

# Outsourcing warfare: proxy forces in contemporary armed conflicts

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## Abstract

*The aim of this article is to provide a comprehensive examination of the different types of armed non-state proxy groups. It discusses their characteristics and sponsorship and how they are employed by states in pursuit of their security and foreign policy objectives. The article also analyses the reasons for the recent increase in the use of proxy forces, including the benefits and risks for states that employ them, as well as the broader impact of proxy forces on the international security environment, including great power competition. Data was collected and analysed from a wide range of secondary source documents. A descriptive, qualitative research methodology was applied to print and on-line publications available from governmental, institutional and academic sources. This involved literature reviews and case studies to provide an in-depth understanding of current thinking on the topic, while also identifying potential areas for further research. The article provides a comprehensive, qualitative analysis of the existing literature and case studies on the topic of proxy forces, which due to the research methodology applied, also relies on the researcher's judgement, choices and assumptions. Proxy wars will remain the norm for the foreseeable future. Two strategic developments drive this conclusion. Firstly, there is the renewal of great power competition for influence, resources and security, and secondly, the imperative for states to achieve these objectives without employing their military forces in a manner that could cause a major war.*

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## Keywords:

Iran, United States, Russia, proxy forces, great power competition

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## Introduction: proxy wars and proxy forces

The use of proxy actors in warfare is not a new phenomenon. They have been an instrument of foreign policy and a feature of inter-state competition through the ages. Powerful states have frequently backed rebel groups operating on an opponent's territory or used militias and mercenaries to support a client state in an internal conflict, while seeking to avoid direct involvement. Proxy warfare was prevalent during the Cold War as the United States (US) and the Soviet Union sought to pursue their rivalry without risking a military confrontation that could lead to nuclear war. The Soviet Union supported anti-colonial and revolutionary movements opposed to the West, while the US backed anti-communist leaders and counter-revolutionaries. The use of proxy forces has again increased in the twenty-first century as states with a stake in an internal conflict seek to use military force indirectly in order to minimise the political and financial costs and risks of involvement. The tendency to outsource warfare to non-state agencies seems set to continue, as contemporary conflicts in the Middle East, Africa and Ukraine illustrate.

The 2018 US National Defence Strategy emphasised great power competition as the primary national security concern (Department of Defense, 2018). The main objective of the US armed forces is now to prepare for hi-intensity warfare against near-peer competitors rather than engage in the irregular wars that have been their priority for the last two decades. However, irregular or hybrid wars will continue, involving nation states as well as non-state actors. A traditional war between the great powers would pose huge military, political and financial risks for the states involved and cause unimaginable destruction even without the use of nuclear weapons. Therefore, as great power armed conflict remains less likely than intense great power competition, the US and other major powers will not be able to ignore civil conflicts, insurgencies, and proxy wars. These confrontations will provide opportunities and challenges for rival powers just as they did during the Cold War. Rather than the direct use of military force, competing states will likely operate in the so-called grey zone between peace and war, employing information and cyber warfare, covert special forces' operations, and, of course, proxy forces to achieve their objectives while seeking to stay below the threshold of activities that might trigger a conventional military response.

In the last decade there has been a growing reluctance by major powers to put "boots on the ground". Large scale ground force operations have been replaced by what Paul Rogers calls "war by remote control", involving the use of stand-off weapons, special forces, local militias and Private Military Companies (PMCs) (Rogers, 2016, p. 160). In this respect, the current civil war in Libya has been described as a possible "testing ground for how wars will be fought in the future" (Vest and Clarke, 2020). Libya certainly illustrates the complexity of contemporary proxy wars and demonstrates how the Cold War era, unilateral sponsorship of chosen proxies has largely been replaced by what has been termed "coalition proxy warfare" (Mumford, 2013a, p. 45). A number of states currently provide military support to the combatants in Libya, while typically denying their involvement in the fighting. Russia is the main military backer of the rebel Libyan National Army (LNA) while Turkey has emerged as the military provider for the Government of National Accord's (GNA) forces. GNA and LNA ground operations have been assisted by foreign sponsor military drone and air strikes, advanced air defence systems and, especially in the case of the LNA, social media campaigns directed by its state backers Russia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia. Another feature of the war is the deployment of thousands of Syrian and Sudanese mercenaries, reflecting a growing trend to exploit stateless or displaced populations to supply soldiers for proxy wars (Vest and Clarke, 2020; England, 2020).

It is not surprising that analysts acknowledge the difficulty of defining the term "proxy" in the current, complicated geo-strategic environment (Sterman, 2019; Rauta *et al.*, 2019,

pp. 416–420). Andrew Mumford provides a broad definition that covers traditional proxy warfare involving intervention by a foreign power: “conflicts in which a third party intervenes indirectly in order to influence the strategic outcome in favour of its preferred faction” (Mumford, 2013, p. 40). Geraint Hughes offers a more specifically military definition, which most closely matches the approach taken in this article: “(armed conflicts) ...in which belligerents use third parties as either a supplementary means of waging war, or as a substitute for the direct employment of their own armies” (Hughes, 2012, p. 2). Andreas Krieg and Jean-Marc Rickli have introduced the term “surrogate warfare” (Krieg and Rickli, 2018, p. 115) to capture the greater complexity of contemporary proxy warfare, which they argue involves technical as well as human proxies, including unmanned combat systems and cyber warfare.

Non-state proxy armed forces are most commonly identified as irregular military organisations that act wholly or partially on behalf of a foreign government in an internal armed conflict. They include militias, insurgents and “terrorists”. PMCs, on the other hand, are a separate category. They are ostensibly private military provider companies which, in this context, operate as state proxy forces. Pro-government militias (PGMs) represent a third type of proxy force that emerges when a government confronted by an insurgency co-opts local tribal, ethnic-based militias or anti-rebel terrorist groups. Contemporary PGMs are also often created or manipulated by outside powers. Daniel Byman makes a useful distinction in this context between what he describes as an “alliance” relationship, when a state makes a significant, direct and open military contribution in support of another government, as the US has done in Afghanistan, and a “proxy” relationship where an external state’s involvement is indirect. In the latter case, assistance might include weapons, financing, military advisers, and support for PGMs, but rarely involves an overt military deployment (Byman, 2018).

This article examines the characteristics of the different non-state armed, proxy groups and their sponsors, analyses the reasons for the recent increase in their use, the benefits and risks of employing proxy forces in contemporary armed conflicts and their impact on broader international security challenges, including great power competition. Data has been collected and analysed from a wide range of secondary source documents. A descriptive, qualitative research methodology was applied to print and on-line publications available from governmental, institutional and academic sources. This involved literature reviews and case studies to provide an in-depth understanding of current thinking on the topic, while also highlighting potential areas for further research.

The term proxy forces is used here to cover the categories of non-state armed actors discussed below, namely militias/insurgents, PMCs and PGMs. To date, few scholars have created typologies for contemporary proxy forces. Vladimir Rauta is a notable exception. He has produced a typology of armed non-state actors in what he describes as “hybrid warfare”, classifying these groups into four categories, “proxy” “auxiliary”, “surrogate” and “affiliated” forces. Rauta’s typology differs from that used here but, like the author of this article, he does not claim his categories are definitive. He also calls for further research into this complex and rapidly evolving topic (Rauta, 2019).

## **Proxy Armies – militias, insurgents and “terrorists”**

Writing about future US strategic policy before the current upsurge in the use of proxy forces, Philip Bobbitt predicted that local proxy armies would in future offer an economical alternative to expensive state armed forces as well as reduce the risk to American lives (Bobbitt, 2002, p. 331). He envisaged local proxies engaging in ground combat under US strategic direction backed up by air power, special forces, and intelli-

gence assets. Essentially, this is the approach that the US took with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), especially the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) which was the main proxy force that led ground operations against Daesh in Syria from 2016. This relationship has been described semi-officially as “by, with and through”, led *by* the proxy force, *with* enabling support from US forces and *through* agreements between US authorities and their partners (Robinson, 2017). Earlier attempts in 2014–15 to train and equip Syrian rebels to fight Daesh were ineffectual, not least because the Obama administration's cautious approach to deeper US military involvement in the Middle East meant that many restrictions were placed on the programme (Ryan, 2019). Support for the YPG has also helped the US to mitigate the influence of Iran and Russia in the region, although this relationship has not been without controversy because the YPG is regarded as a terrorist group linked to the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) by America's NATO ally, Turkey (Hasan, 2018). The US has also employed more shadowy proxy forces operated by the CIA's Special Activities Center. For example, since 2001, a branch of the CIA's paramilitary arm known as Ground Branch has trained and supported local militias in Afghanistan for covert counter terrorism operations, often outside of Afghan government control (Gibbons-Neff *et al.*, 2019).

Proxy forces are not just exploited by great powers. As well as backing the LNA in Libya, the UAE has partnered with the Southern Transitional Council (STC), a secessionist movement in Yemen that shares the UAE's common opposition to Salafi-jihadist groups (Rauta *et al.*, 2019, p. 423). As a small and affluent state, but lacking military power projection capabilities, the UAE has supported the STC with money and material along with some Emirati military advisers on the ground. In Libya and Yemen, the UAE views support for proxy forces as a means of gaining influence that it would not otherwise be able to exert.

Iran provides the most interesting and complex example of a contemporary proxy force sponsor. Compared with its enemies, Iran is relatively weak in conventional military terms. Therefore, it has made surrogacy the key to its defence and deterrence posture. Through the use of its elite Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to recruit, train and advise proxy militias, it has built a network of ideologically committed non-state allies to support its revolutionary agenda and provide a so called “resistance axis” against Israel, Saudi Arabia and hostile Western powers (McInnis, 2016). Estimates suggest that by 2016, Iran had more than a quarter of a million personnel in its proxy forces, including groups with recruits from Afghanistan and Pakistan as well as the Middle East (McInnis, 2016, Levitt, 2020, p. 4). Like the US, Iran uses special forces' operatives to train and advise its proxies and provides intelligence and logistical support to assist their operations. But the Islamic Republic's commitment towards its proxies goes much further. Iran has deployed thousands of troops to supplement hard pressed proxies on the ground in Syria, demonstrating the importance to Iran of the Assad regime's survival and, consequently, its greater willingness to get directly involved in the fighting.

In the Middle East, Iran has maintained proxy relationships with militant groups in Lebanon and the Palestinian Territories dating back to the 1980s. It backed Shia militias in Iraq after the US invasion in 2003 and more recently has extended its influence through militias raised to fight Daesh. The most prominent Iranian sponsored proxy militia in Iraq is Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH). KH is virulently anti-American and jihadist in ideology and has operated on behalf of the IRGC's Quds force in Iraq and Syria since 2006 (Counter Extremism Project, 2020a). In Syria, Iran has raised militias and directed both Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) and proxy fighters from Iraq and Afghanistan to support the Assad regime in the ongoing civil war. LH is Iran's most significant, powerful and long-standing proxy force. As “proxy” often implies a temporary relationship, Vladimir Rauta argues that LH has the status of an Iranian ally, having “long outgrown its proxy status”

(Rauta, 2020, p. 45). LH has been the principal player in Iran's confrontation with Israel and, after 2012, took the leading role on Iran's behalf in fighting against rebel forces in Syria. LH also raised and trained its own pro-regime militias in Syria, such as Quwat al-Ridha, an apparently novel situation where a non-state actor rather than a state has sponsored proxy forces (Jahanbani, 2020).

## Proxy armies – private military companies

A PMC is an enterprise organised along corporate lines that is formally contracted to provide military services. Most private companies that work with the armed forces restrict their activities to training and support functions, but a true PMC delivers direct combat services. The media and some lawyers routinely refer to these PMCs as “mercenaries”, although the legal status of private companies, as opposed to individuals who take part in foreign wars, remains ambiguous. All major powers now employ private contractors to provide critical combat support and combat service support to state military forces. PMCs also perform peacekeeping tasks for the UN and non-governmental organisations. However, western states have not accepted direct combat operations as a legitimate role for PMCs. In 2017, the founder of the PMC Academi, formerly known as Blackwater, proposed that the US government hire the organisation to take the lead in the fight against the Taliban in Afghanistan. The proposal was firmly rejected by the US administration (Pfaff and Miene, 2019). The use of PMCs as proxy combat forces is proscribed in the Montreux Document (ICRC, 2009). More than fifty states have signed this agreement, which established guidelines for PMCs, stressed the defensive role of these companies and their obligations under international humanitarian law. Major PMCs also instituted their own code of conduct to provide ethical and legal accountability for their clients.

China was an original signatory of The Montreux Document and its approach to PMCs is broadly similar to that of Western states, although the government's emphasis on political loyalty has inhibited the growth of China's private security industry (Ghiselli, 2020). There are a number of domestic and foreign private security companies that provide protection for Chinese personnel and assets abroad, but there is no equivalent of Russia's Wagner Group or a “Chinese Blackwater”. However, China employs a proxy maritime militia that is ultimately controlled by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy to enforce its territorial claims over islands in the South China Sea (Green *et al.*, 2017, p. 11; Poling, 2019). These militias masquerade as civilian fishing vessels to provide the Chinese government with plausible deniability in the event of clashes with other states' ships in the region. The “fishing vessels” are supported by the Chinese Coast Guard and, if necessary, the navy to provide additional coercion when necessary. One of these militias, the Tanmen Maritime Militia, has even been described as China's “little blue men” for its role in grey zone operations in the Pacific (Green *et al.*, 2017, p. 11).

Russia does not subscribe to the international PMC regulatory regime and, unlike other powers, employs PMCs offensively in direct combat as proxy forces. Operating alongside the Russian army, special forces or local militias, PMCs are well-suited to Russia's hybrid approach to contemporary warfare (Spearin, 2018, p. 67). The Vostok Battalion was Russia's first modern PMC. Formed during the second Chechnya war, it fought as a proxy force adjunct to Russian forces in South Ossetia during the 2008 invasion of Georgia and played a significant operational role in eastern Ukraine in 2014 (Bristow, 2019, pp. 6–7). However, the Wagner Group is by far Russia's most prominent PMC. Despite ostensible independence from the state, the Wagner Group maintains close links with Russian military intelligence services and was led in Ukraine by Dmitry Utkin, a retired senior officer from the Russian special forces. Wagner's

training bases are on Russian soil and its leaders have even received state gallantry awards (Marten, 2019, pp. 192, 199). The Wagner Group first came to prominence operating alongside covert special forces in Crimea. It also fought in eastern Ukraine in 2014–15 in support of pro-Russian separatists. Wagner deployed over 2,000 troops in Syria organised into brigades, structured and commanded similarly to the Russian Army. The group was used in direct combat in lieu of Russian troops, notably in the battle for Palmyra in March 2016.

The Wagner Group received unwelcome global publicity when, along with Syrian militias, it attacked a US-supported, Kurdish-controlled military base at Deir el-Zour in 2018. US retaliatory airstrikes caused hundreds of casualties. The Russian high command denied involvement or any responsibility for the fighters, although the Kremlin was aware of the attack and wounded Wagner fighters were evacuated on Russian military aircraft to Russian military hospitals (Marten, 2019, pp. 194–195). The Deir el-Zour battle illustrates the complicated nature of the Russian state's relationship with PMCs, an association that Mark Galeotti and other analysts describe as an illustration of Russia as a “hybrid state”, where public and private, military and civilian, legal and illegal all interact under Putin's patrimonial rule (Galeotti, 2016). Wagner's director, Yevgeny Prigozhin, is a prominent oligarch who is an associate of Putin. He has developed a portfolio of enterprises, which generate profits like other oligarch-owned Russian businesses, but serve the interests of the state when required.

The Wagner Group has expanded its area of operations since 2018. Wagner and affiliates provide military, security and training services in the Central African Republic (CAR), Burundi and Sudan. Wagner has taken a lead in combat operations in Libya in support of the LNA, an intervention that has stretched the Russian government's claims of non-involvement to the limit (US News, 2020). Wagner's intervention in resource rich countries illustrates the mix of private and state interests that categorize the PMC's activities. For example, a Russian has been appointed as the CAR president's national security advisor, while Wagner has reportedly become involved in the CAR's mining industry (Stronski, 2020). PMC operations provide Russia with political and economic influence in client states, confounding Western interests by protecting authoritarian and repressive regimes, such as those in the CAR, Nicaragua and Venezuela. Although outside the scope of this study, it is also worth highlighting that Russian PMCs are involved in cyber operations, subversion and disinformation operations against Western states and Ukraine (Klein, 2019, p. 5). Prigozhin funds the Internet Research Agency in St. Petersburg, known as the “troll factory”, which amongst other activities, sought to influence the outcome of the US presidential election in 2016. Wagner and affiliates also conduct disinformation campaigns in Africa on behalf of client governments through local media. Hackers and trolls are becoming a new form of contemporary proxy force. The Russian Federation is not alone in this. Many other states and some non-state actors now employ this form of non-kinetic warfare in their competition with adversaries.

Turkey's SADAT Inc, a PMC founded in 2012, combines elements of the IRGC and the Wagner Group. SADAT offers international training and consultancy services, particularly to Muslim states. Like Iran's IRGC, it is loyal to the governing regime and its Islamist ideology and was described by one commentator as “Erdogan's private praetorian guard” (Jacinto, 2017). SADAT's founder, retired General Adnan Tanriverdi, is a close associate of President Erdogan and known for his Salafist and anti-Western views (Jacinto, 2017; Spyer, 2018). SADAT has been heavily involved in training Sunni rebels in Syria, including jihadists in the Free Syrian Army. Recently, SADAT has reportedly supplied thousands of Turkish-backed Syrian and other foreign mercenaries for the GNA in Libya

(Ersozoglul, 2020). It is not clear whether SADAT personnel engage in direct combat, but they have certainly trained fighters and supplied military equipment to the GNA. Like the Wagner Group, SADAT is emerging as a potent proxy force, in this case, to support Turkish strategic and economic interests and extend its sphere of influence.

## Proxy armies – pro-government militias

PGMs are a perennial feature of domestic counter terrorism campaigns. Such PGMs, sometimes referred to as “pseudo gangs”, are violent groups that support the status quo in a civil conflict. As a result, they can attract unacknowledged backing from within state security services to commit illegal acts of violence against the government’s enemies. During the campaign in Northern Ireland, elements within the British security forces are known to have colluded with loyalist para-military groups responsible for a number of extra-judicial killings of individuals with ties to the Irish republican movement (Cadwallader, 2013). In the 1980s, Spanish right wing Grupos Antiterroristas de Liberación (GAL) conducted attacks against members of the ETA terrorist group, but also Basque nationalist politicians and their supporters. GAL was backed by reactionary police officers and some senior politicians (Woodworth, 2003). In the 1970s – 1990s, Colombia witnessed a number of right wing paramilitary groups that were aligned with elements within the government and security forces. These paramilitaries committed numerous atrocities against civilians suspected of supporting leftist guerrillas (Hanson, 2008). The use of what are essentially pro-government terrorist groups may bring short-term tactical benefits to governments engaged in counter terrorism campaigns but, as was the case with the examples cited above, the illegal activities and atrocities committed by such groups can weaken a government’s legitimacy, undermine the rule of law and complicate disarmament and demobilisation programmes.

Huseyn Aliyev makes a distinction between so called “state manipulated” groups, such as those discussed above, and what he refers to as “state-parallel” PGMs (Aliyev, 2016, pp. 500–506). The latter result from state weakness when the scale of insurgent activity overwhelms poorly trained and equipped armed forces and drives governments to rely on proxy militias for internal defence. In recent years, countries such as Ukraine, Iraq, Syria and Nigeria have embraced “state-parallel” PGMs and abandoned any attempt to strictly retain the state’s monopoly of violence. Nigeria, for example, has sanctioned a number of militias as it struggles to battle Daesh’s West African affiliate and Boko Haram. The so-called Civilian Joint Task Force is the largest militia organisation. Others include the Arab Shewu militias, the Vigilante Group of Nigeria and various hunters’ associations (Felbab-Brown, 2020). These militias have no formal legal authority, but are recognised as the main security agencies in many communities. Unfortunately, like many PGMs elsewhere, they face little or no accountability for their actions and sometimes engage in human rights abuses and criminal activities that ultimately undermine trust in the national government.

PGMs have been essential to combat major insurgencies in Iraq and Ukraine. After Daesh’s rapid advance in Iraq in 2014 and the collapse of Iraqi army units, Shia militias, known collectively as Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF), emerged to lead the resistance and roll back Daesh’s gains. These Shia paramilitary forces were established by the Iraqi Ministry of the Interior and are theoretically subject to the same legal frameworks and regulations as the country’s security forces. In practice, the majority are outside the government’s direct control (Aliyev, 2016, p. 504). Leading militia, Kata’ib Hezbollah, for example, is closely allied with both LH and the IRGC (Counter Extremism Project, 2020b).

Ukraine’s weak armed forces also suffered early defeats in 2014, in this case against Russian-backed separatists in Eastern Ukraine. In response, the government and local oli-

garchs established paramilitary formations to support the army and the National Guard. By 2016, there were over forty of these volunteer battalions. Like the PMF in Iraq, Ukraine's PGMs acquired military strength comparable to the regular army, representation in government and considerable popular legitimacy (Aliyev, 2016, p. 505).

PGMs are also supported or created by foreign powers that back the government's side in a civil war. In Syria's case, Iran, Russia, Iraq and LH have all supplied PGMs with weapons, finance, training and, when necessary, direct combat support. As the weaknesses of the Syrian Arab Army became increasingly apparent, President Assad established the National Defence Force (NDF), a PGM largely recruited from his co-ethnic Alawite minority (Hughes, 2016, p. 197; Abbs *et al.*, 2020, p. 910). However, the IRGC and LH were involved from early in the conflict, training and organising the NDF and other pro-regime groups. They also facilitated the introduction of militias sent by Iraq as well as the involvement of Shiite recruits from a range of countries including Afghanistan and Pakistan (Jahanbani, 2020; Giustozzi, 2020). As discussed above, Russia also became involved in the Syrian civil war from 2015. Like Iran, Russia sought to work through existing PGMs such as the "Desert Hawks" but also established and trained some new groups that were less subject to IRGC influence and control (Dvornikov, 2018; Giustozzi, 2020).

The creation or manipulation of PGMs by outside powers makes such militias hard to distinguish from traditional foreign state supported proxy forces, except that in these cases sponsors are supporting pro-government rather than rebel groups. Foreign sponsored PGMs were essential to Syria's counter insurgency operations and ultimately the survival of the Assad regime (Giustozzi, 2020). The plethora of different militias and multiple sponsors in Syria led to complex and fluid relations between proxies and sponsors. To an extent fueled by sponsor rivalry, especially between Russia and Iran, transactions were far less hierarchical and predictable than the proxy force principal-agent norm. Although it was created as a state sponsored militia, the NDF, for example, had various sources of both Syrian and foreign training, financing and command and control (Leenders and Giustozzi, 2019).

Relationships with PGMs are not always temporary or based on common interests in a specific violent conflict. The Russian Cossacks are a prominent example as they have acted as pro-government, irregular militia for centuries (Bristow, 2019, pp. 3–6). The major Cossack group, the All-Powerful Don Host, operated both with Russian troops and independently in combat in Chechnya, Georgia and Ukraine. Cossack organisations tend to share the current Russian government's ideological antipathy to the West and would be available along with other proxy forces, including organised crime groups, to operate on NATO's periphery in a crisis. Militarised Cossacks, for example, have a central role in the Kaliningrad-based paramilitary formations that are prepared for both defensive and offensive operations in and around the enclave (Sukhankin, 2020a).

## Why do states employ proxy forces in contemporary wars?

The use of proxy forces creates both benefits and risks for a sponsoring state. They can reduce the political and financial costs of a war, especially in circumstances where there is a risk of wider conflict and limited public support for direct military involvement (Mumford, 2013, pp. 41–42). Major expeditionary operations by the US and its allies in Iraq and Afghanistan since 2001 have proved costly failures. Consequently, in operations against Daesh, the US partnered with local rebel militias, providing operational, technical, and logistic support, while local forces took the lead in combat operations and suffered the bulk of casualties. Proxies can also provide valuable local tactical, cultural and

linguistic knowledge that deployed foreign soldiers usually lack ([Hughes, 2016, p. 199](#)). As the YPG case demonstrates, they can prove to be motivated and determined fighters with a real stake in the outcome of the conflict.

The use of a proxy force in military operations rather than a state's armed forces can potentially reduce the dangers of conflict escalation. For example, Israel has fought Iran's proxy force LH and responds vigorously to attacks by the group on its territory. If Iran, rather than LH, mounted such attacks, Israel would naturally feel compelled and be within its rights to strike Iran directly, an escalation that both state antagonists would seek to avoid ([Byman, 2018](#)). This raises the issue of deniability, which is frequently cited as a reason for the use of proxies. The conventional wisdom is that the use of a proxy actor creates ambiguity which offers plausible deniability by the sponsoring state if its involvement is suspected ([Lee, 2019](#)). At least a denial of involvement by the sponsoring state provides an excuse for the targeted state not to take direct military action that, as in the Israel/Iran case, may be strategically undesirable. However, apart from small scale covert operations and the cyber domain of warfare, states working with contemporary proxy forces in significant irregular wars appear to do little to hide their involvement. Russia's denials, in particular, most recently in the case of Libya, increasingly lack credibility. Arguably, the perception of "indirectness" has become more important than that of "deniability".

Indirect involvement also reflects a perception that few local conflicts directly threaten the vital national interests of the major powers, although the renewal of great power competition might modify this perspective ([Krieg and Rickli, 2018, p. 124](#)). As public opinion has arguably become the centre of gravity for many states in contemporary warfare, governments have had to become more conscious of accountability, cost and casualties. War by proxy is cheaper and attracts less domestic political and public scrutiny. Writing in 1995, US strategic thinker Edward Luttwak was the first to popularise the term 'post-heroic warfare'. He highlighted growing "casualty aversion" following the end of the Cold War as Western states were called upon to intervene in a host of regional wars, but were no longer confronted by truly existential threats ([Luttwak, 1995](#)). Casualty aversion is not just a challenge for liberal democracies. Despite increasing state control of the media in Russia, the government is aware that the use of PMCs attracts less public attention than the deployment of the armed forces as the death of fighters widely regarded as mercenaries is far less contentious than the loss of regular soldiers. The memory of the negative impact on Russian public opinion of conscript casualties during the Afghan and Chechnya wars appears to be a significant factor in the state's readiness to employ PMCs ([Marten, 2019, p. 193](#); [Defense One, 2020](#)).

The contrasting approaches of Iran and the US illustrate that states can have very different strategic objectives for the sponsorship of proxy forces ([Katz, 2019a](#); [Rauta, 2020, pp. 43–44](#)). The US has a transactional relationship with its partners who tend to be abandoned when the immediate short term operational goals are achieved. This occurred with mujahidin fighters in Afghanistan in the 1980s, the Sunni tribal militias in al Anbar in Iraq in the 2000s, and most recently with the YPG in Syria. Such a policy arguably suits domestic politics in the US given the perceived public aversion to so called "forever wars". But the absence of a political strategy and long term commitment by the US means that military victories achieved through proxy forces tend to have only a short term impact on regional stability and security. Arguably, the Iranian approach to proxies is better suited to an environment where there is long term regional competition for influence. Iran has leveraged its comparatively weak military position to create a group of what Brian Katz refers to as "ideologically aligned, militarily independent, political-military actors committed to one another's mutual defence – a resistance NATO so to speak" ([Katz, 2019](#)).

Russia has institutionalised the role of PMCs as proxy forces to advance its foreign and security objectives in a manner unlike any other state. In terms of great power competition, Russian PMCs act as a force multiplier for the Russian armed forces, allow a sometimes politically useful claim of non-involvement for grey zone operations and provide a means by which Russia can seek to establish influence in regions of strategic or economic interest. Military provider companies are illegal under the Russian constitution and criminal code, but, as these enterprises are registered abroad, it gives the state an excuse to distance itself from their activities. During an interview in 2012, President Putin acknowledged that PMCs were a potential “instrument for realising national interests without the direct participation of the government” (Klein, 2019, p. 4). Paul Stronski sums up the advantages that PMCs offer Russia as follows: “Versatile, cheap and deniable, they are the perfect instrument for a declining superpower eager to assert itself without taking too many risks” (Stronski, 2020). Russia operates with a much smaller budget than the US. Therefore, its PMCs offer a cost effective power projection tool, being significantly less expensive to employ than regular Russian forces or Western PMCs, not least because personnel costs are shared with business owners and partner states (Bristow, 2019, pp. 9–10). There is speculation that Russia has developed a so-called “integrated force group”, an expeditionary warfare concept involving special forces, PMCs and local militias based on its successful intervention strategy in Syria. This formation would be available to support Russian-friendly, anti-Western, authoritarian regimes to suppress popular rebellions in return for economic concessions and political influence (Tucker, 2019; Dvornikov, 2018).

## The risks of employing proxy forces in contemporary Wars

Russian PMCs may have proved an effective and cost effective means of power projection, but their employment has by no means been an unreserved success. PMCs, including the Wagner Group, are not as effective as Russian regular forces (Sukhankin, 2020b). Combat successes to date have been achieved against weakened Ukrainian opponents or technologically limited enemies, such as anti-Assad militias. In Syria and Libya, the Wagner Group has suffered significant casualties and reversals when undertaking offensive operations against more sophisticated opponents. In May 2020, Russian aircraft had to be deployed to Libya to provide close air support to the LNA and its Wagner Group proxies after these had suffered a series of defeats at the hands of the Turkish-backed GNA. Wagner operatives that deployed to Mozambique in 2019 were ill-suited to the terrain and the tactical situation in Cabo Delgado and had to be withdrawn from operations against Daesh-affiliated insurgents. This failure suggests that Russian PMCs may get sucked into counterinsurgency operations in Africa for which they have no experience or aptitude, thus creating broader military and political challenges for Russia's involvement in the continent (Sukhankin, 2020b). The hybrid nature of Russian PMCs poses a risk that Russia could suffer political, economic or reputational damage associated with their use especially when they are working for a partner government outside of direct Kremlin control. Reports suggest that Russian PMCs have committed war crimes against civilians and engaged in criminal activity (Mackinnon, 2020). Kimberly Marten even claims that wealthy patrons and their mercenaries could gradually undermine Russian sovereignty and embroil the state in unwanted conflicts abroad (Marten, 2019, p. 188).

Local insurgents and militias are often problematic proxy forces. The objectives of local proxy forces are not always fully aligned with those of their sponsors. Irregular fighters can be unreliable and hard to control and their local agenda can complicate efforts to end a conflict. In Eastern Ukraine, Russia's Wagner PMC had to intervene to stop infighting between supposedly pro-Russian rebel commanders and establish a pro-Kremlin order (Kramer, 2015; Giglio, 2019). During the siege of Raqqa, a deal between the SDF and

Daesh apparently allowed hundreds of the latter's fighters to evacuate the city despite the US's declaratory objective to "annihilate" them (Sommerville and Dalati, 2017). The YPG shared the US objective of defeating Daesh and nominally the desire for Syria to become a secular democracy. But the YPG is also alleged to have committed war crimes against non-Kurdish civilians and, as noted above, caused a serious rift between America and its NATO ally Turkey (Hasan, 2018). Turkey regards the YPG as an affiliate of the PKK terror group and was alarmed by the expansion of Kurdish territory in northern Syria. This prompted Ankara to invade northern Syria and push back Kurdish forces, a situation that raised the risk of the US being drawn into a dangerous conflict on its proxy's behalf.

PGMs arguably pose the greatest challenges and risks for state sponsors. For otherwise well governed states, the covert, small scale, illegal use of PGMs in counterterrorist campaigns may cause no more than a temporary political and reputational scandal. However, when fragile states with weak security services are confronted by a rebellion, they may have no choice but to depend on powerful PGMs. These militias may enable the regime to survive but can exacerbate the level of violence and prolong the conflict (Abbs *et al.* 2020, pp. 905–906). PGMs may be essential for a state to counter a major insurgency, but they frequently challenge the sponsoring government's authority and can even usurp state sovereignty. Militias in Nigeria's North East have become the main source of policing, security and governance functions in many local communities. As these PGMs have profited from the continued instability since 2009, they are considered unlikely to willingly de-mobilise once the military conflict with jihadist groups is over (Felbab-Brown, 2020). In Ukraine, the PGMs raised to fight in the Donbass in 2014 continue to wield considerable political power and have popular legitimacy. Although most of these militias have been absorbed into the National Guard or other security forces, some have remained largely independent and politicised (Marten and Olikier, 2017). Powerful oligarch sponsors and militia commanders have threatened action if the government makes concessions to the separatists. The Azov Battalion, in particular, has also been linked to far-right extremism, which plays into the Russian narrative that Ukraine is a fascist state (Nemtsova and Dickey, 2019; Aliyev, 2016, pp. 509–510). Ukraine's PGMs potentially challenge Ukraine's stability and make the conflict in Donbas even harder to resolve.

PGMs in Iraq represent an even greater threat to the sovereignty of the state because so many Shia groups are sponsored and supported by Iran, which regards them as its own proxy forces. At the height of the fighting against Daesh, Shiite irregulars organised by the LH and IRGC largely replaced the Iraqi Army (Hughes, 2016, pp. 211–212). Many militias established to combat Daesh continue to operate independently of Iraq's security forces and even threaten "state capture". The leading pro-Iranian PGM, Kata'ib Hezbollah, functions in a manner similar to Hezbollah in Lebanon. It has established significant political influence, conducted unsanctioned terrorist attacks against US forces in Iraq and defied demands by the government to disarm (Counter Extremism Project, 2020b; Frantzman, 2020). To date, Assad's regime in Syria has avoided a similar fate, although Iran played a leading role in sponsoring its PGMs. The Syrian regime was able to leverage its international backing, especially from Russia, to resist greater Iranian control in its internal affairs. This has allowed the state to retain a greater degree of authority and independence than has been possible in Iraq (Giustozzi 2020; Leenders and Giustozzi, 2019, pp. 173–174).

## Conclusions

Proxy wars will remain the norm for the foreseeable future. Two major geo-strategic developments drive this assertion. Firstly, there is the renewal of great power competition for influence, resources and security and secondly, the imperative for states to achieve these objectives without employing their military forces in a manner that could cause a

major war. States prefer to keep their rivalries below the threshold of conventional armed conflict. Therefore, proxy actors can provide a means of distancing a sponsoring state from direct combat and keeping its involvement indirect, if not deniable.

For Russia, Iran and Turkey, proxy forces play a significant role in the protection of strategic interests and power projection. By contrast, the US tends to adopt a short-term, transactional approach to its proxy relationships. China is something of a separate case, but it remains to be seen whether the Communist state will be forced to modify its apparent reluctance to employ non-state proxy forces in the future. Obviously, the employment of proxy forces is not without risks and challenges. Proxy actors' objectives are rarely fully aligned with their sponsors and their behaviour and ambitions can create strategic, political and reputational problems for their state sponsors, which in the case of powerful, state-parallel PGMs may even prove an existential threat.

Proxy forces will influence international politics and shape the future of armed conflict. As the wars in Syria and Libya have demonstrated, proxy warfare is no longer a unilateral issue involving competing superpowers but rather a multilateral matter undertaken by proxy warfare coalitions between regional and global powers. This may create greater command and control problems and increase the risks of conflict escalation. Non-state military actors have also supplanted the state's monopoly of the legitimate use of force in a number of countries. This undermines a defining characteristic of national sovereignty since the early twentieth century and threatens greater regional and global instability. Hezbollah's example also suggests that some proxy forces have become powerful and independent enough to sponsor their own surrogates, in this case to employ ideologically motivated or displaced individuals from conflict affected countries such as Afghanistan and Sudan. With millions of international refugees and internally displaced people, there is no shortage of manpower to provide fighters for future proxy wars, which threatens yet more potential for instability and conflict.

Many states, led by the US, are reluctant to employ PMCs in offensive combat roles. However, Russia's widespread use of the Wagner Group and its affiliates as proxy combat forces sets an example that other states may be increasingly tempted to follow. Western powers have access to a range of private companies that could provide effective combat services on behalf of the state, although such a development would remain politically and legally challenging as long as such companies are widely perceived as hiring mercenaries. In the early modern period, it was common for units of regular soldiers to deploy in combat alongside privately contracted units financed by the state. These hybrid forces are again common in contemporary wars. Iran has employed significant numbers of its soldiers in combat together with its proxies in Syria and Iraq. Russia too has used its PMCs and PGMs alongside regular troops in Georgia, Chechnya and Ukraine during major combat operations.

Contemporary proxy forces are characterised by complexity, contradiction and ambiguity. Their degree of dependence on their sponsors varies considerably, as does their scope for independent action, both of which can change over time. Proxy forces were traditionally expected to provide a degree of plausible deniability for a sponsoring state. However, the notion of deniability has become increasingly implausible in recent conflicts and even the claim of no direct involvement is hard to sustain when proxies fight alongside regular troops. It remains unclear whether proxy forces reduce or, conversely, increase the risks that a sponsoring state may be dragged directly into an armed conflict. Although proxy forces have traditionally been regarded as irregular fighters, nowadays they often possess more sophisticated military capabilities than many state militaries. Finally, the laws of armed conflict have not caught up with the increased employment of proxy forces. The

legal status of PMCs and the degree of state responsibility when proxies commit human rights abuses are among the many issues requiring the attention of international lawyer. As regards proxy forces, there is certainly plenty of scope for further research and analysis of their evolving and challenging impact on twenty first century inter-state relations and armed conflict.

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