

# The Proxy War for and Against ISIS

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# Summary of talk

- Assessment of proxy wars
- Brief history of proxy wars
- Current trends
- The proxy war FOR Islamic State
- The proxy war AGAINST Islamic State
- Implications and Conclusion

# What are Proxy Wars?

- o “...conflicts in which a third party intervenes indirectly in order to influence the strategic outcome in favour of its preferred faction”
- o Proxy wars are the logical replacement for states seeking to further their own strategic goals yet at the same time avoid engaging in direct, costly and bloody warfare.

# Proxy wars in history

- A long-standing element to the history of warfare.
- Proxy wars have manifest themselves during all varieties of war: inter-state; civil wars; insurgencies
- ‘War on the cheap’/’plausible deniability’: no troops, just weapons/money
- Heightened appeal at dawn of nuclear age and era of total war.



# The rise of proxy wars

- o John Mueller has argued that the world has witnessed “the obsolescence of major war.”
- o Major war may be gone, but states still seek ways to maximise interest or enhance security.
- o The initiation of a proxy war by a state often based upon a calculation of risk – a cost/benefit analysis (i.e. extend interest in a new region versus potential international backlash against involvement).



# Why does proxy war appeal?

Reasons of:

- o interest (classic realism)
- o identity (often based on ethnicity)
- o ideology (solidarity or expansion)
- o resource access (material gain)
- o strategic design (world view)

# Current Trends and Future Implications

Future wars fought by Western militaries are more likely to be against third party proxies than state forces.

This is because of:

- o Cost of 'War on Terror' both in financial and human terms.
- o Desire of states/non-state actors to achieve strategic objectives.
- o Acknowledgement of risk in contemporary global security.
- o Rise of new global and regional superpowers.
- o Rise of Private Military Corporations (PMCs)

# ISIS and Proxy war

The broad set of factors causing an increase in proxy wars have met with specific region issues in the Middle East since 2011:

1. Arab Spring regime changes, either successful (Qaddafi) or unsuccessful (Assad)
2. Rise of Islamic State
3. Reconsideration of the use of irregular forces

# ISIS and Proxy War

- There will be no grand battle to eliminate ISIS so long as their enemies and allies continue to utilise so many 3<sup>rd</sup> party proxies.
- This has turned Syria into a chaotic proxy warzone involving a shifting set of benefactor-proxy relationships.



# ISIS and Proxy War

- o The swift rise of ISIS made strange bedfellows out of the resultant anti-ISIS coalition: America, Iran and other Gulf states
- o “The Iranian’s have a PhD in this type of warfare” (anonymous senior Iraqi politician)
- o The simultaneous battle to oust Assad from power in Damascus has seen Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar channel financial assistance and weapons towards their favoured rival Sunni groups (including ISIS)
- o These instances of indirect intervention have created the conditions for regional uprisings and insurgent violence across the Middle East to be infused with significant proxy activity.

# ISIS capabilities

- IS contains around 30,000 fighters, with a core of approximately 20,000 ideologically loyal full-time members.
- Using a combination of intimidation, guerrilla warfare, and more orthodox large-scale military assaults.
- By September 2014, IS was earning approximately \$2 million per day, making it the wealthiest terrorist organization in the world

# The Proxy War FOR Islamic State

- o The proxy training of Syrian rebels to topple Assad began in 2012 when senior intelligence operatives from Qatar, Turkey and Saudi Arabia established a “military operations centre” on the outskirts of Istanbul.
- o But in-fighting occurred in the management of this training camp as the alliance started to turn to different favoured rebel groups (especially hard-line Islamist ones) to achieve their aims at the expense of the Free Syrian Army (FSA).



# The Proxy War FOR Islamic State

- o A Middle Eastern intelligence official noted that ISIS fighters “are always pleased when sophisticated weapons were sent to anti-Assad groups of any kind, because they can always get the arms off them by threats of force or cash payments”
- o US officials were perturbed by reports in December 2012 that Qatar allegedly turned US-approved weapons destined for anti-Qaddafi groups in Libya over to Islamist forces
- o It is widely acknowledged that the Qatari’s have been ploughing economic and military aid to the al-Nusra Front too.

# The Proxy War FOR Islamic State

- Saudi Arabia initially began pumping money into ISIS as part of a proxy war strategy headed by the then head of Saudi Arabia's intelligence service, Prince Bandar bin Sultan.
- Western attempts during 2013 to get the Saudi's to shift their allegiance to the 'moderate' FSA coincided with Bandar's removal from his post, signalling a shift in the Saudi strategy



# The Proxy War AGAINST Islamic State

- o The West's favourite proxy has been the loose coalition of 'moderate' anti-Assad fighters known as the Free Syrian Army (FSA)
- o Saddam al-Jamal, a former FSA commander who defected to ISIS in 2013 revealed that FSA military council meetings were attended by intelligence officials from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE and, on occasion, America, Britain and France
- o March 2015: the British government authorised the deployment of 75 military personnel to Turkey to help train FSA fighters

# The Proxy War AGAINST Islamic State

- o Proxy wars are notoriously difficult to manage. In Syria the chances of American-sanctioned weaponry being used by ISIS have a short turnaround time
- o Such dangers were realised in October 2014 when ISIS uploaded a video showing a cache of weapons that had been dropped from over ISIS-held territory. The bundle (one of 27 dropped in that particular airlift) was intended for the Kurdish peshmerga fighters defending Kobane from ISIS fighters
- o The reliability of proxies is also a key issue. This was highlighted in November 2014 when Harakat Hazm and the Syrian Revolutionary Front – two of the main insurgent groups on the receiving end of US arms and money – surrendered to the al-Nusra Front, handing over all their weapons.

# The Proxy War AGAINST Islamic State

- o The Kurdish *peshmerga* were instrumental in preventing ISIS from taking the prize possession of the Kurdish regional capital Erbil, but they are not taking any territory back from ISIS.
- o Collectively, the proxy warfare approach adopted by the West and Arab powers is a sign that they are trying to inflict death by a thousand cuts upon ISIS rather than putting all their chips on a major land invasion.



# The Proxy War AGAINST Islamic State

- o As an indicator of how the proxy battleground has shifted in Syria even Assad himself was claiming that his own regime was actually being let inside the anti-ISIS coalition by offering “information” on air strikes against ISIS targets inside Syria’s
- o So altered is the picture inside Syria in 2016 compared to 2011 that the proxy war effort that was once in place to overthrow Assad has now recalibrated itself to stem the spread of ISIS, making Assad a de facto ally in the process
- o *My enemy’s enemy is my friend...*

# Potential consequences of proxy war against ISIS

- o 'Blowback' (unforeseen long-term consequences) - elements of Al-Qaeda already allied with Free Syria Army
- o Prolongs the violence – intensifies humanitarian crisis?
- o Dependency - what if rebels win? Money and arms still keep flowing?
- o Overspill – where next? Libya?

WAR AND CONFLICT IN THE MODERN WORLD



# PROXY WARFARE

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# Thank you

o Any questions?

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