

Foreword to the Special Issue 'Proxy forces in modern warfare': Practitioner's perspective on the use of proxy forces

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Since the end of World War II, the world has rarely seen a conventional war, and the intensity and magnitude of conflicts that did take place were not comparable to the two world wars. On the contrary, unconventional wars, irregular wars, insurgencies and terrorism have been the dominant conflict types. Militaries were not always successful in these types of conflicts and states have been using proxy groups instead of their militaries, and such actors have therefore become the focal elements of these environments.

As a retired special forces and commando officer, I have served in these types of conflicts and worked with proxy forces. When I was a tactical level officer, I assisted Kurdish Peshmergas with their fight against PKK militants in the mountains of Northern Iraq. I was then the leader of a group of international advisers who were helping the Afghan Security Forces in Kabul with their fight against al-Qaida and the Taliban. In my last job, I was the commander of a Turkish Army Commando Brigade which was giving operational support to local moderate opposition groups in the Free Syrian Army in their fight against ISIS in North East Syria.

Since I was asked to reflect on a practitioner's perspective on Proxy warfare for this special issue, my humble thoughts below are just my personal experiences from the above mentioned missions and I hope my opinions will take the readers to the field and motivate them to read valuable academic contributions on the topic of proxy warfare that is examined in this journal.

I should emphasise that each conflict should be handled separately and each has its own dynamics. Therefore, the rules for using proxies may change from case to case. Making

an overgeneralisation related to proxy warfare may lead us in the wrong directions. One promising attitude in one instance may not be valid or proper for another case.

Having clarified this, I can share my practical observations and give some recommendations about how militaries should act while working with proxies. First, proxy forces are not subordinates of the military, they are partners, and the military should behave accordingly. Each proxy group has its unique culture, structure, and chain of command relationship. We should understand these dynamics. Conventional soldiers, if they do not have previous working experience with proxies, should be trained before their engagements or they should be supported with special forces or unconventional soldiers before interacting with proxies. Special forces soldiers may successfully play a bumper role between the conventional units and the proxy forces.

Motivating proxies is crucial and it is not a one-off job. The ways proxy groups can be motivated may differ, and we need to find out what really motivates these groups. If we are fighting together with proxies, we need to give them proper weaponry and equipment at the individual soldier level, and we must make sure that proxy groups get enough operational support parallel to their role in the operation. They should be assured of the superiority of our supporting assets such as, close air support, Unmanned Aerial Vehicles, artillery and armour support.

On the other hand, we should be careful about their endless demands and set a limit for the support material that we give them. We should also make sure that the lower-level proxy elements get what we provide for them. If there is no control over them, the equipment and material may be carried to the black market and sold to other groups and, worse than that it may fall into the hands of our adversaries.

States generally use proxies to refrain from employing their military forces. This reduces the political risks for governments by keeping the soldier casualty rate at a minimum level. When there is success in the field, it may be attributed to the supporting nation or military and this may create a positive public image about the intervention. If the proxies are not getting expected results, this is not automatically attributed to the absence of our military in the short term. On the other hand, if proxies are not getting success in the long term, the state could be in a situation which necessitates the participation of military units. Therefore, the supporting state should bear in mind that if the proxies are stopped or defeated, it may have to use its military assets to break the resistance of the adversary. The military should be prepared to assume the role of the proxy groups depending on the political decisiveness of the government in this conflict.

There is always some risk that the proxies may either shift sides or prefer to end the fighting with the opposing groups. This possibility should not be ignored, and some actions must be taken in preventing such rapprochements of groups.

Proxies may violate international law, be involved in some atrocities against locals such as indiscriminate killings, rapes and looting, and their leaders would become war lords by dealing with the drug trade, smuggling and other forms of criminal activities. This may endanger our position in the international arena and we might be held responsible for their activities and the legitimacy of the intervention would be lost. The supporting military should set the rules before and during engagement, and must not allow any tolerance of unlawful acts.

Working with proxies in an operational environment is a delicate issue and this should continue to be of mutual benefit. Both sides should find a win-win deal. The proxies should be assured that when the conflict resolved, they will not be abandoned by the

sponsoring state and all proxy groups will be integrated into the newly established institutions after the peace process.

To sum up, states will continue to work with proxies in different parts of the world. They should bear in mind the challenges and the opportunities of the type of conflict where proxies are the main elements of the ground force. I hope, with the contributions in this journal, readers will have a better perspective for understanding the current situation of proxy conflicts.

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