovation states undertake in combining hard and soft power to advance their interests. There appears to be even less critical understanding of how these strategies shape and are shaped by local dynamics and socio-political divides. Confronting Russia’s increasingly aggressive approach to the West; Iran’s strategy of deterrence and efforts to extend its influence in the region; and China’s competitive challenges, will require a sharper understanding of today’s proxy wars and what tomorrow’s conflicts might look like.

Given the complexity of regional conflicts in the Greater Middle East and its periphery, contemporary proxy warfare appears to have the potential to put the world on course for a major collision. At the same time, norm-breaking violence is rending societies in much of the region. Current analysis, however, is largely based on outmoded interpretations of the Cold War, the global war on terror, and counterinsurgency campaigns. Much of the extant research focuses on the experience of the United States, demonstrating the need for more extensive primary and secondary source review in languages other than English on the experience of other states with proxy strategies.

The United States and other world powers now face important questions at the dawn of a new age in the future of conflict: When does norm bending become norm breaking beyond repair? How does, for example, Syria’s reliance on a combination of Russian, Iranian, and pro-regime Syrian forces in air campaign targeting processes impact accountability for civilian casualties and related collateral damage, particularly in an environment where Syria has demonstrated a willingness to use chemical weapons? When Houthi missiles strike inside Saudi Arabia and Hezbollah trainers are on the scene assisting Houthi rebels, is a counterstrike inside Iran a proportionate response? What can be done to ensure that a norm reshaped by proxy forces does not become grounds for escalation to a third world war? Answers to these questions are neither easy nor quick to hand. The scale and pace of global security demands a rethinking of proxy warfare in the twenty-first century.

This study attempts to do just that by examining a significant sample of the existing academic and think tank literature on the topic. It maps many of the main theoretical disputes about proxy warfare. In addition to looking at the Cold War and post-Soviet evolution of proxy strategies, our analysis focuses on conflicts in the regions of concern, state building, international law, and irregular forces.<sup>1</sup> It identifies gaps in the existing literature and highlights current and future emerging threats. Although far from comprehensive, the study attempts to tease out the policy challenges posed by the rise of proxy warfare through a survey of English-language academic, journalistic, and think tank literature.

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→ **AUTHOR'S NOTE**

This report is the first in a series on proxy warfare to be published under the rubric of New America's Future of War initiative in the International Security program. The authors surveyed a wide variety of literature in the areas of international relations, history, military science, political science, economics, and business. The inquiry was also informed in part by semi-structured interviews with a variety of Washington-based national security experts and conversations with international researchers. While Israel and China play critical roles in shaping these regional conflicts, and their influence and interests are touched on, strategies employed by Tel Aviv and Beijing so far do not appear to rely heavily on the use of proxies and therefore are beyond the scope of this paper.

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The study is divided into four main sections, including this one. This section begins with an exploration of a substantial sample of the existing literature and conceptual challenges posed by proxy warfare. It interrogates state-centric models of sponsor-proxy relations and teases out the complex motivations behind proxy strategies. The second section, "Principal Rivalries and Proxy Dilemmas," provides a brief historical overview of the evolution of proxy warfare from the end of World War II through the Cold War with a focus on the Greater Middle East and its periphery. The third section, "A New Age of Proxy Warfare," maps out the emergent properties of twenty-first century strategies employed by states and other actors to advance their interests. The concluding section examines the analytical challenges ahead as the United States and its allies confront new dimensions of a strategy that delivers political and economic advantages in the short term but poses long-term challenges to global stability. In

addition to these four main sections, the report includes an executive summary and an atlas of proxy warfare in the Greater Middle East and its periphery.

It is important to note that the wide array of states and non-state actors engaged in conflict in these regions makes it impossible to account for every angle. As a result, our inquiry prioritized an examination of the motivations, goals, and strategic objectives of sponsors and their proxies. We focused on major state powers actively engaged in providing support to armed forces active in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Libya, Afghanistan, and Ukraine including the United States, Russia, Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf States.<sup>2</sup>

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→ **AUTHOR'S NOTE**

An additional limitation of this report is its reliance on English language sources. There are a wide variety of Arabic, Russian, Farsi, and Turkish primary and secondary sources and data that merit evaluation, not to mention a treasure trove of European language works on related topics. It is the hope that the publication of this paper and the launch of New America's project on proxy warfare will produce future briefings and reports that draw on sources in other languages as well as on partnerships with research institutions across the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia to produce insights into this critical policy area.

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A fundamental first step towards a discussion of the character of proxy warfare today, its future, and the costs and risks of embracing proxy strategies is laying down a conceptual framework. This is tougher than it might seem. Proxy warfare is not a new subject of analysis, but it is an area that has few well-marked boundaries or definitions. The phrase dates at least to the beginning of the Cold War and has risen in use ever since. Moreover, while the term may be of mid-twentieth century origin, the basic idea of engaging in war while someone else does the fighting—by proxy—is likely as old as warfare itself.

Though the concept is old, the current state of proxy warfare analysis is reminiscent of the state of post-9/11 counterinsurgency research in the early stages of the Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts. In those cases, the failure to have clear ideas about counterinsurgency led to years of misguided policy. As with the current literature on proxy warfare, a significant amount of research from prior periods was available, but few synthesized observations were applicable to the policy challenges and particularities of those conflicts.

Uniform definitions of the term “proxy warfare” are hard to come by. This is partly because, as Andrew Mumford notes in his 2013 monograph on the topic, proxy wars have been “chronically under-analyzed” and under-theorized.<sup>3</sup> Until very recently, the moral and legal conundrums posed by current proxy wars on international norms and the standing of the United States as a strategic partner have received little serious introspection in Washington’s interagency policy community, as Anthony Pfaff has noted.<sup>4</sup> The covert nature of most proxy strategies has also limited analysis. Those that are overt tend to be the product of specific dynamics regarding the strength and motive of the supporter of the proxy that allow it to embrace a more public strategy, introducing substantial selection effect biases.<sup>5</sup>

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## **Proxy wars have been “chronically under-analyzed” and under-theorized.**

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The question of definitions is essential to good policymaking. A lack of clarity as to what is meant by “proxy warfare” and what qualities define a useful proxy strategy for the United States have been on full display since the 9/11 attacks. The prolonged and sometimes heated policy debates in successive White House administrations over sponsorship of paramilitary and militia forces in Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Afghanistan have profoundly impacted U.S. alliances and affected the stability of the Greater Middle East. Tensions between those in the responsibility to protect (R2P) camp who called for interventions in Libya and Syria and those who feared blowback risks and cautioned against widening foreign entanglements high during the Obama administration.<sup>6</sup> Frictions over whether to arm Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG), a U.S.-designated terrorist organization and longtime antagonist of Turkey, a critical NATO ally in the region, called into question the efficacy of backing forces that lie outside and challenge the constitutional order of states in order to contain perceived threats to stability. Despite heated debate, little in the way of formal congressional authorization for use of military force or clear strategic guidance regarding the benefits, risks, and endgame of proxy engagements has emerged out of these debates.

Much of the theorizing around proxy warfare draws on Cold War analysis of the rivalry between the United States, Russia, and China during the conflicts in Cuba, Vietnam, Angola, Afghanistan, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. The analytical focus on the Cold War has many roots, not least of which is the vast investment in

strategic thinking on nuclear deterrence as well as Soviet support for revolutionary movements. Another factor is that the collapse of the Soviet Union resulted in the declassification of thousands of official U.S. documents, and for a brief time opened Soviet archives, which for years had been sealed in hermitic secrecy. Newfound sources also prompted the publication of a slew of political histories, journalistic accounts, and personal memoirs, and many Cold War participants and witnesses have also been more willing to be interviewed.<sup>7</sup>

Studies on state-sponsored terrorist and insurgent groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria also offer a few theoretical clues. Of particular note for its conceptual clarity are Daniel Byman's *Deadly Connections* and his other publications on proxy warfare and state sponsorship of terrorism.<sup>8</sup> Many significant studies on external support during civil wars and on state sponsorship of terrorism have also touched on the subject, yet both these fields capture only a subset of the broader challenges of proxy warfare. Idean Salehyan, Reed Wood, and David Siroky, among others, have, for instance, made significant contributions to understanding principal-agent relations and ways in which external sponsorship of rebels leads to atrocities.<sup>9</sup>

The literature on state sponsorship of terrorism is predominantly rooted in Cold War conceptions that emphasize the power of highly centralized states and their influence over non-state proxies rather than the agency of groups themselves.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, much of the discussion and analysis of proxy warfare in the American academy and Washington policy circles is highly politicized and fails to critically examine the “good for me but not for thee” orthodoxy of partnered military operations.<sup>11</sup>

This critique of the focus upon the power of highly centralized states finds echoes in more recent literature on state co-optation of rebel forces and the integration of irregular paramilitary and militia forces into the strategic playbook of many principal sponsors of proxy warfare. As Ariel Ahram notes in his book *Proxy Warriors*, “few states have ever actually sought a complete monopoly over military force, much less possessed it. States engage continuously in negotiation, collaboration, and domination of external and internal challengers to assert and maintain a hold on power.”<sup>12</sup> In the context of conflicts in the Greater Middle East, Afshon Ostovar suggests in his recently published book *Vanguard of the Imam*<sup>13</sup> that the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the Basij paramilitary units stand out as examples of the type of phenomenon that Ahram describes as an as-yet unresolved “competition and cooperation between state and embedded societal elites for control of coercion” that has for decades marked the post-colonial state-building project in the region.<sup>14</sup>

Several international policy analysts and think tanks have, like Ahram, ably tracked the connection between proxy wars and the rise of paramilitaries and militias since 2001.<sup>15</sup> The rise of what András Derzsi-Horváth and Erica Gaston call “local, hybrid and sub-state security forces” in Iraq during recent clashes

with ISIS is just one example of how competition between principal rivals is increasingly defining and distorting competition between local elites for control over territory and resources.<sup>16</sup> “Loose command and control” over proxy militias and paramilitaries, Derzsi-Horváth and Gaston note, poses serious problems not only for Iraqi state stability but for the increasingly tenuous relationship between two key NATO allies in the region—the United States and Turkey.<sup>17</sup> Both countries share an interest in containing Iranian-backed Popular Militia Forces (PMF) but Washington’s decision to back Kurdish forces has cast considerable doubt on the resilience of this Turkish-American partnership.<sup>18</sup>

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### **Local militias are attractive to sponsors like the United States because they provide a ready source of local expertise in a given terrain.**

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Similar dynamics have precipitated sharp tensions between the United States and other erstwhile partners in South Asia. In Afghanistan, American backing for a variety of “auxiliary police,” “tribal *gendarmerie*,” and militias who operate outside established law has been a subject of friction between Washington and Kabul since 2001. As Antonio Giustozzi, Mark Sedra, Michael Bhatia, and other well-known experts on the Afghan conflict have noted, war and politics have long been shaped by the interaction of militias with the state, and local militias are attractive to sponsors like the United States because they provide a ready source of local expertise in a given terrain.<sup>19</sup>

Though Afghan militia proxies may seem expedient, they are not always very effective at supporting the project of rebuilding the state. Various think tanks and human rights groups have also traced the outgrowth and impact of U.S.-backed paramilitaries, such as the Afghan Local Police in Afghanistan, where various stripes of Northern Alliance, Hizb-e Islami, and Taliban fighters have been “reintegrated” into a security apparatus with only the loosest of linkages to constitutional order.<sup>20</sup>

Just over the Afghan border, as Steve Coll and Stephen Tankel document in their books on Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence agency and its relations with the Taliban and Laskar-e-Taiba, Pakistan’s military elite has long viewed its investment in proxies as critical to creating strategic depth in the face of threats from India.<sup>21</sup>

Others have documented the proliferation of militias in Syria, Yemen, Libya, and Ukraine, where principal rivalries between the United States and Russia, as well as Iran and Saudi Arabia, are heating up competition between local elites for support of their own proxy forces. But there are few book-length studies that examine and compare in detail the nature and character of proxy wars that are now raging across the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia.

Much of the journalistic and think tank coverage on conflicts in the region relies on interviews with participants and key decision-makers, but leaves open, primary source data virtually untouched. For some countries mired in proxy conflict today—notably Syria, Iraq, and Ukraine—journalists and analysts have begun to exploit digital traces of conflicts by sifting through social media platforms and other online data; the work has been impressive, but it only scratches the surface.<sup>22</sup> However, on other conflicts, most notably Yemen and Libya, the use of digital forensics to find fresh analysis is rare, demonstrating both the difficulties of tracking online sources as well as verifying existing digital evidence absent a strong community of locally based correspondents and researchers in those countries.<sup>23</sup>

Several recent book-length scholarly publications and articles stand out for their conceptual clarity regarding the subject of proxy warfare. In addition to recent books on the subject by Geraint Hughes, Mumford, and Michael Innes, other important contributions that touch on related topics such as state sponsorship of terrorism and patron-client relationships during counterinsurgency include recent works by Walter Ladwig and Daniel Byman.<sup>24</sup> Yet few works in this category adequately address the cross-cutting dynamics that drove the rash of intra-state wars and the rise of transnational social movements following the 1979 Iranian revolution and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Many studies focus primarily on the outcomes of support upon non-state actors while too often treating the state conflicts that underlie many proxy wars as external factors. Likewise, the predominance of English-language American and European scholarly work on strategic studies also tends to narrow the topic and geographical focus considerably, as has been documented recently by several researchers.<sup>25</sup>

As Idean Salehyan observed in his 2011 book *Rebels Without Borders*:

A large share of research on civil conflict treats nation-states as hermetically sealed, independent units. Country-level attributes and processes—such as income inequality, ethnic tensions, dependence on primary commodities, and the responsiveness of political institutions—dominate theories of civil war. This is especially true of works that draw heavily on statistical analyses.<sup>26</sup>

Salehyan notes in a separate article on related themes that while Iran and Israel have engaged in a deadly proxy war with each other for years, with Iran providing support to groups like Hamas and Hezbollah to target Israel, the widely used Militarized Interstate Dispute database records no dispute between the two countries because the conflict has been engaged in via indirect means.<sup>27</sup>

Other commentators have noted a tendency to debate causes of conflict like ancient hatreds or the role of Islam in the Middle East while ignoring the impact of proxy wars and the Cold War.<sup>28</sup> The U.S. experience of engagement in proxy warfare in the Middle East is covered extensively by these scholars, but the experiences of rival states such as Iran and Russia are scantily covered in existing literature.<sup>29</sup> Likewise, critical examinations of the impact of divisive European colonial policies on social structures and political development—and what William Easterly has called the “tyranny” of European and North American experts—has primarily remained the preserve of development studies specialists whose analysis rarely integrates scholarship on the counterinsurgency campaigns that were so pivotal in the colonial and early post-colonial period.<sup>30</sup>

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## **A large share of research on civil conflict treats nation-states as hermetically sealed, independent units.**

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All of these analytical approaches offer a window onto the variegated nature of proxy strategies but there is nothing in the way of a unified theory on what drives proxy wars, as Geraint Hughes explains in his book on the subject.<sup>31</sup> Nor is there much convergence around how to assess a principal sponsor’s support for conventional forces versus irregular forces or how best to measure the strength of a sponsor’s direct or indirect influence over proxies.

Three main threads, nonetheless, emerge from the literature: the central role of the United States, Russia, and China as superpowers in shaping proxy strategies; the clash between capitalism and socialism in the international arena; and the progression from wars for independence after the collapse of the French and British colonial empires after WWII to the proliferation of intra-state conflicts following the collapse of the Soviet Union. These themes are still relevant today, but contemporary academic analysis often fails to capture the experience of the regional client states in the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia in the post-WWII period.



As can be seen from even the above snapshot of existing literature, the subject has been studied from many angles. There is, however, little accord on who qualifies as a principal or an agent in a proxy relationship, what shapes proxy-sponsor relations, what constitutes command and control, or how best to analyze the problems that arise with proxy strategies. Little has been written on the ways that access to remote targeting capabilities such as drones and ballistic missiles have transformed proxy-sponsor relations in places like Yemen and Syria. Nor is there much consensus on what, if any, distinction can be made between strategies that rely primarily on surrogate irregular forces versus those that rely primarily on the conventional forces of a client or allied state. There are many debates, but most agree that the logic of proxy warfare is firmly rooted in the concept of “limited war.”

### **The Limited War Paradox and the Appeal of Proxies**

In limited war, as Sir Lawrence Freedman has noted, “belligerents choose not to fight at full capacity, in order that a conflict neither gains in intensity nor expands in space.”<sup>32</sup> Limited war is characterized by mutual acceptance of external constraints imposed by the prospect of mutual annihilation. Conceptually, limited war is deliberate step back from all-encompassing “total war”—the kind of destructive force that occurred in World War I. Limited war took on a new dimension after the Soviet Union tested its first nuclear weapon in 1949—only four years after the United States dropped nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. As the Soviet-American arms race heated up, the doctrine of mutually assured destruction became the bedrock of Cold War strategic thinking.<sup>33</sup>

It also spawned a non-proliferation regime which for nearly 70 years has sought, with mixed results, to limit the number of states with access to weapons of mass destruction, ballistic missiles, and other high-powered standoff capabilities. Following revelations about Israel’s nuclear weapons program in the 1960s, escalation dominance appeared to become ever more central to the military doctrine of many former Cold War client states in the Greater Middle East and its periphery. In addition to Israel, India and Pakistan also have nuclear weapons. Iran has tried to acquire them. Iraq and Syria have at various points tried to develop their own weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missile capabilities, prompting preemptive strikes by Israel and intervention from other external powers. Saudi Arabia and the UAE are among the world’s leading importers of weapons.<sup>34</sup> Virtually all the major regional powers have expanded their ballistic missile programs in part as a response to perceived threats from regional rivals and external adversaries.

Yet even as more states have acquired powerful weaponry in the Greater Middle East and worked to attain parity with rivals, their ability to project power is hamstrung in part by historical dependencies on external powers, a circumstance

that has impeded the ability of former Cold War client states to modernize their militaries. The majority of former client states are dependent on external providers such as the United States, Russia, and China for weapons and military equipment. Many draw on close-knit networks of ruling tribes, clans, or families and well-connected powerbrokers to form the backbone of their officer corps. Only a handful rely on conscription to fill their ranks. All these factors contribute to a highly unsteady regional military balance in the Greater Middle East and its periphery that constrains the means by which rival states can use conventional forces to advance their strategic aims.

Yet competition remains, making limited war the next best option and raising the appeal of irregular proxy forces that lie outside the chain of command dictated by a state's constitutional order. Irregular militias, paramilitaries, and private security contractors not only fill in gaps, because they are not directly beholden to the public, they could operate outside the normative lines conventional militaries are obligated by international law to observe. As long as proxies exact their toll on rivals in a way that is plausibly deniable by their sponsors, the reasoning goes, sponsors can deny command responsibility. Concealing and controlling narratives around command responsibility is critical to containing costs and preventing escalation.<sup>35</sup>

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## **Competition remains, making limited war the next best option and raising the appeal of irregular proxy forces that lie outside the chain of command.**

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Paradoxically, the need for secrecy greatly complicates sponsors' ability to insulate themselves from escalation risks. As seen with Russia's use of private military security contractors to back separatist forces in Ukraine, the pressure to conceal can greatly complicate the command structures and impose limits on sponsors' ability to exert control over proxies.<sup>36</sup> The downing of MH17, a Malaysian Airlines commercial plane that flew over Ukraine airspace in 2014, is but one example of the potential risks posed by relying on proxies to advance limited war aims. The shootdown, which killed 298 people, among them Dutch, Australian, Indonesian, and British nationals, was ultimately attributed to Russian-affiliated forces and prompted stringent international sanctions against Russia. In a highly globalized and interconnected world, the potential for proxy warfare to expand in geographic scope and increase in lethality is a feature that distinguishes today's strategic balance from that of the Cold War. Escalation risks

have grown in an international system destabilized by the transition from bipolarity at the end of the Cold War to multipolarity en route to the Arab Spring.

The rise of non-state actors, transnational social movements, and the diffusion of remote targeting and high-powered weaponry have been hallmarks of that transition. The shift to multipolarity has introduced many more armed actors into the mix, some of whom are pursuing revolutionary or apocalyptic goals that are heedless of geographic boundaries and that are fundamentally at odds with states' interests in limited war aims. At the same time, globalization has seen the rapid integration of transportation, communications, and supply chains. Under these circumstances, borders and boundaries are increasingly difficult to defend.

In some cases, fears that weapons of mass destruction might be transferred to proxies can encourage escalation. For example, Israel has reportedly conducted air strikes in Syria in part with the intention of preventing and deterring transfer of chemical weapons and sophisticated missile technology to Hezbollah that might then be used in a war with Israel.<sup>37</sup> Proliferation fears can drive escalation even when such fears are not well founded, as seen in the construction of the case for the invasion of Iraq based on arguments regarding weapons of mass destruction and terrorism. All of these factors raise the risk of miscalculation and greatly complicate efforts to tamp down escalation. In an international environment where multipolarity, the proliferation of high-powered weaponry, and armed groups are increasingly shaping threat perceptions, the covert nature of sponsor-proxy ties paradoxically raises the risk of strategic miscalculation.

### **Re-Defining the Concept**

The question of what constitutes proxy warfare remains a highly contested and under-analyzed issue. There are a number of examinations and efforts to define the subject. These efforts provide insight, yet they suffer from flaws. A legally focused definition that defines proxy warfare as sponsorship of conventional or irregular forces that lie outside the constitutional order of states is best placed to avoid these flaws and form a platform to reassert accountability and clear lines of command responsibility, which is essential to avoiding the threats posed by twenty-first century proxy warfare.

The conceptual roots of proxy warfare have antecedents in Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*. In the classic narrative of the war between Athens and Sparta, expansion and containment are the intertwined strategic impulses that shape the epochal conflict between the two rivals.<sup>38</sup> The characteristic strains of conflict described by Thucydides—asymmetric rivalries, rejection of a total war of annihilation in favor of a limited war of attrition, alliance targeting, rhetorical battles over the moral demands of just wars—are all features that are repeatedly described in subsequent historical and analytical narratives of proxy warfare.

Historically speaking, proxy warfare is as old as war itself, but the emergence of international strategic studies as a formal analytical field in the post-World War II era marks a distinctive period in the conceptual genealogy of proxy warfare.<sup>39</sup> Notwithstanding debates about the fundamentals of battlefield victories,<sup>40</sup> there can be little doubt that the dawn of the nuclear age brought with it a new understanding of the meaning and dynamics of “limited war.” Yet, analytical approaches to twenty-first century proxy warfare inevitably run into the thorny problem of definitions.

Even a cursory review of conflict studies literature reveals that there are deep disagreements over what constitutes sponsorship, what defines a proxy, and how state and non-state actors fit into the strategic paradigm. Mumford, for example, defines proxy warfare as the “indirect engagement in a conflict by third parties wishing to influence its strategic outcome.”<sup>41</sup> His definition of proxy war accounts for how states and non-state actors can both be and have proxies.

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### **The dawn of the nuclear age brought with it a new understanding of the meaning and dynamics of “limited war.”**

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Others have proffered more state-centric views of proxy warfare in which the principal must be a state and the proxy agent a non-state actor. Iran’s sponsorship of Hezbollah, U.S. support for the Contras, and Pakistani support for Lashkar-e-Taiba are often cited as classic examples. Geraint Hughes, for example, adopts a definition of proxy warfare in which only states can be principals and only non-state groups proxies.<sup>42</sup> Yet this definition separates Hughes’ work from the strategic literature on proxy relationships involving states as agents. At the same time, it excludes the rising phenomena of transnational non-state groups, private military-security providers, and entities with cooperative arrangements with other such groups that appear to deserve analysis as proxy relationships.

Beyond the question of state centrism and the identity of principal and agent, there is substantial debate over what kind of relationship between principals and agents constitutes a proxy relationship. Mumford suggests that “the fulfillment of a strategic goal by proxy does not necessarily have to be a conscious or deliberate act.”<sup>43</sup> While this is a useful departure point, Pfaff, for his part, rightly points out that proxy war requires intention—even if the strategy fails or the proxy also seeks goals that are in conflict with its sponsors.<sup>44</sup> Not simply a definitional

nitpick, the disagreement between Pfaff and Mumford reveals the need for better theories on what constitutes proxy warfare and an evidence base to test those theories.

Pfaff describes proxy warfare strategy as “the use of surrogates to replace, rather than augment, benefactor assets or capabilities.”<sup>45</sup> This definition conceives of a state as a monolithic actor though there is plenty of evidence to suggest that the erosion of state power in the age of globalization has seen non-state actors grow their interests and influence over military affairs. Problematic formulations of the state aside, Pfaff’s conceptualization lines up well with the analysis of Michael Innes and others, in the aptly titled *Making Sense of Proxy Warfare*. But Innes goes one step further, suggesting that a “symbiosis between state and non-state actors” underpins sponsors-proxy relations and sponsorship takes on many different forms in today’s conflicts in which militias and paramilitaries often serve the interests of multiple actors and private military actors take on state roles, among other phenomena.<sup>46</sup>

The most prevalent formulations of what constitutes proxy war conceptualize proxies as rebel non-state armed forces under formal or informal contract as agents to a principal state as a unitary and often singular actor. But, as some, among them Pfaff, have noted, multipolarity has given way to a “polyarchic” world order<sup>47</sup> in which the monopoly on the use of force by nation-states is highly atomized and under sway to bureaucracies that tend to do their own thing. Indeed, recent scholarship has emphasized an expanding spectrum of non-state agents from entrepreneurial individuals to networks to classical organizations capable of being part of a proxy strategy, requiring a move beyond analyses that focus solely on organization to organization-cooperative arrangements.<sup>48</sup>

If there is one major point of agreement, however, in the existing literature, it is that proxy warfare is characterized by a distinctive relationship between a principal-sponsor who delegates some authority over the pursuit of strategic war aims to a proxy-agent.<sup>49</sup> There is also near-universal agreement that the two major risks in proxy strategy center on proxy motivations and modes of fighting and the alignment, or more often, misalignment of principal sponsors’ war aims and those of proxy agents.

Theories that conceptualize proxy warfare as primarily a contest between external state powers miss what has changed. The chaotic reordering of the political order in the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia that followed closely on the heels of the September 11, 2001 attacks on New York and Washington and intensified with the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq and the 2011 Arab Spring has aggravated regional rivalries and stoked sectarian divides. Russia’s recent rebound and China’s rising influence, as well as the intensification of regional rivalries among Gulf States, have in turn compelled the United States to reorient its strategic focus. The high price of direct military confrontation with either Russia or Iran in the Middle East in particular all but ensures that the

United States will double down on an off-shore balancing strategy that leverages alliances in these regions.<sup>50</sup>

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In rethinking proxy warfare, it is important to acknowledge the thin gray line that separates allies and client states.<sup>51</sup> Allies, by definition, agree not only on the nature of the perceived threat but to a shared responsibility to respond to that threat in an all-for-one, one-for-all formulation; even where one state holds an upper hand militarily, implicit in the idea of an alliance is the independence of each party. While client states may share the same perception of a threat and may even agree with their sponsors on a response, it is more often the case that clients are materially dependent on a sponsor and could not otherwise respond or pose a credible counter to a threat on their own.

It also pays to be clear-eyed about the high price of doing business with a stable allied state versus a fragile client state that has just undergone violent regime change. With very few exceptions, when states have deployed proxy warfare strategies in the clientelist model of state to state, military to military support they have historically relied on formal treaties, military technical agreements, or formal diplomatic notes that define relations and terms and lay out the provisional authorities of external actors who serve as advisers or enablers for conventional forces of allied states. In both instances, the rules of engagement are usually explicitly stated and there is little ambiguity in international law about the obligations of combatants even when there may be questions about the legitimacy of certain battlefield tactics or specific events.

However, in weak states with contested constitutional orders that fail to explicitly or comprehensively articulate the relationship between a state's security forces, its government, and its citizens, it is ultimately the shortcomings of the client state's conventional national security institutions which often lead sponsors to enter into formal or informal contracts with irregular armed forces. Frequently in these cases, the territorial jurisdiction and legal authorities of externally supported irregular militia or paramilitary forces is murky. Ambiguity can hold a strategic advantage for sponsors and client states, in heightening plausible

deniability, but it can also undercut local government legitimacy, not to mention, as Pfaff notes, the credibility of the principal sponsor who may have to answer for a proxy's excesses.<sup>52</sup>

As seen in Afghanistan and Iraq from 2001 forward, U.S. efforts to advance its foreign policy objectives “by, with, and through” partners have imposed high economic, political and strategic costs.<sup>53</sup> In both Afghanistan and Iraq, the clientelist model of proxy warfare predominated despite the fact that decades of internecine conflict arose directly out of systemic abuses of power by the very same Afghan and Iraqi security institutions that the United States inherited as partners. In the heated aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, however, there was little appetite in the U.S. national security establishment, the UN, and NATO to start from scratch or contravene the orthodoxy of a “light-footprint” approach to intervention and reconstruction.<sup>54</sup>

Successive White House administrations chose instead to work within the constraints of existing local security institutions while stitching together a patchwork of auxiliary irregular forces to fill in capabilities gaps.<sup>55</sup> This wave of post-Cold War U.S. investment in irregular forces at the same time precipitated parallel support from Pakistan, Iran, and later Russia to rival proxies ostensibly allied with the Taliban in Afghanistan.<sup>56</sup> In Iraq, meanwhile, Tehran reinforced existing support to Shia militia forces both during its war with Saddam Hussein and later in its not-so-covert competition with Washington.<sup>57</sup> The United States, for its part, backed an array of paramilitary forces after the 2001 al-Qaeda attacks, most notably the Afghan Local Police and Counterterrorism Pursuit Teams and the “Sons of Iraq” following the 2003 invasion.<sup>58</sup>

The decision to stand up the Sons of Iraq program tapped into the local grievances of tribal leaders in Anbar Province to combat al-Qaeda in Iraq despite concerns regarding the difficulty of later integrating fighters recruited under the program within the Iraq government structure.<sup>59</sup> Similar logic motivated the U.S. decision to establish the Afghan Local Police (ALP) in 2010. An iteration of the previously disbanded Afghan Auxiliary Police, the ALP was meant to extend the writ of the state by recruiting locally based fighters to challenge the Taliban in remote and contested parts of the country. In theory, ALP fighters would better be able to leverage their expert knowledge of the local terrain and local Taliban to regain control. In practice, the highly centralized nature of the Afghan state, and the Ministry of Interior more specifically, made oversight of ALP forces challenging, while the recruitment of supposed Taliban defectors and locals affiliated with unsanctioned militias in not a few cases raised human rights concerns.<sup>60</sup>

Three important factors are often determinative in shaping a decision to adopt a proxy strategy: the length of supply lines, the limitations of conventional forces, and political constraints that make prolonged military confrontation unattractive to many decision makers.<sup>61</sup> Proxy forces can shorten lines of communication and

bring to bear considerable local knowledge of the terrain and stakeholders in a conflict that external sponsors might not otherwise be able to access easily. In addition to flattening the tactical obstacles of range and intelligence, there are significant short-term non-military advantages that both sponsors and proxies derive from their relationship. As one Western military expert suggested the immediate success of battlefield gains at a fraction of the cost of what it would take to mobilize a conventional force produces a “form of military ‘sugar rush’ that can be addictive for policymakers” looking to demonstrate the efficacy of wars fought on the cheap.<sup>62</sup>

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This may be especially true in situations where the political tenure of elite decision-makers is shaped by the size of their coalition of support and foreshortened by either a selection cycle or internal and external threats that spur them to demonstrate a decisive ability to effectively wield coercive power.<sup>63</sup> In this respect, the U.S. decision to partner with Northern Alliance fighters in Afghanistan in 2001 and the Russian decision to provide backing to ethnic Russian rebel forces in Ukraine in 2014 are notable examples of the “sugar rush” effect, where swift battlefield victories are followed by a hard crash when local politics do not line up with sponsors’ strategic objectives.

The advantage of using irregular forces in each case was in allowing sponsors to project power beyond their own existing capacity, while avoiding the same kind of domestic scrutiny that a direct declaration of hostilities might incur. In each instance, external powers relied on national or subnational forces operating outside of their own direct constitutionally defined chain of command. Yet, there were clear distinctions. In the initial years, U.S. relations with local Afghan forces were governed primarily by a military technical agreement, and later, a status of forces agreement.<sup>64</sup> In Iraq, U.S. forces initially provided support to Iraqi forces under the imprimatur of an occupying force. Iran appears to rely primarily on less formal agreements with Shia powerbrokers in Iraq. It only recently renewed its military cooperation agreement with Damascus.<sup>65</sup>

In each case, the role and legal authorities of security forces in the constitutional order of a state engaged in active combat either with an external or internal adversary thus proves pivotal in demarcating the difference between a proxy



strategy that employs “allies,” “partners,” or “surrogates.” The lines may not always be bright, but since one of the main purposes of a constitution is to define the terms of the social contract between a government and its citizens for the provision of internal and external security, examining the legal authorities different forces operate under becomes critical to understanding parameters of proxy strategies.<sup>66</sup> In weighing the costs and the benefits of clientelist proxy strategies that augment existing forces operating under a clearly articulated constitutional mandate versus irregular forces outside that mandate, a key consideration is how either choice impacts the perceived legitimacy of the state and drives up the cost of doing business for sponsors.

The decline in inter-state conflict and prevalence of civil wars since the collapse of the Soviet Union suggests that proxy forces will remain an attractive tool for exerting strategic influence. Since irregular forces are rarely, if ever, mentioned or explicitly described in the constitutions of most states, the strategic usefulness of irregular forces to third parties—be they states or non-state actors—is the very ambiguity of their authorities. It is also in that ambiguity that the classic principal-agent problems of moral hazard and adverse selection challenges often arise.<sup>67</sup> Adverse selection occurs when the expert knowledge that makes proxy forces so attractive to sponsors is used to pursue hidden objectives that may not align with those of sponsors or alternatively when sponsors use proxies to pursue goals that remain hidden from the proxy (often this is seen in sudden changes in sponsor policy, with sponsors abandoning proxies to achieve broader foreign policy goals).

The inability to constrain proxies from abusing power or bending norms around the principals of distinction, proportionality, and military necessity that undergird International Humanitarian Law (IHL) creates a moral hazard for sponsors who championing the political claims of one combatant group over another. Sponsors may pay a high price from the “strategic costs of civilian harm”<sup>68</sup> arising from murky command and control arrangements that exact tolls on the very population military actions are meant to protect, but which the proxy is not affected by because external sponsorship has shielded the agent from popular backlash.<sup>69</sup>

The potential for conflict escalation can be high in proxy warfare as a result of the challenges described above. Absent the constraints of well-defined authorities and clear command and control structures, agents may be incentivized to take more risks on the battlefield, raising the risk of conflict escalation.<sup>70</sup> At the same time, the local expertise that makes proxies so attractive and expedient to external sponsors may also motivate proxies to hide information from sponsors about the actual costs and risks of battlefield tactics.<sup>71</sup> High risks and hidden information can make it more difficult to broker an end to conflict, since populations at the mercy of proxies may be less inclined or incentivized to accept a deal that entails power-sharing with former adversaries, or that fails to bring perpetrators of atrocities to account. The nearly 50-year-long conflict in

Afghanistan—with its many failed power-sharing deals—is a case in point, while the conflict in Syria certainly seems to be moving onto a similar track.

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Despite these drawbacks, reliance on irregular forces offers strategic advantages that some sponsors may calculate outweigh potential downsides, providing three key benefits. First, it insulates sponsors from the high risks and costs associated with direct military action while allowing them to tap into local coercive power unconstrained by international or local customary law. Second, it obscures the express or implied terms of the contract between sponsoring principals and their proxy agents from public scrutiny, which has the added benefit of allowing sponsors to bend, break, or reshape established norms without suffering immediate retribution from adversaries. The less is known about the ways and means that irregular forces enable sponsors to remotely target and disrupt the activities of their rivals, the greater the degree of strategic surprise. The same might be said of allied or aligned conventional forces who, by express agreement, advance the strategic interests of another state by conducting expeditionary operations. Third, support for proxies arguably also allows sponsors to challenge rivals for a longer duration, since domestic responses to military intervention through third party forces is frequently met with public indifference, or even outright support, as long as it does not entail domestic conscription or casualties.

Proxy warfare is best defined as the direct or indirect sponsorship of third-party conventional or irregular forces that lie outside of the constitutional order of states engaged in armed conflict. Secrecy, plausible deniability, and ambiguity in the rules of engagement and command structure are characteristic features critical to the success of proxy strategies, making narrative control over the quality of command and control a central tactical concern. Yet the more obscure the connections between command and control and the more covert the proxy networks, the less visibility sponsors have into whether and when proxies are operating on agreed terms and providing verifiable information about conditions on the ground.

Existing definitions of proxy warfare each grasp part of this problem, but some are too broad, like Mumford's suggestion that when the actions of a third-party unintentionally serve the strategic interests of a stakeholder with interests in a conflict. A vision of proxy warfare that includes traditional coalition warfare or allied support, where command and control and rules of engagement are articulated under formalized agreements, mistakenly conflates the characteristics of alliance dynamics with the features that make proxy warfare such an alluring, but also dangerous, policy choice.

There is a real risk that overly elastic definitions could contribute to an escalatory climate by encouraging military responses to perceived threats from armed groups that are not actually part of a sponsor's proxy strategy. This question has particular policy relevance when it comes to the Trump administration's assertion that al-Qaeda is an Iranian proxy as justification for withdrawing from the Iran nuclear deal. Tehran's relationship with al-Qaeda is contested at best, and there is substantial evidence that suggests Iran's interactions with al-Qaeda were often hostile.<sup>72</sup> A legalistic focus avoids such overly broad definitions of proxy warfare that stretch the term beyond useful meaning. It helps clarify disputes over what constitutes proxy sponsorship by linking the definition to the provision of material support to combatants that enhances their lethality.

As noted above, there will always be debate over where to draw the line. For example, is Syria's attempt to formally integrate Iranian-backed militias operating in the country a legitimate legal authorization? Is Yemeni President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi's invitation to the Saudi coalition to intervene in Yemen truly authorizing the activities of the coalition, and does this continue to hold legal sway given the collapse of governance in the country?<sup>73</sup> Similar debates exist regarding the militias active in Iraq, where assessing the various levels of legal integration into the Iraqi system helps clarify the challenges posed by militias.<sup>74</sup> Despite sometimes blurry distinctions, a definition that looks to international law provides a basis for resolving or at least assessing claims regarding where particular cases fall even if debate over proper interpretation persists.

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A legal definition also enables the examination of private military companies and militias that may be understood by a sponsor as augmenting its forces, rather than replacing them. Rather than getting bogged down in debates over whether a strategy augments or replaces forces—as Pfaff’s definition risks doing—a legal definition shifts the focus to whether a group is a third party operating under an unbroken chain of constitutional authority. This is essential, for example, when it comes to evaluating whether Russia is waging proxy warfare via private security that are deeply tied to the state but also often outside the country’s formal armed forces and in the case of non-western countries’ reliance on militias, an issue raised well by Ahram.

A legal definition also avoids the artificial limits of state-centric definitions, such as that put forward by Hughes requiring that proxy warfare involve a state sponsor supporting a non-state group. It enables scrutiny to be applied to cases where states sponsor other states in wars that exist outside of—or purposefully stretch the meaning of—constitutional authorizations. For example, the United States’ support for the Saudi coalition in Yemen can be analyzed under this framework if the Saudi-led coalition is judged to be acting outside of constitutionally authorized structures in Yemen. Similarly, non-state sponsors, whether powerful individuals or organizations, should not be excluded from an effort to address the dangers of proxy warfare strategies by dint of their not being states.

A legal definition focused on constitutional authorization and international humanitarian law holds promise for policy development to return accountability to and limit the costs imposed by today’s proxy wars without being sidetracked by politicized and analytically unsound accusations, where only one’s rival’s partners are proxies. A more stable reference point based in law as to what constitutes proxy warfare helps guide policy debates about the efficacy and wisdom of partner operations and gives local populations, human rights advocates, and peace activists a tool with which to identify and clarify the lines of command, a prerequisite to any semblance of democratic governance and accountability in warfare.

As the U.S. experience in Afghanistan and Iraq illustrates, adverse selection problems have real-world consequences of joint or partnered military operations, detentions, and intelligence sharing. In Afghanistan, several major military operations resulting in mass casualties have been directly attributed to faulty intelligence provided by Afghan forces to their American military partners.<sup>75</sup> In some cases, Afghan forces deliberately fed misinformation to their American and NATO counterparts with the express purpose of eliminating rivals; in others, inaccurate information was provided to deliver a short-term tactical advantage where Afghan forces were unable to overcome their adversaries without coloring outside the lines of international humanitarian law. The October 2015 bombing of a hospital run by Doctors Without Borders in the northern province of Kunduz

is perhaps one of the more striking cases in which misdirection and misinformation provided by Afghan forces resulted in devastating numbers of civilian casualties and heavy collateral damage.<sup>76</sup> In Iraq, faulty intelligence provided by local partners on the ground has reportedly resulted in a persistent pattern of errant strikes.<sup>77</sup> Several high-ranking U.S. military officials have openly admitted to the strategic costs of errant strikes<sup>78</sup> and false intelligence provided by local partners, resulting in substantial changes to the ways partnered operations are handled.<sup>79</sup>

If Russian operations in Syria and Ukraine are any guide, Moscow appears even less concerned about the adverse selection problems and the strategic tradeoffs of backing the Assad regime and other proxies on the ground. As seen with skirmishes in Deir Ezzor between U.S. forces and proxies in the Wagner Group, a Russian private military security company (PMSC) with alleged Kremlin connections, reliance on proxies raises the real risk of escalation.<sup>80</sup> In Ukraine, the downing of the commercial jet MH17 in July 2014 is another instance in which faulty targeting by proxies on the ground had real strategic impact.<sup>81</sup> Moscow, for its part, appears to have developed a systematic strategy of disinformation about operations in which its forces may have been involved, suggesting that one of the best routes for measuring the extent of its control over proxies in Syria and Ukraine may be in examining patterns of denial.

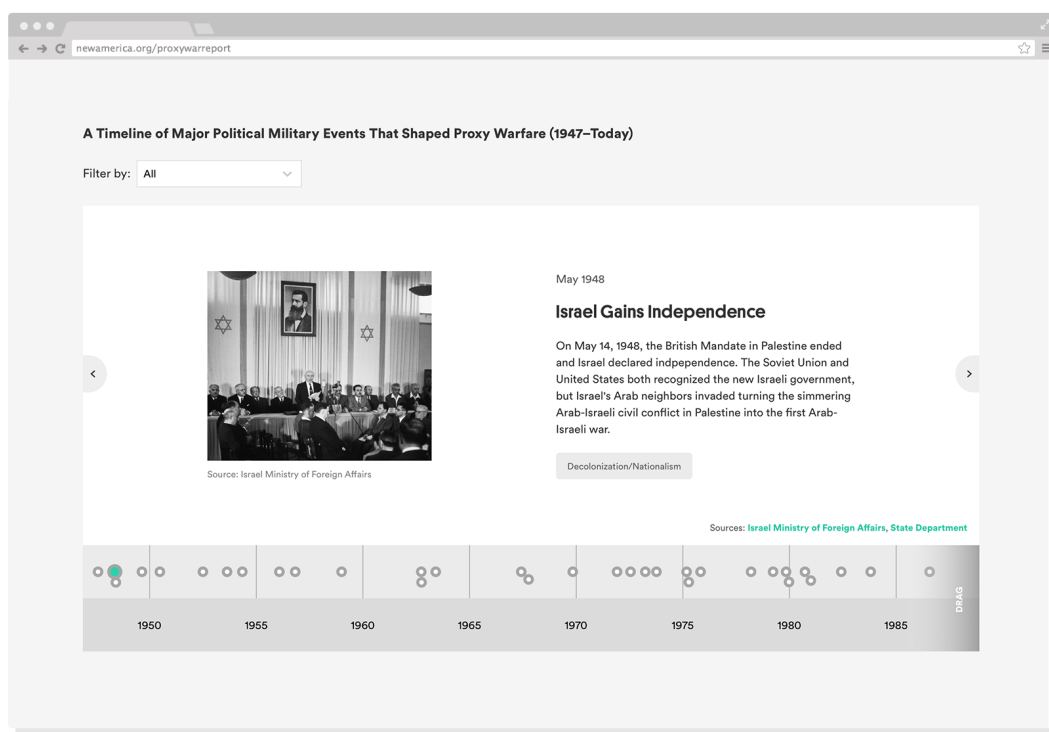
Often the covert nature of connections between sponsors and their proxies, and lack of transparency about the rules of engagement in partnered operations, may provide tactical advantages. But, as seen in the cases of U.S. operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, and Russian operations in Syria and Ukraine, persistent monitoring of proxy activity may be the only way to measure the effectiveness of proxy strategies. Four factors warrant examination when defining terms of reference for proxies: authorities, territoriality, alignment with stated sponsor goals and objectives, and information discipline. But once a proxy strategy is defined, what exactly constitutes a sponsor's control or influence over a proxy, and how can control be measured so that it can be applied more effectively?

As Ladwig explains, aid dependence, power asymmetry, selectorate theory,<sup>82</sup> and the strategic utility of a client state make up the main competing theories of control in the academic literature.<sup>83</sup> None account for the often divergent interests between patrons and client state powerbrokers who often are poorly incentivized to comply with externally imposed policies, lest they look weak to their neighbors and vulnerable to their domestic rivals and constituents. The fractious relationship between successive White House administrations and the government of Hamid Karzai, the former president of Afghanistan, is one more recent example of this phenomenon.<sup>84</sup> But in strategy, as in other realms, past is precedent. In this regard, the history of the Cold War and the two decades that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union in the lead-up to 9/11 are even more instructive.

# Principal Rivalries & Proxy Dilemmas

## Cold War: Two Poles, One Divided World Order (1945–1953)

The principal rivalries that define today’s bloody conflicts in the Greater Middle East and its periphery have a long history. The emergence of the Cold War created a bipolar security system. Yet even as a bipolar order emerged, other trends of decolonization and nationalism complicated the bipolarity. These trends combined with the accelerating forces of globalization and economic competition and strategic innovations in warfare, most notably the diffusion of high-powered and standoff weaponry, to give root to today’s new era of proxy warfare that challenges the models generated during the Cold War.



To view the interactive timeline, please visit [newamerica.org/proxywarreport](https://newamerica.org/proxywarreport)

With former European colonial powers weakened by two long devastating conflicts that coincided with major technological transformations that upended the political economy of Europe, Russia and the United States emerged as the predominant powers in the international order. In the immediate aftermath of

World War II, clashes between the two, and eventually China, cleaved the region between two competing economic systems: capitalism and communism. From 1945 forward, Europe emerged as the central proving ground in the tug of war of the Cold War bipolar world order.

It was not long before Asia, Africa, and the Greater Middle East were mired in post-colonial paroxysms that reignited violent competition between local elites that had long been held in check by European powers. Though some, like Britain and France, tried to exert their historical hold on colonial power, their rule never recovered. The Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia simultaneously experienced successive socio-political convulsions wrought by technological advances that progressively reshaped the local and international order.

In 1946, Soviet forces refused to withdraw from Iran, where the Allies had stationed troops to protect oil supplies for the war effort against the Nazis. The United States backed Iranian complaints, and the Soviet Union withdrew, though the early crisis pointed to the key role of the energy sector in defining the coming Cold War conflicts in the Middle East.<sup>85</sup> Further to the east, following the collapse of British rule in India, the country was partitioned between India and Pakistan in 1947, sparking a whole new rivalry that would become the center for future proxy wars. In 1948, British rule in Mandatory Palestine ended, and the 1948 Arab-Israeli war broke out—though in that instance, Moscow and Washington aligned in backing Israel, illustrating the fluctuating process of the solidification of Cold War rivalries in the region.<sup>86</sup>

But it was when the Soviet Union successfully exploded its first nuclear bomb in 1949, ending the American monopoly on nuclear weapons and cementing a limited war dynamic between the two superpowers of the bipolar system, that competition with the United States upped the stakes in proxy wars between the two superpowers. The establishment of NATO that same year set off a race for influence in Moscow's backyard that would ultimately prompt then Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev to deploy nuclear warheads in Cuba, only a short distance from Florida's Gulf Coast, a little more than a decade later.

Meanwhile, the scramble for control over the hydrocarbon extractive industry began to reshape alliances in the Middle East. In 1953, the United States and Britain supported a coup in Iran, overthrowing the government of Mohammad Mossadegh, which had planned to nationalize oil production, threatening American and British oil interests.<sup>87</sup> The coup would help generate substantial anti-American feeling in Iran that would later redefine the security structure of the Middle East.<sup>88</sup> It also, in part, prompted the Soviet decision to double down on its support of revolutionary movements in places like Algeria and Southern Yemen as well as to invest heavily in the Ba'athist regime of Hafez al-Assad.<sup>89</sup>

## **Pan-Arabist Fever and New Cold War Alliances (1954–1967)**

The rise of the pan-Arabist Ba'ath party and other Arab nationalists during the 1950s marked a new turn in Cold War competition between the Soviet Union and the United States. It marked a reconfiguration of global and regional alliances in the Middle East, leading to a solidification of new spheres of influence and devastating proxy wars along their borders. However, during this period, the United States and the Soviet Union often exercised control over their clients and partners resulting in dynamics that, though at times escalatory, also limited the scope, reach, and lethality of proxy warfare.

Determined to leverage their newfound hegemonic edge over European powers in the region and cultivate ties with rising nationalist movements, Moscow and Washington aligned against France, Israel, and Britain in the 1956 Suez Crisis and in other conflicts that erupted in the Middle East around the same time.<sup>90</sup> The partnership between London, Paris, and Tel Aviv against Gamal Abdel Nasser, an Arab nationalist whose election that same year challenged European colonial interests in the region, made for strange bedfellows. But it was as much motivated by fears that Nasser's pan-Arab nationalism would fan the flames of Arab discontent in other former European colonies in North Africa and the Middle East as it was by fears of Soviet hegemony in a critical energy-producing region.

As with the Suez Crisis, the United States and the Soviet Union aligned against France's desire to maintain control in Algeria. The exercise of power by the United States in particular to restrain and reverse the action of France, Britain, and Israel illustrated the ability of the United States and Soviet Union to calibrate and control escalation dynamics in the emerging bipolar system. However, such control did not always result in restraint, as later demonstrated by the third Arab-Israeli War in 1967 and the fourth in 1973. The United States and Soviet Union backed different sides, at times escalating the violence while at other times cooperating to restrain it. The alignment of superpower interests in the region was almost always the result of a tense marriage of convenience.

Across the Middle East, the clash between Arab nationalists, led in large part by Nasser's Egypt and more conservative Arab states like Saudi Arabia, became progressively intertwined with the Cold War clash between the Soviet Union and the United States.<sup>91</sup> In 1958, under a push by Nasser, Egypt formed the short-lived United Arab Republic, drawing together Pan-Arab nationalist regimes in Syria and Iraq and pushing both deeper into the Soviet sphere.

The growing Soviet influence in the Middle East via Nasser's Egypt reflected a shift in Soviet policy towards building relationships with emerging nationalist movements in the Global South. In prior years, Soviet foreign policy under Stalin



focused heavily on cultivating Communist Party ties at the local level and on the assassination of perceived traitors and defectors from the communist camp rather than cultivating nationalist movements.<sup>92</sup> A key moment for this shift came during the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in February 1956, when Khrushchev not only denounced Stalin in his famed “Secret Speech” but abandoned Stalin’s “two camps” theory<sup>93</sup> that divided the world into opposing communist and capitalist camps that left little room for co-opting national liberation movements.<sup>94</sup>

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## **The alignment of superpower interests in the region was almost always the result of a tense marriage of convenience.**

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In 1963, Israel and Iran began to provide joint support to the Kurds in northern Iraq, embracing a proxy warfare strategy of their own. They built upon pre-existing, low-level Iranian aid, to counter what they feared was growing Iraqi influence in the wake of the 1963 Ba’athist coup.<sup>95</sup> The effort was part of a broader Israeli-Iranian-Turkish intelligence partnership known as Trident. It was not simply a local struggle, but closely tied to the tension between the two superpowers as Israel and Iran sought to sell themselves, the broader Trident partnership, and the proxy war against Iraq using the Kurds, to the United States as a bulwark against the Soviet Union’s solidifying sphere of influence.<sup>96</sup>

While Trident shaped Iran-Israel relations for a time, leading both states to invest in Kurdish and other ethnic minority proxies in the region, it was the outbreak of a new round of warfare between Israel and its Arab neighbors that helped solidify Israel’s partnership with the United States. Ba’athist flirtations with the Soviets, Nasser’s increasing assertiveness, and a desire to exact a toll for its failure to contain the rise of a powerful Chinese-backed Communist bloc in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, prompted an American pivot to the Middle East in the late 1960s. At the same time, the rising power and influence of OPEC, after its founding in 1960, escalated anxiety in Washington and allied European capitals over what the reconsolidation of Arab nationalist power in the region might mean for energy markets and critical maritime trade routes in the Mediterranean, the Persian Gulf, and the Gulf of Aden.

Tensions boiled over when Nasser threatened to close the Straits of Tiran to Israeli ships in response to long-simmering enmity over Israel’s incursion into the

Sinai. Unlike the Suez Crisis in 1956, the clash between Cairo and Tel Aviv found the United States facing off against the Soviet Union as the Soviet Union's Arab clients, Syria and Egypt, confronted Israel in the 1967 Six-Day War.<sup>97</sup> Israel's push into the West Bank and Golan Heights delivered a stinging defeat to Egypt and its Arab allies. It also ultimately led to the slow-burning destruction of the War of Attrition, a significant but often under-analyzed turning point in the Arab-Israeli conflict that colored the competition between the United States and Soviet Union in the region. During the low-level conflict, from 1968 to 1970, artillery exchanges between Israel and Egypt across the Suez Canal resulted in thousands of fatalities on both sides and ultimately led Nasser to turn to the Kremlin for weaponry, fighter pilots, and military advisers.<sup>98</sup>

Shortly before his death, Nasser turned to Yasser Arafat's Fatah to create a Palestinian buffer and broker the Cairo Agreement with the Lebanese military. This allowed PLO fighters to use Lebanon as a base to launch attacks in the disputed territories, setting the stage for future proxy wars in the region and the 1975 civil war in Lebanon.<sup>99</sup> The rise of international terrorism also emerged as a prominent issue shaping proxy warfare as Palestinian groups took on a more active role, with greater independence from Arab states—though still drawing on state support—in the wake of the 1967 defeat.<sup>100</sup>

### **Regional Rebalancing and Military Modernization in the Middle East (1968–1991)**

The collapse of the United Arab Republic and rise of the Ba'ath Party, Israel's acquisition of nuclear weapons in the 1950s and 1960s, Egypt's loss to Israel in 1967, and Nasser's death in 1970 paved the way for a rebalancing of military and economic power in the Greater Middle East. The aftermath of the 1967 Arab-Israeli War saw the growth of a period of proxy conflict among newly empowered former client states, driven by a decline in Soviet influence, military modernization, and renewed revolutionary politics—in particular, the Iranian revolution. As a result, during this period the superpowers found their ability to impose escalation control increasingly challenged.

Spooked by Moscow's growing closeness to Tel Aviv and its cultivation of stronger ties with Iraq after the failure of the United Arab Republic, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat began disentangling Egypt from its alignment with the Soviets. Cairo's leadership was also increasingly suspicious of the Soviet military's advice to avoid a confrontation with Israel at the highly fortified Bar-Lev Line, and began to suspect the Soviets were holding back weapons sales to avoid escalating a conflict that could draw in the United States.<sup>101</sup> Egypt's realignment dealt a major blow to Soviet influence in the Middle East, setting the stage for a period of American dominance, albeit one in which the United States

would soon find itself in conflict with and seeking to manage tensions among former client states.

Israel, for its part, cleaved closer to the United States even as it secretly grew its nuclear weapons capabilities in the late 1960s.<sup>102</sup> In the midst of Egypt's realignment, the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, the last true inter-state war of the Arab-Israeli conflict, broke out. Israel demonstrated for a third time its conventional superiority over its Arab neighbors. This and Israel's widely recognized, if unofficial, status as a nuclear state, brought the logic of deterrence and limited war to regional conflicts even without the role of nuclear armed superpowers.<sup>103</sup> By the end of the decade, Egypt and Israel signed a peace deal formally ending their conflict and cementing the United States role of powerbroker and peacemaker in the region.

The 1979 Iranian revolution that overthrew the U.S.-backed shah in Tehran again reshaped the region's security architecture. It sparked an enduring rivalry between the United States and its former client state, fueled by Iranian anger over American support to the Shah's repressive regime, American anger over the embassy hostage crisis, and Tehran's increasing alignment with Shia revolutionary fighters in southern Lebanon.<sup>104</sup> At the same time the revolution revived old tensions with Saudi Arabia over claims to leadership of the Islamic world. Iran's transnational internationalist revolutionary ideology, combined with traditional strategic concerns regarding the Iranian state's economic and military power relative to Arab states, threatened Saudi Arabia.<sup>105</sup> The revolution also quickly put an end to the Israeli-Iranian intelligence cooperation under Trident, though a tense, more limited cooperation would persist through the 1980s, despite growing enmity.<sup>106</sup>

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## **Iranian investment in ballistic missile development and a nuclear program also increased Israel's perception of its one-time friend as a threat.**

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In September 1980, Iraq invaded Iran, sparking the Iran-Iraq War. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States backed Iraq and provided funding, viewing Iraq as a buffer against Iran, which in turn vastly escalated the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran.<sup>107</sup> The Iran-Iraq War, along with Iran's transnational revolutionary roots, also led Iran to develop ties with Shia militias in Iraq that would become an important part of its foreign policy in the future.<sup>108</sup> The United States provided

support to Iraq to aid the remaining Arab pillar of its failing regional security strategy, but found itself increasingly taking on a direct military role in ensuring the flow of oil from the Gulf, notably during the Tanker War of the late 1980s.<sup>109</sup>

In June 1982, amid the heat of the Iran-Iraq War and ongoing attacks from Lebanon into its territory, Israel sharply escalated its participation in the Lebanese civil war with an invasion aimed at placing the Christian Phalange militias, one of its proxies, in control of the country. The strategy quickly faltered, revealing the strategic costs of investing in proxies who bend battlefield norms, as when Phalangist forces slaughtered hundreds in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps with the help of weapons and support from Israel.<sup>110</sup>

A mix of revolutionary zeal and strategic hedging prompted Iran to jump into the Lebanese fray. It drew upon its cultural cachet as the de facto leader of Shia Muslims in the region; substantial funding; and a contingent of the IRGC to organize a ragtag assembly of Shia militias under the banner of Hezbollah.<sup>111</sup> Syria, under Hafez al-Assad's leadership, provided the main base for the IRGC-Hezbollah partnership, overcoming, in time, initially tense relations with revolutionary elites in Iran as shared interest in pushing back against American hegemony grew and the crucible of the Iran-Iraq War reinforced ties between Damascus and Tehran.<sup>112</sup> Hezbollah's bombing of the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut in 1983 and the subsequent kidnapping of CIA station chief William Buckley deepened the enmity between the United States and Iran, setting up an acrimonious rivalry that continues to this day.<sup>113</sup>

The Iranian-Israeli rivalry also steadily intensified as Hezbollah expanded its operations beyond Lebanese borders during the 1990s. Hezbollah's role in the 1994 bombing of the Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina Jewish community center in Buenos Aires was a wake-up call for Tel Aviv, which had remained too entrenched in its rivalry with Baghdad to read the warning signals clearly. Israel remained hopeful for quite some time that it could revive the periphery doctrine and resuscitate its pre-revolutionary accord with Iran.<sup>114</sup> Iranian investment in ballistic missile development and a nuclear program also increased Israel's perception of its one-time friend as a threat.<sup>115</sup>

Iran, sidelined during the administration of George H. W. Bush because of the Iran-Contra affair and deepening U.S. acrimony and cut out of the Clinton administration's efforts to advance the Oslo Accords, took up the mantle of spoiler in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process by backing Palestinian groups like Hamas. Tehran's efforts to regain leverage in the long-simmering conflict also marked the beginning of Hezbollah's on-again, off-again flirtation with Hamas.<sup>116</sup> This would escalate as Israel accused Iran of support for Palestinian groups during the Second Intifada, setting off yet another wave of investment in proxies in the region that to this day is reverberating around the world.

Throughout this era of proxy proliferation in the region, many Gulf countries began to increase the size of their conventional weapons arsenals while attempting to modernize their militaries and expand their ability to deploy weapons of mass destruction. During the Iran-Iraq War, Tehran reportedly launched an estimated 600 ballistic missiles.<sup>117</sup> Iraq, meanwhile, swelled its military ranks to nearly 1 million and deployed chemical weapons.<sup>118</sup> The accelerated acquisition of Soviet-made Scud missiles and Soviet and American conventional weapons such as tanks and armored vehicles was likewise a game changer for the region, while the expansion of U.S. basing rights in the Gulf region set the stage for future confrontations.

### **Afghanistan’s “Useful Brigands” and a New Chapter in the Longest War (1979–1991)**

As tensions escalated between the United States, Israel, and Iran in the Middle East, a new front in the Soviet-American Cold War opened in Afghanistan, illustrating the continued influence of the bipolar Cold War system in proxy warfare as well as that system’s further weakening. The proxy wars in Afghanistan combined with the military modernization in the Middle East to help sow the seeds of future conflict.

The opening of the proxy conflict in Afghanistan began with the assassination of Adolph Dubs, America’s ambassador in Kabul, in February 1979 following the Saur Revolution in 1978. Not long before he was kidnapped and sequestered in the Kabul Hotel, U.S. embassy staff had released a highly critical report on human rights as a result of Hafizullah Amin’s crackdown on protesters.<sup>119</sup> The failure of Amin, the embattled leader of the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), to secure Dubs’s freedom and suspicions that Soviet advisers were involved in the kidnapping had goaded Afghan police to move aggressively against the kidnapers and only increased the growing acrimony between Washington and Amin’s regime.<sup>120</sup> The subsequent Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 was ostensibly meant to bring Amin’s government to heel, but the invasion quickly precipitated a violent backlash across Afghanistan.

It also drew the United States deeper into the conflict. The incursion and subsequent installation of Babrak Karmal following Amin’s assassination at the hands of Soviet Spetsnaz forces during Operation Storm-333 provoked a harsh reaction from the Carter White House. The Carter administration imposed a grain embargo against the Soviet Union in 1980 and led a multinational boycott of the summer Olympic Games that same year. Part policy response to what it viewed as aggressive Soviet expansion, and part opportunistic payback for its losses to the Soviets and Chinese in proxy wars in other parts of the world, American-led sanctions against the Soviet Union were the first step on the road to

an extensive covert campaign to beat back Soviet entrenchment in South Asia. Alongside Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and other Arab states, the United States leveraged its long-standing support of its client state Pakistan to provide substantial support for the anti-Soviet Afghan mujahideen.<sup>121</sup>

Under pressure from the UN to withdraw, the Soviets began to internally debate the efficacy of the Afghan campaign as early as 1982.<sup>122</sup> Devastating losses in a bloody proxy guerilla war and a slow-burning economic crisis at home triggered by a precipitous drop in oil and coal production—a key source of much-needed hard currency—sparked a crisis of confidence in the Politburo.<sup>123</sup> Struggling to finance a bloated military and maintain generous pension guarantees to veterans and retirees, the Kremlin found itself early on in the Afghan conflict looking for the nearest possible exit.<sup>124</sup> Washington's decision to distribute Stinger missiles to the mujahideen in 1986 arguably only increased the urgency in Moscow to end an increasingly costly war.

But as the United States continued to pump aid and weapons to Afghan factions operating out of Pakistan and sub-contracted command and control over the mujahideen to the ISI in Islamabad, the Politburo was riven between an older generation of hawkish stalwarts committed to avoiding humiliation at the hands of American proxies and a faction led by Mikhail Gorbachev that reluctantly acknowledged that a clean and clear victory was far out of reach.<sup>125</sup>

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## **The proxy wars in Afghanistan combined with the military modernization in the Middle East to help sow the seeds of future conflict.**

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By 1987, Gorbachev had more or less won the argument, declaring in a media interview that July that Soviet withdrawal was all but a done deal.<sup>126</sup> The decision to withdraw from Afghanistan also appeared to mark, for a time, the end of the Soviet strategy inaugurated by Khrushchev of seeking influence in the developing world via client states and proxies.<sup>127</sup> From there forward, UN efforts to push the United States, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Iran to pull support for their proxies ebbed and flowed but the resulting Geneva Accords, calling for non-interference in Afghan affairs, far from ended the conflict.<sup>128</sup> While the accords articulated the terms of Soviet withdrawal, the cessation of aid to the mujahideen, and the return of Afghan refugees, and were agreed to by Pakistan and Afghanistan and

endorsed by Moscow and Washington, they did not spell out a post-war political dispensation.

As internecine battles broke out between the seven main mujahideen factions, the cross-linkages between networks of sponsors and volunteer fighters from the Middle East and Afghan factions in South Asia propelled the emergence of a violent Salafist-jihadi transnational social movement just as the Soviets began to wind down their involvement in the late 1980s.<sup>129</sup> Although the movement's roots well predate the emergence of al-Qaeda on the rugged edge of Peshawar, its dynamic transformation into a global juggernaut first briefly under Abdullah Azzam, a Palestinian Sunni Islamic scholar who graduated from al-Azhar in Cairo, and later Osama bin Laden, the scion of a wealthy Saudi construction dynasty, illustrated the growing complexity and risks of proxy warfare in a more globalized and interconnected environment. The roots of the next wave of proxy conflicts in the Greater Middle East and its periphery stretched deep into the Arab-Israeli and Afghanistan conflicts and continue to roil the world today.

At the time, however, few would have predicted the rise of al-Qaeda and its particularly violent brand of vanguardist jihadism. Many in Washington instead viewed the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 as the end of the Cold War's bloody proxy conflicts. For all intents and purposes, it appeared to many that the United States was the last superpower standing, as the world turned the page on the ideological battles between socialism and capitalism. Before the start of the Balkan crisis, the promise of political and economic change in former Soviet states and the reunification of East and West Germany produced widespread hope that the post-Cold War thaw would transform rivalries in the Middle East and the world more generally.

The hope was not entirely unfounded; during the 1990s, Iran and Saudi Arabia experienced a short rapprochement even as both sought to gain greater influence and step into the vacuum left by the Soviets in Central and South Asia. Saudi support for Salafist groups, including the Taliban in Afghanistan, however, remained a sore point with Iran.<sup>130</sup> Tehran's anxiety about the rise of these groups in its neighborhood escalated in 1994 when Pakistan backed a Taliban push to gain dominance in the southern province of Kandahar. Iran responded by providing substantial arms and support to the loose confederation of anti-Taliban fighters that would ultimately constitute the Northern Alliance.<sup>131</sup> Unsettled by the prospects of a Taliban-dominated Afghanistan, particularly after the Taliban's involvement in the hijacking in 1999 of an Indian commercial airliner, India also jumped into the Afghan civil war by providing support to the Northern Alliance.<sup>132</sup>

It is well beyond the scope of this report to comprehensively recount the intricacies of the post-Cold War years of the Afghan conflict. However, it is worth noting that the mood of triumphalism in Washington set off by the Soviet Union's withdrawal in 1989 and collapse soon after is perhaps one of the most stinging

cautionary tales about the challenges scholars of the era wrestled with in terms of confirmation bias. Only a few years before the fall of the Soviet-backed government of Mohammed Najibullah, Francis Fukuyama's now-famous "End of History" lecture at the University of Chicago in 1989 and the companion articles that followed marked the opening salvo in a long intellectual skirmish between the realist, liberal, and constructivist wings of the international relations field over the causes and impact of the Soviet collapse.

Even as skirmishes between Pakistani, Saudi, Iranian, and Indian proxies raged in the Hindu Kush, Fukuyama argued that the end of Washington's Cold War rivalry with Moscow delivered the final blow to capitalism's main competitors—fascism and communism.<sup>133</sup> The article set off controversy within the academy and in Washington policy circles, stoking fierce debates about what led to the Soviet collapse and how to interpret the role of the macro politics of the nuclear race versus the micro politics of proxy warfare in shaping the Cold War. Most notably, Fukuyama's arguments found a powerful echo in John Lewis Gaddis's *The Long Peace*, which contended that the United States and Soviet Union had effectively avoided direct confrontation in large part due to understanding that escalation would ultimately end in mutually assured destruction.<sup>134</sup>

In reality, as more recent scholarship on the Cold War suggests, Gaddis's and Fukuyama's framework left far too much outside its margins. Many of the proxy conflicts set off in South Asia and the Greater Middle East by Washington's 45-year-long contest with Moscow not only did not end, but escalated and grew in reach during the 1990s. Moreover, the "Long Peace" formulation failed to take accurate stock of the proxy strategies adopted by Moscow, as Cold War scholars Paul Thomas Chamberlin and Alex Marshall have noted.<sup>135</sup>

Early on, Lenin in particular was conscious of the strategic role played by the plethora of "useful brigands" whose allegiance fluctuated with prevailing winds on the battlefield. Rather than acting as mere pawns on a global chessboard caught up in a zero-sum game, proxies like Fatah, the PLO, the Taliban, and the Northern Alliance in fact skillfully maneuvered their patrons to serve their own ends, as demonstrated by the fierce fluctuations in alliance politics during both the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Afghan war. The resulting bloodbaths at the edges of Asia Minor in highly contested and rapidly decolonizing territory in many cases dictated the tempo of Soviet-American competition, as Chamberlin suggests in his book *The Cold War's Killing Fields*. This competition was often over control of the global commons—the sea, air, space—which has been pivotal in the rivalry between Moscow and Washington, shaping everything from economic policies at home to military alliances and interventions abroad.

Three other important dynamics colored the post-Soviet era and presaged a resurgence of proxy warfare: a rising tide of economic globalization; technological advancements, particularly in the area of computer engineering and communications; and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and



remote targeting capabilities among superpower client states in the region. As Washington reveled in post-Cold War triumphalism, pushing a twin agenda of promoting peace through globalizing prosperity and American predominance through NATO expansion, debates about whether a “revolution in military affairs” justified new approaches to U.S. global military operations.<sup>136</sup> In the meantime, the very states the United States sought to isolate throughout the 1990s—particularly Syria, Libya, Iraq, and North Korea—became the subject of great concern because of proliferating access to nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons.

In 1997, CIA Director George Tenet detailed the expansion of Syria’s chemical and biological weapons program in official reports and Congressional testimony and warned of potentially catastrophic attacks against Israel.<sup>137</sup> In May 1998, Pakistan launched its first nuclear bomb test after cobbling together a secret program that relied on a network of suppliers that ran from Tripoli to Tehran and Pyongyang. Only one year later in Kosovo, NATO and Russian troops clashed at the Pristina International Airport, reigniting Moscow’s anxiety over U.S. hegemony. All of these dynamics combined to gradually escalate long-simmering rivalries between principal states with a stake in the current conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Libya, Afghanistan, and Ukraine even as interest in the topic of proxy warfare faded among academics, analysts, and journalists.

The failure to recognize the continuation of conflict and its escalation in the Greater Middle East and its periphery may be partly ascribed to mistaking driving economic and material forces for ideological issues. For those who viewed the Middle East’s late-Cold War conflicts as driven largely by economic and material factors and increasingly carried out by breakaway regional client states in the Soviet-American contest, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the American decision to step in into the breach provided little solace, and for some even suggested a coming escalation.<sup>138</sup>

This dynamic was in many ways presaged by the Gulf War, when Iraq’s Saddam Hussein, who had benefited from American, European, and Saudi and Gulf Arab State support in his war against Iran, rapidly building up Iraq’s military capabilities, invaded Kuwait. While the swift victory over Hussein’s forces was widely hailed as the start of a “New World Order” and global American hegemony, the first Gulf War in reality marked the beginning of a broader conflict. Amid substantial support for the Gulf War, Christopher Hitchens presciently noted the danger at the time when he warned that stepping into the role of policing these conflicts would be a commitment on the order of 100 years.<sup>139</sup> Almost three decades later, with every American president since George H. W. Bush having conducted air strikes in Iraq, the United States is well on its way to making that prophecy come true.<sup>140</sup> Whether the latest phase of the Iraqi conflict and other proxy wars in the region and its periphery marks the end of an old era or the start of a new one is an essential question.

## A New Age of Proxy Warfare

### Warning Signs: Renewed Rivalries in the 1990s and the 2000s

The end of the Cold War saw the emergence of a new age of proxy warfare in which multipolarity supplanted bipolarity, globalization transformed the role of sponsors and proxies, and transnational social movements were further elevated. In many locales, most notably in the Middle East, this new age of proxy warfare rivals and perhaps exceeds the threat it posed during the late Cold War.

A review of the existing literature suggests the opening of new markets to trade, the reorganization of the global security system, and the continued acceleration of technological developments during the 1990s marked the beginning of a paradigm shift in the way wars would be waged for the next two decades. It is there, close on the horizon of the start of the twenty-first century and just before the 9/11 attacks on the United States, that the faint outlines of a new era in proxy warfare began to emerge. Not surprisingly, as the late Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya documented, it all began at the southern edge of Russia's most vulnerable buffer zone.<sup>141</sup>

Starting with Russia's two successive scorched-earth military campaigns against Islamist rebels in Chechnya and Dagestan and the U.S. intervention in Somalia, the 1990s rewrote the post-Cold War rules of clientelism. The start of the rebellion in Chechnya in 1994 and the Russian Federation's brutal campaign of repression ushered in a new era of proxy war marked by gloves-off extrajudicial killings, renditions, and other brutal tactics. With its military hollowed out after Afghanistan and a roughly 50 percent cut to the nearly 3 million Soviet armed forces that were dispersed across 15 of its former republics across the Caucasus, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia, Moscow could ill afford another lengthy conflict in its near abroad.<sup>142</sup>

On the U.S. side, the devastating and politically costly Black Hawk Down incident in 1993 and deaths of more than a dozen of U.S. Army Rangers in Somalia provoked anxiety in the White House, leading Washington's national security establishment to press heavily for more remote missile strikes and use of partners rather than direct U.S. force against groups like al-Qaeda in the Greater Middle East and its periphery.<sup>143</sup> Israel, meanwhile, began to expand its use of unmanned aerial vehicles in the region, with attendant expansion of extraterritorial military campaigns and increased reliance on local sources to provide targeting intelligence.<sup>144</sup>

Even as analytical interest in proxy warfare as a strategic paradigm was supplanted by the global war on terror, the shadow of external sponsorship and the historical role of the United States, Russia, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and

other Gulf States—from Afghanistan and Pakistan to Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Libya—always loomed in the Middle East. At the same time, the massive project of deconstructing the Soviet army, one of the world’s largest militaries, on the margins of these developments was by no means a singular or insignificant event. The United States, along with many other countries, began imposing steep cuts to its standing forces.

Some of the earliest hints of reinvestment in proxy warfare strategies emerged in the breakaway former Soviet territories of Chechnya, Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, and Transnistria in Moldova, where Moscow successfully leveraged ethnic divisions and political instability to redraw the boundaries of its imperium. At the periphery of the Black Sea, political and economic transformations obscured the depth of internal fissures in former Soviet republics and Kremlin anxieties. In these conflicts, the Kremlin tested a model that would become central to its gray zone strategy early in the twenty-first century. Short of conventional war, gray zone tactics leveraged a combination of support to irregular forces and weaponized narratives predicated on nationalism to advance strategic objectives.

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## **This new age of proxy warfare rivals and perhaps exceeds the threat it posed during the late Cold War.**

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After 9/11, the U.S. counter-terrorism campaign against al-Qaeda across the Middle East ignited new debates about just war theory, the limits of state-to-state clientelist strategies, and Cold War alliances in the face of a rise in transnational social movements.<sup>145</sup> In Afghanistan, American exceptionalism clashed with Salafist extremism and confronted norm-distorting tactics that included targeted strikes against civilians; suicide raids on religious sanctuaries, schools, and other protected spaces; and mass atrocities perpetrated by the Taliban, the Haqqani Network, and armed Salafist affiliates. CIA renditions of alleged high-value detainees, detention operations at the U.S. military bases in Guantanamo and Bagram, and targeted drone strikes in areas outside the hostilities in Afghanistan only seemed to deepen questions about how to respond effectively to a violent transnational social movement that operated outside of the more traditional and territorially-bounded revolutionary movements that had been the hallmark of the Cold War era. This shift to tactics that bent the norms of international law cast a particularly long shadow over U.S.-led interventions that relied to a great extent on third party proxy forces that acted outside of or even sought to topple the constitutional order of existing regimes.

After the 2003 U.S. invasion, norms were tested by American actors in Iraq. Sean McFate and other scholars of the post-Cold War privatization of the “market for force” mark this period as the beginning of the reemergence of “neo-medievalism.”<sup>146</sup> The well-documented and controversial role of private military security contractors (PMSCs) like Blackwater in major civilian casualty incidents in Iraq raised fresh questions about accountability and command and control in an era of increasing U.S. dependence on forces outside the constitutional chain of command.

It is perhaps not coincidental that the IRGC’s Quds Force and Abu Musab al Zarqawi, bin Laden’s lieutenant in Iraq, were able to leverage local discontent with the U.S. occupation on the heels of several incidents involving American contractors. Not surprisingly, Iran also recognized an opportunity and within just three years of the 2003 U.S. incursion into Iraq, the 2006 Lebanon war renewed tension between Israel and Iran. A year later, the U.S. surge of forces in Iraq in 2007 appeared temporarily to stabilize positioning in the region but the failure to cement a status of forces agreement for American troops to remain in-country precipitated the start of a drawdown in 2009.

Around the same time, Russian anxiety over NATO expansion; the “color revolutions” in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan; and the Euro-Atlantic alliance’s involvement in the conflict in Kosovo emerged as preeminent concerns for the Kremlin.<sup>147</sup> After the Rose Revolution in Georgia elevated Mikheil Saakashvili to the presidency in 2004, clashes between the government in Tbilisi and Moscow over the status of South Ossetia began to re-escalate as Georgia deployed extra peacekeeping forces to the region. Across the Black Sea in Ukraine, anger over rigged presidential elections triggered mass protests and a recount that ultimately handed Viktor Yuschenko a victory over Viktor Yanukovich, a Kremlin favorite. The dramatic changing of the guard in two of the most strategically important territories along Russia’s border only reinforced suspicions in Vladimir Putin’s government that the United States was determined to expand its influence over the Kremlin’s traditional power base in the Black Sea region.

For Kremlinologists, as Andrew Monaghan notes, Putin’s 2007 speech at the Munich Security Conference marked an important but unexpected Russian pivot away from the cooperative attitude it had adopted in the immediate aftermath of Gorbachev’s resignation. It also provided the most decisive evidence that, in Putin’s own words, “the unipolar model is not only unacceptable but also impossible” to maintain without capitulating wholesale to the peculiar brand of American exceptionalism that emerged out of the “Global War on Terror”<sup>148</sup> Putin’s pushback against U.S. hegemony was as much a genuine reaction to perceived Western backing for popular democratic uprisings against the Kremlin’s handpicked post-Soviet successors in Georgia and Ukraine as it was a reflection of internal fears that Moscow could not contain security threats from

Islamist separatists within its own borders. The deadly 2002 Moscow theater hostage crisis and the 2004 massacre of more than 300 people following the siege of a local school in the North Ossetian town of Beslan raised serious concerns about the effectiveness of state security forces and the Kremlin's ability to suppress internal threats.<sup>149</sup>

The successive democratic revolutions during the 2004 to 2006 period that removed Kremlin-friendly regimes in the Georgian capital of Tbilisi and Ukrainian capital of Kiev were equally decisive in shifting Putin's government onto a more aggressive footing. Both countries border the Black Sea—home to a key contingent of Moscow's naval force in the Middle East and, at the peak of the Cold War, a maritime rival of the U.S. Sixth Fleet. The position of Ukraine and Georgia at the main access to Russia's only contiguous warm water port have made both central to the Kremlin's grand strategy since the time of Catherine the Great. Indeed, Moscow's ambitions to maintain access to its main path to the Mediterranean and southeasterly routes through the Suez and to the Indian Ocean meant that when tensions that had been simmering since 1992 over the breakaway region of South Ossetia finally boiled over into full-scale war between Russia and Georgia in the summer of 2008, few close watchers of the region were particularly surprised.

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### **The dramatic changing of the guard along Russia's border only reinforced suspicions in Vladimir Putin's government that the United States was determined to expand its influence over the Kremlin.**

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What was surprising and has since become one of the key case studies in the advent of cyberwarfare was Moscow's attack on news and government websites that ultimately choked off Tbilisi's ability to communicate clearly what was happening on the ground.<sup>150</sup> While state-sponsored cyberattacks between battlefield adversaries began cropping up just as the World Wide Web was beginning to mature, the series of distributed denial of service attacks (DDOS) in July 2008 on Georgian state websites and on Georgian hackers skilled at counterattacks was one of the first known instances of coordinated state military action on the ground and in cyberspace.<sup>151</sup> The Georgian campaign not only signaled Moscow's renewed confidence in its place in the great power pantheon,

it redefined Russia's strategic playbook and presaged coming clashes in other critically important theaters more central to U.S. strategic interests.

### **The Arab Spring and Today's Proxy Wars (2011–2018)**

When protests over the self-immolation of a Tunisian fruit seller erupted in December 2010, few could have predicted the chain of events that would follow. Though the Arab Spring began as popular protests that quickly spread from Tunisia to Egypt in early January 2011, the discontent quickly shifted into the register of proxy warfare.<sup>152</sup> Disruption in states within the Saudi sphere of influence led Saudi Arabia to escalate its rivalry with Iran, notably in Bahrain, where it directly intervened by sending troops across the border in March 2011 and in Yemen, where it ran an air campaign and provided support to forces on the ground with the backing of the United States and a variety of other partners against Iran-backed Houthi rebels.<sup>153</sup>

At the same time, the Arab Spring led to protests and an escalating civil war in Syria, where Iran, fearing the loss of a partner uniformly viewed as essential by its foreign policy elite, mobilized a range of proxies, including Afghan and Iraqi Shia militias as well as Hezbollah, to defend it against rebels who quickly received support from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, and later the United States and Israel.<sup>154</sup> In Libya, the United States backed a proxy warfare strategy against the Ghaddafi regime, providing air cover to rebels. After the rebels defeated and killed Ghaddafi, the country fell into a civil war between the various factions that was fueled in part by support for competing militias by Qatar and the United Arab Emirates as well as counterterrorism missions—often by proxy—by other powers, including the United States.<sup>155</sup>

The fallout from the Libyan conflict also precipitated a much more decisive break between Russia and the United States. While Russia abstained from a UN Security Council vote to establish a no-fly zone in Libya in 2011, the subsequent breakdown of order in Moscow's longtime client state and a key node in Russia's energy trading chain prompted a sharp rebuke from Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov, which accused Washington and NATO of stretching the UN mandate.<sup>156</sup> In many respects, the chaos that ensued in Libya was instructional for Moscow and paved the way for Russia's eventual intervention in Syria only four years later.

To complicate matters further, Libya, Yemen, and Syria saw the rise of powerful transnational non-state movements—most notably ISIS—fueled by the adept stitching together of local and global grievances, openings for jihadist organizing in countries stressed by revolution and proxy warfare, the challenges of ongoing economic and political globalization, and the powerful impact of the rise of social media.<sup>157</sup> Some analysts have gone as far as to argue that this phenomenon requires a reconceptualization of proxy warfare itself.<sup>158</sup>

A simple review of the news reveals the extent to which inter-state conflict expressed through proxy war roared back in the wake of the Arab Spring. Headlines refer to an increasingly heated “Israeli-Iran Cold War,” discuss how an “Iranian-Saudi Proxy Struggle Tore Apart the Middle East,” and express concern about a “Growing U.S.-Iran Proxy Fight,” and the fact that “Russia is Roaring Back” in the Middle East.<sup>159</sup>

An examination of the number of battle deaths in the Middle East reveals that the number of such deaths in the period following 2011 rivaled the peak during the late Cold War and surpassed the toll during other periods of the Cold War in the region.<sup>160</sup> According to the United Nations, there are more refugees today than at any point since the end of World War II, driven in large part by the proxy conflicts in Syria, Libya, and Yemen that followed the Arab Spring.<sup>161</sup> Far from leaving the dark days of Cold War proxy warfare behind, the Greater Middle East continues to struggle with new and complex forms of the problem.

Substantive shifts in the geopolitical landscape proved key to this dawning age of proxy warfare. One of the driving trends is the re-emergence and escalation of inter-state competition between a resurgent Russia, a rising China, and the United States, as well as the escalation of other rivalries including those between Iran and the United States, Israel and Iran, Saudi Arabia and Iran, and Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, among numerous others. To the extent that the international system is returning to bipolar or multipolar great power conflict between the United States, Russia, and China, a strategy of containment by proxy will appeal to policymakers as far less risky than the overt state use of military force and interstate war, especially where there is the possibility of a catastrophic war between nuclear powers.<sup>162</sup>

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## **Substantive shifts in the geopolitical landscape proved key to this dawning age of proxy warfare.**

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Iran has long provided support to Hamas and Hezbollah to act as proxies against Israel. In Iraq, it supports numerous militias to expand its influence,<sup>163</sup> and in Yemen, it provides ballistic missiles and drones to the Houthis.<sup>164</sup> Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States arm Syrian rebel groups, often with the support of the United States.<sup>165</sup> Meanwhile, Syria relies upon non-state backers like Hezbollah and militias to bolster its shrinking military, while these groups simultaneously receive aid from Iran.<sup>166</sup> Russia seeks to protect its interests in Syria while

keeping its own troops out of a direct role in the conflict by bolstering its support with private military contractors from the Wagner Group and other Russian PMSCs that have been pivotal in joint operations with Hezbollah and Afghan militia fighters.<sup>167</sup> The United States backed Kurdish groups to fight ISIS and Syrian rebels against Assad.<sup>168</sup> Egypt, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates battle it out for influence in Libya through their support for competing militias in the country.<sup>169</sup>

In Syria, the United States and Russia carefully deconflict operations and America has avoided striking Russian targets even when conducting direct strikes on the Syrian regime.<sup>170</sup> Yet American and Russian proxies have clashed there. For example, the United States bombed Russian private military forces, themselves a form of proxy, that attacked U.S.-backed forces in Syria, killing hundreds, according to some reports.<sup>171</sup> In responding to the bombing, Russia emphasized that “no Russian servicemen were involved,” demonstrating the role proxies play in restraining direct and open clashes between the two powers.<sup>172</sup>

The move towards proxies as a way of avoiding the costs of direct confrontation is not restricted to rivalries of great powers. According to a 2016 RAND report, Iran has adopted strategies and methods of war that intentionally fall below the United States’ threshold for direct warfare, similar to the tactics adopted by Russia and China.<sup>173</sup> Moscow’s strategic innovations are most manifest in the Black Sea region in its annexation of Crimea and in the eastern territories of Donetsk and Luhansk in Ukraine, where hundreds of Russian operatives or so-called “little green men” have helped buttress an armed rebellion against the government in Kiev.<sup>174</sup> The RAND report also points among other examples to Iran’s backing for numerous militias in Iraq. In addition, proxies are often used as a way of avoiding retaliation because their use conceals responsibility—a common explanation for the use of terrorists as proxies.<sup>175</sup>

Nor is fear of retaliation only a matter for superpowers and those locked in rivalries with them. In addition to its use of proxies against the United States, Iran has revived its proxy networks in western Afghanistan to counter Saudi and Emirati influence in South Asia and the Middle East while avoiding a direct war. Michael Knights has noted that Iran and Saudi Arabia are extremely vulnerable to one another, so they seek to avoid direct conflict while using proxies to wage war.<sup>176</sup> On the other side of the region in South Asia, Pakistan continues to use proxies to counter India’s comparative conventional military strength, a legacy policy that continued even after Pakistan developed nuclear weapons.<sup>177</sup>

Fear of retaliation is not the only trend driving a resurgence of proxy warfare. It is also influenced by a desire to avoid the steep costs of occupying territory. Proxies offer a means of extending supply lines, creating strategic depth where it might not otherwise exist, and projecting power at a discount. The United States has shown itself increasingly unwilling to respond to conflict in the Middle East with its own forces and its appetite for military operations in South Asia is clearly on



the wane following the costly occupation of Iraq and continuing engagement in Afghanistan. Andrew Mumford argues in his book *Proxy Warfare* that “the inevitable consequence of the War on Terror on the American purse (with the Iraq war alone estimated to eventually cost \$3 trillion in the midst of a global financial downturn) and on American national pride (with over 4,000 combat deaths even after President Bush proclaimed ‘mission accomplished’ in May 2003) is that the U.S. will revert to engagement in proxy warfare.”<sup>178</sup> Mumford notes that many of the United States’ proxy wars during the Cold War followed the disillusionment of the Vietnam War, when direct intervention was similarly sullied.<sup>179</sup>

In a 2016 speech summarizing his counterterrorism strategy, President Barack Obama stated, “we cannot follow the path of previous great powers who sometimes defeated themselves through over-reach,” adding that while “I have never shied away from sending men and women into danger where necessary... I’ve seen the costs.”<sup>180</sup> The impact of the Obama administration’s wariness regarding the costs of direct intervention are particularly clear in the case of Libya. In *Burning Shores*, his authoritative review of the history of Libya from the Arab Spring, Frederic Wehrey writes, “in weighing responses [to ISIS’ rise], Obama ruled out ground troops....That left the option of working with Libyan forces on the ground.”<sup>181</sup> A similar logic would shape the Obama administration’s interventions in Syria.

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## **The move towards proxies as a way of avoiding the costs of direct confrontation is not restricted to rivalries of great powers.**

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The Trump administration has shown a similar hesitancy to expand the direct U.S. footprint in the Muslim world, with Trump repeatedly calling for an end to nation-building both as a candidate and as president, citing its cost to Americans.<sup>182</sup> This tendency has been reflected in policy development, including his call for rapid withdrawal from Syria and efforts to mobilize an Arab force to take over in the country.<sup>183</sup> The administration even considered, although seemingly eventually rejected, outsourcing U.S. military action in Afghanistan to private military contractors.<sup>184</sup> The fact that this idea could be seriously entertained builds on the significantly increased role of contractors at every level in the post-9/11 wars, as well as a clear interest among many global players for developing new modes of projecting force while avoiding the responsibilities,

costs, accountability, and related issues associated with formal state military action.

The United States is not the only actor to seek to avoid the costs and risks of occupation and direct governance through the use of proxies. Iran adopted a strategy of influencing Iraqi politics through multiple proxies rather than supporting a single one in part because it sought to maintain long-term influence rather than seeking to dictate specific policy outcomes.<sup>185</sup> Similar ambiguity has obtained in the Persian Gulf and Levant, where Iran's backing of popular militia forces in Iraq, Houthi rebels in Yemen, and support to Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria has precipitated sharp responses from Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey.

Russia, for its part, has rushed to shore up one-time client state regimes in Syria and Libya, deploying Chechen task forces and private military security contractors in line with long-held strategic visions of using private forces to extend power where it would otherwise be difficult to do so.<sup>186</sup> This dynamic was visible in the Black Sea region and Ukraine where Moscow's use of "little green men" has helped keep action under the United States' threshold for war and achieve plausible deniability.<sup>187</sup> In South Asia, more recently, debates have cropped up about the degree to which Russia is funneling support to the Taliban. Several American military officials have suggested that Moscow has funneled weapons to Taliban contingents but proof has been scant and it is unclear whether such a move is predicated more on a desire to see the U.S. exit the region altogether or rather is simply meant to ensure that Moscow has a seat at the table when it comes to shaping a region it has long considered part of its near abroad.

### **Strategic Innovation and Proxy Proliferation**

Russian involvement in Syria and Ukraine, and suspected interference in U.S. elections, has prompted a spate of commentary on the emergence of a "New Cold War," or "Cold War 2.0," but little in the way of serious analysis that breaks beyond the confines of past paradigms.<sup>188</sup> The few policymakers in Washington's interagency national security apparatus familiar with these trends often frame much of their analysis in terms of the U.S. experience of proxy warfare during the Cold War. As Michael Innes suggests in his edited volume *Making Sense of Proxy Wars*, "the use and role of armed proxies have featured only sporadically as a serious subject of either academic or public inquiry" since the end of the Cold War. Innes adds, "In that Cold War formulation, proxies were little more than third-party tools of statecraft without any agency, intent, or indeed interest visibly separable from those of a well-resourced state sponsor."<sup>189</sup> Little consideration has been given to the anti-colonialist drives for independence and self-determination and the political and military modernization processes that have shaped so many of the conflicts that have shaped the Greater Middle East and its periphery.

An understanding of proxy war based on Cold War models fails to capture the strategic innovations since the Soviet collapse that have dramatically altered the character of armed conflict and the nature of proxy warfare. Proxies today operate with much greater flexibility and autonomy and are able to exploit deeper connections because of more integrated supply chains supported by a wide range of networks in the private and public sector. Several key factors distinguish today's proxy wars from those of the past, limiting the ability of prior analysis to shed light on today's conflicts.

Perhaps the most obvious limiting factor is the shift in the international system away from bipolarity. During the Cold War, the superpowers often intervened to restrain their client states from escalating conflicts. For example, the superpowers sought, often successfully, to restrain the reach of the Arab-Israeli conflict.<sup>190</sup> Today, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States has struggled to establish a stable security system in the Middle East, as multiple states, empowered by globalization and technological advancements—whether Iran, the Gulf States, Saudi Arabia, or Turkey—compete with each other often via proxy warfare.

Compounding this dynamic is that during the Cold War, warfare, including proxy warfare, was primarily state-centric. Where states with highly centralized militaries once predominated as the principal sponsors of proxies and were able to exert tighter (though admittedly less than complete) control over supply chains, the new and emergent political economy of conflict has empowered proxies themselves to develop their own proxies. The spread of advanced weapons and communications systems that enable more effective and cost-efficient long-range targeting and new forms of security operations; the rise of private security companies; innovations in finance and energy production; and the democratization of information technologies have not only seen non-state actors take pride of place in the strategies of rival states, but also become drivers of strategy themselves.

There is a major gap in the literature on the role of the globalized and tightly interconnected international financial system. As seen from the release of the Panama Papers, banking secrecy, the rise of offshore banking, and tax havens have had a real impact on the growth of complex networks of proxies.<sup>191</sup> In one of the few book-length accounts of this phenomenon, former Harvard scholar Brooke Harrington has documented the rising importance of wealth managers and their connections to the wide network of offshore banks in supporting the easy transfer of licit and illicit funds to today's many conflict entrepreneurs.<sup>192</sup>

A case in point is Rami Makhoul, a close associate and cousin of Bashar al-Assad, who has reportedly used shell companies in the Caribbean to perform an end run around U.S. and European Union sanctions on supporters of Assad's regime.<sup>193</sup> A longtime client of Mossack Fonseca & Co., Makhoul reportedly

tucked away millions in offshore tax havens and used the international financial system to help fund Syria's pro-government so-called "Shabiha" militias.<sup>194</sup> Similarly, the proxy warfare in South Asia has long been facilitated in part by innovations in international banking and financial arbitrage, as noted by the UN's 1267 Sanctions Monitoring Team. The team has long called for more comprehensive sanctions on non-state actors who facilitate funds transfers to the Taliban, Haqqani Network, and al-Qaeda in South Asia.<sup>195</sup>

In contemporary proxy warfare, newly empowered non-state actors are both principals *and* agents, marketing their comparative advantage over direct intervention to potential sponsors and sponsoring groups themselves. Daniel Byman and Sarah E. Kreps examine this dynamic by applying principal-agent analysis to state-sponsored terrorism, writing:

Different individuals, groups, and firms have different areas of expertise that make it more efficient for them to undertake an activity than for one group to do everything. A principal might seek to delegate to an agent who has a comparative advantage in a particular skill.<sup>196</sup>

Byman and Kreps argue that "Lebanese Hizballah, for example, has evolved a specialized set of terrorist capabilities, [and] the group has its own training sites in the Bekaa Valley of Lebanon where several Palestinian groups have received training, a well-run and widely viewed television channel (Al-Manar), and a proven record of tactical effectiveness" that it offers to supporters.<sup>197</sup>

In the past, this may have been a footnote within the broader incentive structure of proxy warfare. Today, potential proxies are actively seeking to implant themselves within conflicts. Hezbollah, while acting in part as a surrogate of Iran, has placed itself at the center of a large network of non-state groups engaged in conflict across the Middle East, providing training to the Houthis in Yemen and support to pro-regime forces in Syria.<sup>198</sup> Many of these groups have revolutionary or apocalyptic ideologies that hardly fit the vision of proxy warfare as the "great game" of old, with great powers moving proxies like chess pieces around the global map. For example, Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Nathaniel Barr have argued that al-Qaeda adopted a strategy of rebranding as a bulwark against Iranian influence in part as a way of seeking Arab state support.<sup>199</sup> As the 9/11 attacks showed, allowing al-Qaeda and similar groups to grow within the context of a broader proxy war is an immensely dangerous proposition. And the al-Qaeda of the 1990s did not have armed drones, cyberwarfare capabilities, or the global reach of today's terrorist propaganda machines.

To further complicate matters, today's terrorist organizations have woven their own networks of proxies. Hezbollah, as discussed above, is a case in point. Similarly, while the Islamic State engaged in direct conventional warfare with the predictable result of the destruction of its quasi-state, al-Qaeda worked through

front groups and coalitions rather than engaging in direct efforts to seize territory and exercise governance itself, as Gartenstein-Ross has written, along with others.<sup>200</sup> This strategy echoes al-Qaeda's origins as an organization based around providing training and financing to independent groups and individuals—in essence, a proxy strategy of terrorism.

The rising power of non-state actors and globalization has helped connect conflicts that previously were largely isolated from each other. Global and regional trends identified by Idean Salehyan and others as influencing the supply side of external support for proxies, including the existence of transnational constituencies, suggest that proxy warfare will be even more common in the future.<sup>201</sup> According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees,<sup>202</sup> the world is facing its largest refugee crisis in history, surpassing the number of displaced persons following World War II; one out of every 113 people on Earth has been displaced. As Salehyan notes, the presence of refugee flows from civil conflict increases the probability of international conflict.<sup>203</sup> At the same time, in his book *Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identity in Civil Conflicts*, David Malet finds that foreign fighters are increasingly appearing in conflicts, and that this growth in transnational mobilization is not merely a product of ethnic ties.<sup>204</sup> ISIS drew tens of thousands of foreign fighters to Syria from around the globe, deftly tying local grievances into its larger global narrative.<sup>205</sup>

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## **The rising power of non-state actors and globalization has helped connect conflicts that previously were largely isolated from each other.**

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Further complicating the situation is the acceleration of technological development, wider availability of dual-use technologies, and technical know-how and its diffusion across borders. During the 1990s and early 2000s, concern about potential migration of Russian scientists looking to earn higher salaries by serving in WMD programs in states like North Korea, Syria, and Iran prompted the United States to spend millions on grant programs designed to keep Russian scientists at home. While those programs proved fairly effective, at least one major study suggested that the temptation to work for so-called rogue states has not been entirely extinguished.<sup>206</sup>

Long- and mid-range missiles have always been a trigger for conflict, as illustrated by the Cuban missile crisis. The establishment of the Missile

Technology Control Regime in 1987 was meant to mitigate risks associated with the proliferation of technical know-how and loose import-export regimes by establishing clear standards for the export of missiles and supporting materials and technologies for missile production and maintenance. With some 35 member states, the regime has been credited with shutting down wholesale transfers of missiles to states with the purported intent to develop nuclear, chemical, and/or biological weapons capabilities. But participation is voluntary and a number of countries that are either endowed with WMD capabilities or harbor such ambitions—such as China, Pakistan, Syria, and Iran—remain outside the regime.<sup>207</sup>

While the export control regime is credited with slowing access to weapons for states like Libya, poor reporting routines and information-sharing mechanisms about the export of restricted technologies has blunted the MTCR's effectiveness. The advancement of missile technology and its proliferation in the Greater Middle East has helped escalate conflict and bring rivals who were previously separated by large distances closer to conflict. For example, the Iranian-Israeli clash was not only driven by increasing Iranian support for Hezbollah and Palestinian groups but also the growth of its ballistic missile and nuclear programs during the 1990s and its transfer of advance rocket and missile technology to its proxies.<sup>208</sup> The impact of the diffusion of standoff weapons became particularly clear during the 2006 Lebanon War, when Israel fought a Hezbollah which had benefitted from such weapons and training on them from Iran.<sup>209</sup> Today, fear of the proliferation of powerful weaponry has motivated an aggressive campaign of Israeli air strikes against Iranian-backed groups in Syria that has brought it into tension with Russia.

Escalatory pressures are likely to increase as technological development accelerates, remote targeting capabilities proliferate, and new developments in areas like cyberwarfare and artificial intelligence allow weaker states, armed actors, and other conflict entrepreneurs to advance their strategic aims from further and further away. Long supply chains, poor controls, new forms of financial liquidity such as cryptocurrency, increased human migration flows, and the wide availability of information on the internet all combine to expand the range of conflict stakeholders who can support and sustain proxies. Today, a complex mesh of states, corporations, armed groups, and wealthy individuals increases the likelihood that conflict will only become more entrenched in the Greater Middle East and its periphery. Continuing to rely upon Cold War understandings of proxy warfare to address this increasingly complex environment is likely to produce analytical failure and increase the likelihood of strategic surprise.

## Conclusion

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the subsequent shifts in the military balance, technological advances, and integration of the global marketplace catalyzed a paradigm shift international security. In the 20-year run up to the Arab Spring in 2011, post-Cold War technological advances in computer and satellite technology and transformations in global finance and the world's energy economy have closed the once-wide gap in the military capabilities of former U.S. and Soviet client states.<sup>210</sup>

Iran, Turkey, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf States have progressively matured their capacity to deploy proxy strategies of their own. Iran, in particular, stands out as a regional power whose creative use of conventional and irregular forces, as well as soft power, has dramatically reshaped the military balance in the region.<sup>211</sup> This would suggest that former client states have successfully leveraged material gains in the military and economic sphere to advance their strategic interests with greater autonomy.

Yet mounting numbers of displaced citizens, civilian casualties, and collateral damage in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya reinforce the notion that technological preponderance is a poor strategic substitute for innovations in force employment such as doctrine, morale, and leadership.<sup>212</sup> As witnessed in the case of U.S. support to local forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, Washington's national security establishment has struggled mightily to reconcile and integrate these less quantifiable factors into a grand strategy defined "by, with, and through" partnered operations.

While all eyes have been on Iran's backing of Bashar al-Assad's regime and Hezbollah, scant research has been conducted on Tehran's motives for reviving decades-old links to Afghan militias for deployment to the Syrian front. Russia's political and material support to Damascus is well known but precious little is known about the dozen or so Russian private military companies operating in Syria and advancing Moscow's regional interests in Libya, Sudan, Algeria, and Egypt. Qatar's support of Islamist militias in Libya is widely acknowledged, but the details of its support and the UAE's efforts against its Gulf Cooperation Council rival remain understudied. These examples represent only a sliver of the current known unknowns about proxy conflicts.

Limitations in the existing literature can be attributed, in part, to a problematic formulation of the nation-state that has bedeviled the best attempts to analyze sponsor-proxy relations. For the better part of 70 years, the Westphalian nation-state has served as the analytical cornerstone of strategic studies.<sup>213</sup> The forward march of modernization and the catalyzing force of war have been the presumptive twin engines of the international order that emerged out of the Industrial Revolution, as analyzed by scholars from Samuel Huntington and John

Lewis Gaddis to Francis Fukuyama. Yet history has not ended, and while partisans of the clash of civilizations remain strong in number and powerfully influential, their analysis should be measured against recent reassessments of the history of the Cold War.

Moreover, there has been little accounting in the dominant discourse on the global convulsions wrought by the decades of post-WWII wars for independence and state-building across parts of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East.<sup>214</sup> From Tunisia to Libya to Egypt and beyond, the disintegration of the colonial order has pitted kleptocratic governments against millions of their citizens for years, as Diane Davis and Anthony Perreira note.<sup>215</sup> With the exception of Sarah Chayes and Vanda Felbab-Brown et al.'s scholarly contributions,<sup>216</sup> current analysis largely fails to make the connection between today's intra-state wars, corruption, and the reliance on irregular forces and predatory elites to both buttress the domestic status quo on the cheap and bolster regional positioning vis-à-vis rivals.

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Blowback from these factors is real and quantifiable. The rise of Salafist extremism across the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia is linked to a certain lack of foresight by the United States and other states after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan.<sup>217</sup> In some ways, it would seem the rise of al-Qaeda and ISIS presaged the wave of populist and nationalist politics that have more recently begun to reconfigure Europe, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Recent developments suggest that the elite bargain between citizens and their governments is fragile at best and has all but upended the Westphalian order. In fact, if, as Davis and Perreira suggest,<sup>218</sup> these developments imperil the very idea of citizenship, it is also safe to say that the nation-state qua nation-state may no longer be the most viable vehicle for understanding conflict and international security in a highly networked world.<sup>219</sup>

Yet at the same time the conflict between Russia and the United States is once again coming to the fore. Washington's push for regime change in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya occurred nearly concurrent to Russia's resurgence. Moscow has



redrawn the map of Ukraine and reinforced divisions in the Middle East with its assistance to the Syrian government. Whatever the outcome of the FBI inquiry into Kremlin interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, there is solid bipartisan agreement in Congress that the Obama era “reset” of relations with Russia was stillborn, not least because of the ahistoricism and failure of imagination that grounded many of its assumptions. The jury is out on whether the Trump administration’s revamping of U.S. national security strategy vis-à-vis Russia and other rivals such as China, Iran, or North Korea will fall victim to the same pitfalls.

These insights open a range of questions about how to respond to the complex dynamics driving today’s proxy wars. Across the board, proxy warfare is generally conceptualized as strategy in which one party encourages or uses another party to engage in warfare for its own strategic ends. At the crux of proxy warfare—in its many definitions—is the existence of a principal-agent relationship in the context of war. The value of using such broad definitions focused upon war via indirect means is that commonalities can emerge between various types of conflicts and across historical periods based on their common principal-agent problems. However, adopting a definition focused on legal structure and authorities helps clarify today’s particular proxy warfare challenge.

## Notes

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