

The War Against ISIS: The Need for Operational Art in Proxy Conflicts

A Monograph

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Abstract

The War Against ISIS: The Need for Operational Art in Proxy Conflicts, by MAJ Timothy M. Dwyer, 39 pages.

This study views tactical and strategic thinking in the information age through the lens of modern proxy war in order to conclude that the tenets of operational art, and the nesting of minor military actions within a broader national strategic framework, is imperative in a proxy conflict. Importantly, this extends to the selection of surrogate military forces and the need to fully conceive the implications of a proxy's success. The research proposes a new model for conceptualizing how minor military actions can have strategic impacts. These concepts are explored through a case study on the United States' proxy war against the Islamic State.

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Abbreviations

ADP	Army Doctrine Publication
BTW	By-With-Through
ISF	Iraqi Security Forces
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
JCS	Joint Chiefs of Staff
JP	Joint Publication
KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
PKK	People's Workers Party
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
TOW	Tube-launched, Optically-tracked, Wire-guided
YPG	People's Protection Forces (Syrian Kurdistan)

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Introduction

The fact they operate through proxy forces does not lessen the Iranian regime's culpability nor will it lessen their accountability by the international community.

—Secretary James Mattis, *Remarks at the 2018 Manama Dialogue*

Secretary Mattis highlighted an enduring truth about proxy warfare that is often overlooked or ignored by the United States. That is that benefactors are responsible for their proxies actions in a conflict. This presents a complicated problem-set for American policymakers when progress towards accomplishing national strategic objectives is measured in discrete increments, not total victories. Woven into this security environment are the consequences of an information revolution which propels news of disparate events travels at the speed of thought across the globe. Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, Wikileaks, and other media sites have democratized the broadcast of information and created a world in which small military actions can rapidly accumulate into strategic effects. Despite this new reality, the American paradigm for warfare since before the Vietnam War has remained centered on the use of proxy and partner forces to address regional security issues while minimizing the risk to American lives.

The use of proxy and partner forces has long been viewed as a viable means to limit American military involvement while still achieving a military objective. However, the use of proxies must be properly nested in the broader context of the political aim that the American defense enterprise is seeking to achieve. Proxy warfare is not a broadly applicable strategy, as demonstrated by the US use of proxy forces to destroy the Islamic State. Although operationally successful, this support fomented omnipresent Kurdish national sentiments, was perceived as a threat by Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iran, and led to the ill-fated Iraqi Kurdish independence referendum in 2017. None of these were intended consequences. As highlighted by Secretary Mattis, the benefactor does not absolve themselves of blame for undesirable consequences because their proxies were the ones who acted.

The purpose of the following study is twofold. First, it argues that military surrogates in a proxy conflict must be selected through the lens of global national strategic objectives, rather than operational expedience or by virtue of tactical capabilities they may bring to the fight – exclusive of their own strategic goals. Second, that operational art provides a framework that allows for military commanders to shape the use of proxy forces in a way that ensures that proxy actions at the local level do not limit the strategic maneuver space of policymakers. Short term gains may harm long term regional goals if the tenets of these two arguments are not exercised at the tactical and operational levels.

Full spectrum great power competition, as outlined in the National Security Strategy, is such that all efforts must be made towards aggregate gains composed of innumerable small military actions on a global scale.¹ The proxy-benefactor relationship is an extension of existing military operating concepts and the tenets of operational art still apply. The American proxy war surrounding the Syrian Civil War will be used as a case study to analyze these principles in a 21st century context. This case study provides a contemporary example of the use of proxy conflict by the United States in a complex environment with multiple overlapping tactical, operational, and strategic interests.

The Political Aim, Always

Proxy military forces are a manifestation of the relationship between strategic goal-setting and military action.² This is because the decision to use military surrogates results from strategic and policy decisions, yet those surrogates themselves conduct military operations within a given theater. Therefore, proxy forces cannot be used when their tactical success runs directly contrary to broader strategic goals or when their actions may jeopardize policy aims. There is

¹ The White House, “The National Security Strategy of the United States of America,” December 2017, accessed 23 December 2020, <http://nssarchive.us/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/2017.pdf>.

² Amos Fox, “In Pursuit of a General Theory of Proxy Warfare,” Land Warfare Paper 123, 2019, The Institute of Land Warfare, accessed 15 September 2020, <https://www.aula.org/sites/default/files/publications/LWP-123-In-Pursuit-of-a-General-Theory-of-Proxy-Warfare.pdf>.

rarely a singular policy aim that is at play in a military theater. Instead, a military campaign will likely see the confluence of multiple competing aims and strategic imperatives. For example, the destruction of ISIS's physical caliphate was a primary policy aim in 2014, but so too was the desire to contain the Syrian Civil War, to limit the involvement of American ground forces, to prevent Iranian expansionism, to bolster allies, to limit Russian influence, and many others.³ To coordinate these efforts, American commanders must still understand and use operational art even though most of the fighting is done by proxy forces.

A failure to use operational art can cause a schism between competing national strategic goals and military objectives.⁴ This is what occurred between 2014 and 2019 in northeastern Syria and Iraq. The threat of ISIS and the unexpected successes of their offensive in 2014 imposed significant time constraints on the decision-making processes of key leaders throughout the American national security enterprise. This led to a prioritization of operational objectives aimed at countering the ISIS threat regardless of potential strategic impacts. The defeat of ISIS within politically reasonable timescales became the top priority within the region and led to a significant investment in the only reliable military forces within the conflict area: Peshmerga, Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and the Iraqi military.⁵ These decisions were made without proper consideration for how these investments might affect key regional partners and allies. The support of these regional military forces, especially the SDF, weakened relations between the United States and Turkey. Turkey, as a key NATO ally who controls the maritime transits between the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, represented a strategic partnership that was thus jeopardized in pursuit of regional objectives.

³ US Department of State. *Relations with Syria: Bilateral Relations Factsheet*, 06 May 2020, accessed 07 October 2020, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-syria/>.

⁴ John Andreas Olsen and Martin van Creveld, *The Evolution of Operational Art from Napoleon to the Present* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, UK, 2011).

⁵ Toby Dodge, *Can Iraq be Saved? Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, Volume 56: Issue 5, 2014, accessed 04 November 2020, Taylor and Francis Online Library.

Future crises must always be viewed through the lens of national strategic goals so that strategic decisions drive tactics and operations, not the other way around. The question for the use of proxy forces cannot be can they achieve the military objectives? but rather, does the use of proxy forces represent the most useful means of addressing national strategic priorities in this instance? Military action is never the goal in and of itself. The use of proxies, like all types of warfare, must always be in pursuit of the political aim which necessitates the ranking of political aims by precedence. This will allow for a conscious application of operational art by military leaders and their interagency partners who must coordinate their efforts to win in a world of multipolar competition.

The Need to Recognize the Cognitive Dimension of War

How American military actions are perceived by actors globally is an essential factor when discussing the conduct of the proxy war against ISIS. War is an inherently cognitive domain, all other traditional domains of warfare - air, sea, land, space, cyber - are mediums through which force can be applied onto the cognition of enemies and adversaries alike. The purpose of military operations are thus to both force a change in how an adversary sees themselves socio-politically and to rearrange their existing priorities. This must be accomplished by integrating military force as part of a synchronized national strategy. Enemies fail to recognize their own defeat and can thus persevere when American military actions focus on physical effects without understanding how those actions will be internalized by other parties. Similarly, focusing on military success without considering how that success will be interpreted by other international actors can lead to the jeopardizing of national strategic goals despite military victory. The ubiquity of the internet in operational environments allows for more widespread cognitive impacts and has the potential to exacerbate divides between military actions and national strategic goals.

The democratization of information and its speed of travel necessitates the use of a new model to describe how strategy can be translated into a desired end state using operational art. Figure 1 below shows a framework for conceptualizing how military operations manifest in the cognitive domain.

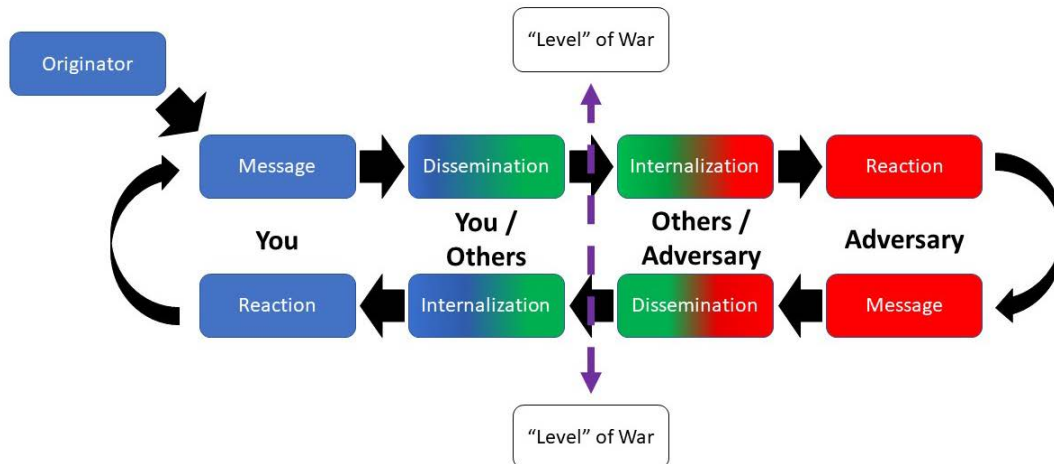


Figure 1. The Cognitive Dimension of Informatized War. Created on Microsoft Power Point by author.

In this framework the “originator” is the unit or individual that creates a given “message.” Message is an intentionally broad term that encompasses any military action that is intended to impact an adversary. This can include anything from a press release to a route clearance patrol to a division air assault and more. The dissemination of the message describes how widely information regarding the message is spread. Internalization represents how the information about the message is understood by those who interact with it. Traditionally, the designation of tactical, operational, or strategic actions would be determined based on the originator of a given message. A Soldier firing her weapon or a battalion seizing an objective would be tactical actions because of the “originator” of those messages. However, the information age has created an environment in which all actions have the potential for global

impacts. This has created confusion in the military lexicon resulting in paradoxical descriptions of the “strategic corporal” and Divisions as tactical units.⁶

The confused lexicon is a result of the misconception that actions or units themselves can be tactical, operational, or strategic. Although this may have been true throughout most of the 20th century, the Information Age has invalidated this understanding of military efforts. Actions and units themselves cannot be tactical, operational, or strategic because how their messages are disseminated and internalized is unpredictable. Tactical, operational, and strategic impacts may result from actions conducted at any number of different organizational levels because the information age allows for global dissemination of messages. Units at every echelon can have strategic, operational, or tactical impacts because it is the impacts of military actions that are the true determinant of the level of war that they inhabit.

Using this framework allows for a more complete understanding of how small actions in a proxy war can rapidly impact national strategic aims. This occurs because who originates the military message is irrelevant but how that message is disseminated and internalized is of the utmost importance. Therefore, it becomes essential that the means of dissemination and the likely impacts of internalization by a myriad of actors be considered when planning military campaigns regardless of whether the actual fighting is to be undertaken by predominantly surrogate forces. Viewing operations through the lens of potential impacts on the cognition of other actors allows for the proper use of operational art by nesting disparate messages in pursuit of strategic impacts that remain relevant to both adversaries and others who inhabit a given conflict space.

A Word About Definitions

Further defining the concepts used in this discussion is essential before continuing. The term “proxy warfare” has been used by the American defense enterprise since at least World War II and has been understood differently based upon the era and audience. For this discussion,

⁶ GEN Charles C. Kulak, *The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three Block War*, Marines Magazine 1999, DTIC Archives.

Andrew Mumford's definition of proxy warfare as "conflict in which a third party intervenes indirectly to influence the strategic outcome in favor of its preferred faction."⁷ This definition is intentionally broad to encompass the wide variety of potential actors that may be leveraged by third parties in pursuit of their political aims. American support to militias, Rojava, and Iraqi Kurdistan specifically focused on armed military proxy forces but cyber actors, criminal enterprises, or artificial intelligence systems should all be recognized as interrelated proxies in a conflict under this definition.⁸

The second important, and somewhat controversial term is operational art. This study understands operational art as the intentional synchronization of planned military actions, operations, and campaigns to accomplish nested objectives in pursuit of a dictated political aim. It is important to note that the tenets of operational art must be multidisciplinary and applied by leaders throughout the national security enterprise. The military alone cannot achieve the nation's policy objectives with regard to other great powers. Instead, operational art must encompass the synchronization of all available resources towards the accomplishment of discrete objectives towards a beneficial and holistic end state as defined by the political aim.⁹

Finally, the term "military strategy" is equally contentious and has been used in a myriad of ways since the inception of strategic thought.¹⁰ This discussion will define military strategy as framing and planning for the deliberate use of military forces to manipulate socioeconomic and political systems in pursuit of a dictated political goal. A strategy is accomplished when it is internally logical and relevant to the context. Everett Dolman's focus on conceptualizing strategy

⁷ Andrew Mumford, *Proxy Warfare and the Future of Conflict*, The RUSI Journal, Vol. 158:2, 2013, accessed 21 September 2020, Taylor and Francis Online Archive. 40.

⁸ Eran Lerman, *The Turks in Syria and the Kurds in Rojava: Prelude to Tragedy or Reasonable Compromise?* Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, No. 364 12 September 2016, accessed 14 August 2020, JSTOR Online Database.

⁹ Nicholas Sinclair, *A Logic All Its Own: Russian Operational Art in Syria*, Military Review: January-February 2020, accessed 24 February 2021, EBSCO Online Database.

¹⁰ Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (Oxford University Press: New York City, NY, 2013).

as the intentional manipulation of systems is an essential concept in this definition.¹¹ It is important to note that the military forces included in this definition go far beyond those specific tactical units who apply lethal military violence. The full suite of military capabilities include medical aid, logistic capabilities, military trainers, infrastructure building, and many others. A military strategy must encompass the totality of military capabilities to apply positive pressure on the people of a region to bend their perceptions to better align with US interests. However, military strategies cannot and should not stand alone nor should they be created irrespective of other national priorities around the world. Rather, they need to be synchronized with the other elements of national power and balanced with broader national strategic goals to ensure the economic application of power in the global commons.¹²

Research Methodology

A qualitative case study of American support to the various proxy forces surrounding the Syrian Civil War was the focal point of a broader consideration of the relationship between strategy and tactics. Various tribal militias, Syrian rebel forces, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (Rojava), and Iraqi Kurdistan were all considered. Qualitative content analysis has been used to explore these relationships. This case study has analyzed how that support evolved and what effects this evolution had on relations between the United States and Turkey. The perspectives of different affected populations, regional partners, coalition allies, and US decision makers have been considered. Historical Kurdish perspectives have been studied to include archival research into Kurdish relations with previous western powers. Kurdish-Ottoman interactions, Anglo-Kurdish relations, Turkey's efforts to combat Kurdish independence, and modern Kurdish independence sentiments have all been included to provide a holistic analysis.

¹¹ Everett Carl Dolman, *Pure Strategy*, (Taylor and Francis Group: New York, NY, 2005).

¹² Milan Vego, *Operations Short of War and Operational Art*, *Joint Forces Quarterly*, 98: 3rd QTR 2020, accessed 24 February 2021, EBSCO Online Database.

The research also considered Turkish perspectives regarding both its identity as a regional power, how the Turkish people perceive themselves on the world stage, and how their national strategic goals relate to their involvement in the Syrian Civil War. The purpose of this study was to derive broader lessons regarding the interplay of tactical, operational, and strategic decision making in the American defense enterprise. The goal was to elucidate how tactical and operational decision making can affect national strategic aims when those decisions are not made with strategic goals in mind.

Literature Review

Our “by, with, and through” approach and operational-level simultaneity strategy are working, and our partner forces continue to build momentum across the battlespace as we pressure the enemy on multiple fronts and across all domains.

—General Joseph L. Votel, USA

Proxy Warfare Theory in American Doctrine

General Joseph Votel recognized the prominence of proxy warfare in the American national security enterprise. The use of proxy forces has an established presence in American doctrine and foreign policy engagement. Although the terms *proxy warfare* or *proxy forces* do not appear in the joint doctrine, the Department of Defense’s official publications list proxy warfare as a viable tactic. Joint doctrine specifically referenced “friendly surrogates” as a means of accomplishing “mutually agreeable objectives when the direct employment of US forces would be objectionable or infeasible.”¹³ Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 3-05: *Army Special Operations* stated that “support for an insurgency could be an effective way of putting indirect pressure on the enemy.”¹⁴ This is a clear example of the tenets proxy warfare being incorporated into military doctrine and it establishes the doctrinal framework for practitioners to exercise in utilizing proxies in pursuit of military goals.

The broader issues related to the use of proxy forces are not addressed in any meaningful sense within military doctrine, apart from broadly wording warnings. ADP 3-05 cautions that the costs of conducting proxy warfare must be considered against any potential gains prior to committing to its use.¹⁵ This is hardly a comprehensive consideration of the potential pitfalls

¹³ US Department of Defense, Joint Staff, Joint Publication (JP) 3-0, *Joint Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Publishing Office, 2017), Chapter I, 2.e, I-12.

¹⁴ US Department of the Army, Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 3-05: *Army Special Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Publishing Office, 2019), Chapter 2, 2-47, 2-11.

¹⁵ US Army, ADP 3-05.

related to the delegation of American national security priorities to a third party. Additionally, ADP 3-05 paradoxically referenced the American support to the mujahedeen's conflict with Russia in the 1980s as a positive example of the utility of proxy warfare.¹⁶ This support likely facilitated the collapse of Afghanistan in the 1990s.¹⁷ This example better illustrated the reasons to avoid a proxy conflict, rather than its benefits. The treatment of proxy warfare in American doctrine fell short because it is wholly focused on tactical and operational successes rather than the logic of exercising these types of benefactor/proxy relationships. This represents a fundamental disconnect between national strategic priorities and tactical goals. Regardless, these tenets were recently used in a CENTCOM campaign.¹⁸

In 2018, CENTCOM specifically advocated for the use of military proxies and surrogates through their "by-with-through" (BWT) initiative.¹⁹ General Garrett et al. defined "by-with-through" as "employing partner maneuver forces" with support from American advisors while operating within established legal frameworks.²⁰ These authors framed BWT as an operational approach that made available additional means outside of organic American military forces in pursuit of the political aim. They argued that this allows for a greater ability to affect practical increases in regional stability by coopting the people who live in specific regions and the organizations who govern them. General Garrett et al. also provided historical examples of these efforts to demonstrate how they are building on both existing concepts and tested methods to codify these efforts into systems that are universally applicable.²¹ Further, this BWT approach

¹⁶ US Army, ADP 3-05.

¹⁷ Mona Alami, "After the Syria withdrawal, it's time the US rethinks the use of proxy forces," The Atlantic Council, 18 November 2019, accessed 15 September 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriacouncil/after-the-syria-withdrawal-its-time-the-us-rethinks-the-use-of-proxy-forces/>.

¹⁸ Garrett et al., 2018.

¹⁹ Ibid, 49.

²⁰ Ibid, 49.

²¹ Ibid, 51.

was internalized in the campaign design for Operation Inherent Resolve whose primary goal was the destruction of ISIS.²² This use of BWT in a major operation has led to its further analysis with regards to proxy warfare by authors elsewhere in the academic discussion.

Other policy professionals have expanded the analysis of BWT beyond its basic tenets and argued for the long-term benefits of instituting a BWT approach in certain theaters. Brigadier General John B. Richardson and Major John Bolton argued for the widespread use of the BWT operational approach and its benefits in stabilizing conflict regions.²³ Their argument was premised on the notion that American forces can never be successful in stabilizing a foreign nation within politically reasonable costs or timescales. Instead, they advocated for the use of host nation forces facilitated by select American capabilities to achieve regional security. Importantly, Richardson and Bolton stated that the BWT method “requires strategic patience” on behalf of policymakers and military leaders.²⁴ This is because the slow incremental progress of such an approach which is counter to the usual desire for a rapid conclusion to the conflict.

The limitations of these arguments and doctrinal descriptions is in their failure to differentiate between the types of partners that could reasonably be coopted into a proxy, or BWT, conflict. Richardson and Bolton specify host-nation security forces in their argument but this necessitates the identification of a legitimate government, an act that is simpler in theory than in practice. These arguments also fail to incorporate many of the broader implications that are identified elsewhere in the academic discussion. This omission is likely owing to the strictly military lenses of the authors, however the omission of broader political implications points to a greater issue of grand national security objectives being lost at the operational level and below.

²² Operation Inherent Resolve, “CJTF Campaign Design,” accessed 15 September 2020, <https://www.inherentresolve.mil/campaign/>.

²³ John B. Richardson IV and John Q. Bolton, *Sacrifice, Ownership, Legitimacy Winning Wars By, With, and Through Host-Nation Security Forces*, Joint Forces Quarterly, 89:2, 2018.

²⁴ Ibid, 67.

These dilemmas and many other related to proxy warfare have been the subject of a variety of academic arguments against the use of proxy warfare as a national tool.

Many of these issues are addressed by Major Amos Fox in his research into the BWT operational framework specifically and proxy warfare more generally. Fox applied deductive reasoning to historical examples of proxy warfare, to include CENTCOM's OIR campaign, to propose a general theory of proxy war.²⁵ His argument was premised on the viability of surrogate warfare and assumes that the benefactor correctly understands the relative interest of the parties involved, the existing tyranny of time, and the nature of the power relationship. Fox proposed that two types of benefactor/proxy relationships exist: exploitative and transactional.²⁶ He stated that each is the result of the existing power dynamic and confluence of interests between the "agent", who will do the fighting, and the "principal", who will finance it.²⁷ Fox presented a strong argument for the creation of a standardized understanding of proxy warfare and the benefits of its proper use. Others in the academic and policy discussion concurred with his support to properly enacted proxy warfare.

A widespread consensus exists in the academic discussion regarding the future prevalence and utility of proxy conflict. Mumford argued that the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, combined with economic constraints and cyber conflict, have increased the likelihood and state benefits of proxy conflict in the future.²⁸ Such a strategy allows principals, in the language of Fox, to pursue their national strategic objectives without risking the political repercussions inherent in large-scale military operations. Mumford also argued for an increase in the prevalence of proxy conflict due to the continuing rise of China and the interaction of their global aims with

²⁵ Fox, 2019.

²⁶ Ibid, 5.

²⁷ Ibid, 3.

²⁸ Mumford, 2013.

the existing system.²⁹ His analysis included the use of cyber actors and is premised on the disinterest in peer conflict amongst world powers. Mumford provided a persuasive argument which, over the intervening seven years since publication, has largely been proven correct. Mumford's assertion that proxy wars will persist because they do not cost American lives while still allowing for the application of military power was a common theme throughout the broader academic discussion.

Byman stated this directly, arguing that proxy wars will continue because "locals fight, and die, so Americans do not have to."³⁰ He also repeated many of the same themes of the authors listed above, among others, regarding the necessity of using indigenous forces to solve regional security issues. Locals can not only integrate the nuances of culture into the conflict they are fighting, they also have a higher level of legitimacy than an outside force that may be perceived as an occupier.³¹ This analysis of the intangible benefits of using proxies is common to many who advocate for the use of proxies in regional conflicts. The difficulties associated with understanding cultural nuances within a conflict space can also manifest themselves in the relationship between the United States and its designated surrogate force.

Tribal rivalries, religious sentiments, cultural differences, and other moral effects have the potential to hamper the achievement of third-party military objectives. This serves to lessen the utility of the relationship and allows for the introduction of additional actors into the power dynamics of the region. Nearly every argument that advocates for the use of proxy war or argues for its continued relevance stresses the importance of recognizing the divergent nature of political interests. The actions of other state-actors are also stressed by many authors who argue that the

²⁹ Mumford, 2013.

³⁰ Daniel L. Byman. "Why Engage in Proxy War? A State's Perspective," The Brookings Institution, accessed 15 September 2020, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/05/21/why-engage-in-proxy-war-a-states-perspective/>, 1.

³¹ Ibid, 1.

United States will continue to engage in proxy conflicts because that is the chosen method of its competitors.³² In this line of argument, the use of proxy warfare is not an ideal solution but must be leveraged by the United States simply because it is commonly used by other nations around the world.

The necessity of proxy warfare is at the core of Nate Rosenblatt and David Kilcullen's discussion entitled *The Tweet of Damocles: Lessons for US Proxy Warfare*.³³ This well-researched argument outlines many of the challenges and limitations related to the use of proxy warfare as a tool of national power. Their study specifically focuses on the "unavoidable downside risks of proxy warfare" that revolve around the dynamics of national interests, escalation, and power described in other works above.³⁴ What sets Rosenblatt and Kilcullen's argument apart is their focus on why it has recently failed in Syria and their assertion that this failure was the result of a confluence of fluid American foreign policy and the nature of proxy conflict.³⁵ This failure, although currently limited in scope, is used as a demonstration of the inherent difficulties associated with using military proxies in complex systems of conflict. These same cautions are mirrored elsewhere but some have interpreted these shortfalls to be indicative of the nature of proxy conflict, not a symptom of its misapplication.³⁶

The shortfalls of proxy warfare have led some policy analysts to claim that it is not a viable policy. Many political analysts advocate for the end of proxy conflict as a national security tool because of the inherent complexity of conflict and the limitations of delegating

³² Andrew Mumford. *Proxy Warfare*, (John Wiley & Sons Publishing: 2013).

³³ Nate Rosenblatt and David Kilcullen. "The Tweet of Damocles: Lessons for US Proxy Warfare," *New America: International Security*, 06 April 2020, accessed 15 September 2020, <https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/reports/tweet-damocles/>.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 1.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 1.

³⁶ C. Anthony Pfaff and Patrick Gansfield. "How (Not) to Fight Proxy War," *The National Interest*, 2018, accessed 16 September 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/how-not-fight-proxy-wars-25102>.

military force to foreign entities. Stark uses the same contemporary examples as Rosenblatt and Kilcullen but concluded that the shortfalls are representative of a failed approach.³⁷ She argued that proxy warfare fails to address the root causes of American national security concerns and instead only seeks to address the symptoms. This strategy then disrupts the existing socio-political systems and creates opportunities for greater instability or expansion of powers contrary to American goals. This expansion of foreign domestic conflict is another subject which has been used to demonstrate the inadequacy of proxy warfare.

Many policy analysts have argued that outside intervention into a conflict only exacerbates the violence and extends the duration of the fighting.³⁸ This extension of the conflict is rarely beneficial to the supporting power and leads to increased civilian casualties within the conflict zone. These proxy interventions therefore have secondary and tertiary effects across both the region and the globe to include refugee crises, outbreaks of communicable disease, the fragmentation of societies, and the exacerbation of domestic strife.³⁹ Alexandra Stark argued that the best policy position for the United States and its allies is to abandon proxy wars that may exacerbate regional security issues.⁴⁰ Instead, she argued that long-term diplomatic and economic intervention serve to provide bastions of stability in conflict regions that may then address the underlying issues that entice third parties into proxy conflicts.

The arguments against the use of proxy conflict as a tool of national power largely fail to provide a viable alternative. These arguments also tend to ignore the use of proxy conflicts by

³⁷ Alexandra Stark. "Give Up on Proxy Wars in the Middle East," *Foreign Policy*, 07 August 2020, accessed 16 September 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/08/07/united-states-give-up-on-proxy-wars-middle-east/>.

³⁸ Patrick Regan. *Third Party Interventions and the Duration of Intrastate Conflicts*, *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 46:1, 2002.

³⁹ Alexandra Stark. "The Monarch's Pawns? Gulf State Proxy Warfare 2011-Today," *New America: International Security*, 15 June 2020, accessed 16 September 2020, <https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/reports/the-monarchs-pawns/>.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 1.

other nations who are seeking to expand their influence in a region and who may have less scruples regarding civilian suffering. Assuming that the United States or its western allies can reduce the prevalence of proxy conflict by abandoning it in their own national security arsenals is not a viable policy position. Instead, many would argue that the United States should bolster its understanding of proxy warfare because not doing so cedes the conflict space to adversaries and competitors.⁴¹ It is clear from the conflicts in Ukraine and Yemen that nations other than the United States see proxy warfare as a useful tool for the expansion of their influence. The arguments against the United States using proxies to address regional security issues do not provide a compelling alternative given the realities of modern global conflicts.

The Space for new Research

The academic and policy discussions regarding proxy or surrogate warfare largely focus on its applications or implications from either a policy or military perspective. However, this fails to consider how these two realms are inextricably interrelated and how the national security enterprise represents a discrete system of systems with multiple interactions across the globe. Proxy warfare is not simply a matter of policy goals or military actions. It is both tactical and strategic. New research is needed to tie these two military perspectives and functions together through the lens of operational art. This is an essential step towards determining how the United States military can conduct foreign internal defense missions, bolster allied security forces, and assist in foreign counter insurgency or counter terrorism campaigns. The modern political-economic environment is such that a major military campaign is not a viable response to every conflict contingency. Nor are economic and diplomatic initiatives the sole answer either. There is clearly a space and utility for the use of proxies and surrogates to address regional security issues

⁴¹ Andreas Krieg and Jean-Marc Rickli. *Surrogate Warfare: the Art of War in the 21st Century?* Defense Studies, No 18:2, 2018, accessed 16 September 2020, Taylor and Francis Online Library.

with American support. The Proxy War against ISIS provides a useful case study to analyze these issues.

Tactical Goals at odds with Strategic Aims in the Syrian Proxy War

In late 2015, a soldier was recorded firing an antitank missile at an armored vehicle in combat. The vehicle was destroyed and at least one person was killed. This footage was quickly uploaded to several internet sites, to include YouTube, and has likely been seen by millions of people across all platforms since its upload. Although the nature of this action is relatively commonplace in a modern conflict, the means by which it was conducted elucidated a persistent American strategic paradigm: the use of proxy warfare. Critically, the soldier was a member of a militia group fighting in the ongoing Syrian Civil War firing an American-made Tube-launched, Optically-tracked, Wire-guided (TOW) missile. His target was an American-made High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle (Humvee) driven by fighters from the Islamic State.⁴²

This single action, and its prevalence across internet platforms, is demonstrative of the complexities of proxy conflict. The following discussion will analyze the broader and deeper context of that engagement to understand how that incident, and numerous others like it, came to be. A detailed case analysis of the American involvement in the Syrian Civil War is essential to understand how two Syrian fighters, neither of whom are aligned with American strategic interests, came to both use American equipment against each other and have their combat viewed by millions across the globe.

⁴² Thomas Gibbons-Neff. "This Video Shows the Absurdity of the War in Syria with One Blown Up Humvee," Washington Post: 17 November 2015, accessed 07 October 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2015/11/17/this-video-shows-the-absurdity-of-the-war-in-syria-in-one-single-blown-up-humvee/>.

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Figure 2. “Absurd Syrian War Footage - Sunni Militia with US TOW Hit US Humvee Driven by Iraqi Shi'a Militia,” Progressive Polymath, YouTube, 17 November 2015, accessed 07 October 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DwOebuR2VVE>.

The Syrian Civil War: Emergence of Conflict through Social Media

In 2010, Muhammad Bouazizi lit himself on fire on a busy street in Tunisia. This protest against corrupt local officials was putatively a catalyst for a sweeping series of popular uprising against authoritarian regimes across North Africa and the Middle East.⁴³ Long standing governments in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt were toppled while unrest was violently repressed in Bahrain and civil wars began in Yemen and Syria.⁴⁴ This era of political upheaval and violence, popularly referred to as the Arab Spring, was representative of a new generation and their

⁴³ Hernando de Soto. “The Real Muhammad Bouazizi,” *Foreign Policy*: 16 December 2011, accessed 13 October 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/12/16/the-real-mohamed-bouazizi/>.

⁴⁴ Amnesty International. “The Arab Spring: Five Years On,” January 2016, accessed 13 October 2020, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2016/01/arab-spring-five-years-on/>.

rejection of the status quo of cold war authoritarian rule. This movement leveraged social media and the internet to both spread their messages of dissent and organize mass demonstrations for regime change. The existing governments were often slow or unable to respond effectively, using heavy handed techniques that were quickly revealed to the world through social media.

Syria was especially ripe for revolution by the time the Arab Spring reached its people. The Assad regime had been in power since the 1970s when a military coup had seized control. Bashar al Assad, who had replaced his father as leader in 2000, had attempted a failed series of social, political, and economic reforms throughout the early 2000s. These initiatives coincided with an extended drought between 2006 and 2010 that had devastated rural communities and strained public faith in the Assad regime.⁴⁵ Large numbers of people abandoned their unproductive farmland and moved into the cities seeking work, thus exacerbating ongoing socio-political issues and swelling the unemployed urban populations. This confluence of pressures and the newfound motivation of the growing Arab Spring led to a series of demonstrations in cities throughout Syria that were violently repressed. Cellphone videos of the Syrian government's response to these protests were quickly distributed online across social media platforms, especially YouTube, and led to a rapid spread of dissent across the country.⁴⁶ This dissent was exacerbated by its geographical position and lingering domestic strife regarding the extant Sunni-Shia divide.

This violence against the civilian populace represented a common tactic that had secured power for authoritarian regimes across the region for decades, however the information age had removed the barriers to information that had allowed governments to deny their culpability. Inevitably, news and video of the government crackdowns became ubiquitous and instigated

⁴⁵ Zachary Laub. "Syria's Civil War: The Descent into Horror," Council on Foreign Relations: February 19th 2020, accessed 13 October 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/article/syrias-civil-war>.

⁴⁶ Benedetta Berti and Jonathan Paris, *Beyond Sectarianism: Geopolitics, Fragmentation, and the Syrian Civil War*, Strategic Assessment: Vol 16, No 4, January 2014.

increasingly violent responses against the Syrian government. A 2011 mutiny by several Syrian Army units represented the first organized military resistance to Assad's regime and began the Syrian Civil War in earnest.⁴⁷ The country rapidly deteriorated into a patchwork of competing militant groups, militias, government forces, and statelets all vying for legitimacy and political control. A mass humanitarian crisis followed, spawning widespread refugee movements flooding out of the conflict zone into neighboring countries and further abroad. No one entity was able to amass a decisive advantage and a nationwide stalemate quickly developed. The conflict is ongoing at the time of this writing and a negotiated settlement does not appear readily in the offing. Although this conflict is ostensibly a civil war, it is important to recognize the broader regional context and the other actors involved within the conflict space.

The Assad regime and its domestic adversaries may be fighting for control of Syria but it is important to understand how the conflict "is an extension of the regional cold war between Saudi Arabia and Iran."⁴⁸ Saudi Arabia and Iran have been rivals for decades with numerous examples of direct and indirect confrontations since the Islamic Revolution of 1979. This rivalry is founded in the differing socio-religious ideals of the two regimes, Saudi Arabia being based on Sunni Islam and Iran on Shiite Islam. Both nations seek "regional hegemonic status" and have used a combination of proxy warfare, economic means, and diplomatic efforts in attempts to bolster their own claims to power while marginalizing their adversary.⁴⁹ The civil wars in Yemen and Syria have provided fertile ground for both Saudi Arabia and Iran to insert themselves in favor of their preferred faction. Beyond this regional rivalry, the Syrian Civil War also presents opportunities and threats to other outside actors who are either vying for influence or seeking to

⁴⁷ Laub, 2020.

⁴⁸ Berti and Paris, 2014, 26.

⁴⁹ Dayna Santana, "A Comparative Look at the New Cold War of the Middle East," Australian Institute of International Affairs, December 17th 2018, accessed 14 October 2020, <http://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/resource/a-comparative-look-at-the-new-cold-war-of-the-middle-east/>, 1.

prevent their own domestic instabilities. Turkey, Israel, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, Russia, and the European Union all have interests in the outcome of the Syrian Civil War and its broader geographic implications. American involvement was inevitable with so many outside actors supporting their preferred factions, conducting kinetic operations, and influencing the conduct of the war. This involvement took the form of American proxy warfare in Syria.

The United States had substantive barriers to involvement in the Syrian Civil War stemming from its ongoing military commitments abroad, its complex involvement in neighboring Iraq, and its public's aversion towards another ground campaign in the Middle East. The strategic options for the United States were further complicated by its earlier air campaign that assisted in the removal of Muammar Ghaddafi in Libya. Operation Odyssey Dawn, as the Libyan air campaign was known, established a no-fly zone over Libyan airspace and pursued the destruction of Libyan forces "deemed to pose a threat to civilian populations."⁵⁰ Although Odyssey Dawn was billed as a protective measure to prevent a humanitarian crisis, many in the United States and abroad saw it as another failed American foreign intervention aimed at regime change.⁵¹ This intervention using lethal military force had direct repercussions on American policy decisions regarding Syria.

The direct result of Operation Odyssey Dawn was the prevention of a government offensive on Benghazi and the removal of Muammar Ghaddafi from power. This air campaign was hailed as a "model intervention" by American leaders at the time, however the situation quickly proved more complicated as the promised imposition of a free democracy unraveled.⁵²

⁵⁰ Jeremiah Gertler, *Operation Odyssey Dawn (Libya): Background and Issues for Congress*, Congressional Research Service: March 30th 2011, 2.

⁵¹ Alan J. Kuperman, "Obama's Libya Debacle: How a Well Meaning Intervention Ended in Failure," *Foreign Affairs*: March/April 2015, accessed 14 October 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/libya/2019-02-18/obamas-libya-debacle>, 1.

⁵² Florence Gaub, *The North Atlantic Treaty Organization and Libya: Reviewing Operation Unified Protector*, The Letort Papers: US Army War College Press, June 2013.

Rather than stopping the air campaign after a short intervention, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) continued its operations for nearly seven months under the title Operation Unified Protector.⁵³ China and Russia saw this extension as a clear indication that NATO's goal had been regime change all along, rather than the humanitarian intervention touted by American leaders.⁵⁴ Rival militias and rebel groups quickly seized on the newly created power vacuum and the de facto NATO air support to carve out their own power bases and continue the war in search of greater control. This led to a rapid devolution of the security situation in Libya and created what many view today as a failed state. Beyond the conflict and localized humanitarian crises that have developed, the failure of the Libyan state also created opportunities for transnational terrorist groups to propagate.⁵⁵

The intervention in Libya did more than just shake American resolve to intervene in another Arab Spring revolt, it also changed global perceptions of such an intervention. China and Russia saw the NATO effort as entirely directed at regime change and a continuance of the American democratic evangelism efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq. This perception led Russia to declare its support for Assad in Syria and affirm that they “would never allow the [United Nations] Security Council to authorize anything similar to what happened in Libya.”⁵⁶ This aversion to direct military intervention was echoed elsewhere thereby limiting the political viability of an American air campaign in Syria that was similar to the effort to topple Ghaddafi. These factors led the United States to pursue a proxy warfare strategy in Syria that would hinder

⁵³ Florence Gaub, *The North Atlantic Treaty Organization and Libya: Reviewing Operation Unified Protector*, The Letort Papers: US Army War College Press, June 2013.

⁵⁴ Sui Wee-Lee, “Russia, China Oppose Forced Regime Change in Syria, Reuters,” January 31st 2012, accessed 14 October 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-china-russia-idUSTRE81007L20120201>.

⁵⁵ Kuperman, 2015.

⁵⁶ Wee-Lee, 2012, 1.

the Assad regime's efforts and, ideally, set conditions for a pro-western rebel group seizing control.

The United States began searching for effective proxy forces in 2012 that could be vetted for reliability and armed in pursuit of the preferred American end state in Syria. The primary barrier to this support was the nature of the civil war and its embodiment in a myriad of rebel groups vying for control. There were three primary groups resisting Assad's regime in 2012: the Supreme Military Council, the Syrian Islamic Front, and the Syrian Liberation Front.⁵⁷ However, none of these groups existed as a uniform entity. Instead, the three rebel factions themselves were made up of a heterogeneous cadre of units and members with differing methods, goals, support, and motivations. American leadership was itself divided on the nature of potential support to rebel factions and whether US involvement would be beneficial to American interests.

Humanitarian and non-lethal military support to the Supreme Military Council began in 2012 but it took a further two years before lethal support would be provided because of these uncertainties.

The US began providing training and lethal aid in 2014 with an initial goal of supporting a force of approximately 15,000 Syrian rebels.⁵⁸ However, this process was hampered by the American inability to determine which groups it should support and whether those it recruited could be trusted with advanced weaponry. The moderate Syrian rebels required anti-tank munitions and heavy weaponry to counter the modern military capabilities fielded by the Russian-backed Syrian state of Bashar al Assad. There was significant trepidation amongst American leadership due to the fear, clearly valid based on myriad of YouTube videos, that these advanced weapons would fall into the wrong hands. This led to a slow and extended vetting and arming process that failed to produce any substantive beneficial results. Despite \$1 billion in

⁵⁷ Erica D. Borghard, *Arms and Influence in Syria: The Pitfalls of Greater US Involvement*, Policy Analysis, No. 734, 07 August 2013.

⁵⁸ Tara McKelvey, "Arming Syrian Rebels: Where the US Went Wrong," BBC News, Washington, 9 October 2015, accessed 21 October 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-33997408>.

funding and several years of effort, the plan to arm a moderate rebel faction ended in failure with a handful of trained Syrian rebels being fielded for combat..⁵⁹

The ongoing humanitarian crisis, the indiscriminate killing of civilians, and the use of chemical weapons all provided impetus for the US to get involved in Syria. However, it was the rise of the Islamic State and the gruesome beheadings of several American journalists that instigated the need for a broader American response. This need was exacerbated by the successful offensive by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2014 that rapidly gained territory and briefly appeared as if it would topple the Iraqi state. The fall of Mosul and the ISIS offensive deep into Iraqi territory were not inevitabilities, although the likelihood of ISIS expansion was identified as early as November of 2013..⁶⁰ The US engagement strategy in the Syrian Civil War had remained largely unchanged in early 2014 and it was still not willing to directly engage militarily. This situation changed quickly once Mosul, and its significant financial assets, were captured by ISIS and it became clear that the Iraqi Security Forces would not be able to stop the ISIS advance unaided. With the rapid expansion of the Islamic State, the US was forced to seek reliable military allies in the region that could immediately provide results and halt the ISIS expansion. It was at this point that the US turned to both the Syrian and Iraqi Kurds for support.

⁵⁹ Tara McKelvey, “Arming Syrian Rebels: Where the US Went Wrong,” BBC News, Washington, 9 October 2015, accessed 21 October 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-33997408>.

⁶⁰ Hal Brands and Peter Feaver, *Was the Rise of ISIS Inevitable?* Survival: Global Politics and Strategy, Volume 59: Issue 3, 2017, Taylor and Francis Online Library.

ISIS as a Binding Operational Objective

American power can make a decisive difference, but we cannot do for Iraqis what they must do for themselves, nor can we take the place of Arab partners in securing their region.

-President Barack Obama, September 10th 2014

The fall of Mosul and the ISIS advance on both Kirkuk and Baghdad exposed significant structural weaknesses in the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) that led to its inability to resist an existential threat. Corruption, nepotism, and mismanagement had created a paper force whose actual composition could not be determined and whose combat capabilities were non-existent.⁶¹ This led to the complete disintegration of entire Iraqi divisions in the face of the ISIS advance and the abandonment of large swaths of Iraqi territory. The inability of the ISF to mount any substantive defense of Iraqi territory led to the rapid fall of Mosul, Fallujah, and Tikrit along with countless smaller villages and entire provinces. This crisis for the central Iraqi government was exacerbated by the rapid expansion, and relative military successes, of the Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG) fighting forces, the Peshmerga.

As the ISF's forces were dissolving, the Peshmerga quickly mobilized and advanced to fill the newly created power vacuum and check ISIS's advance towards Iraqi Kurdish territory. This effort culminated in the Peshmerga occupation of Kirkuk upon its abandonment by ISF and was solidified as the Peshmerga was able to repeatedly check ISIS attempts to retake the key city.⁶² However, this minor defeat did not affect ISIS's broader attempts to threaten Baghdad and seize greater territorial gains in other parts of the country. ISIS continued to advance towards the Iraqi capital and seize key Iraqi-Syrian border crossing sites throughout the summer of 2014. By late summer, ISIS began to face increasing resistance by the core units of the ISF and mounting

⁶¹ Dodge, 2014.

⁶² Krishnadev Calamur, "The Battle After ISIS: Iraqi Forces Face off Against the Kurds in a Potential Harbinger of Future Conflicts to Come," *The Atlantic*, 16 October 2016, accessed 04 November 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/10/iraq-kirkuk/542970/>.

coalition airstrikes. The American and coalition air campaign began in earnest on August 7th, 2014 but it was widely recognized that an associated ground campaign was needed to affect the military defeat of ISIS.⁶³

The rise of ISIS as a military force and its instigation of broader acts of terrorism around the globe could not overcome the American aversion to a new military ground campaign in the Middle East. Instead, policymakers pursued a surrogate warfare strategy in which regional partners would be bolstered by American weaponry, coalition air support, and military advisors. Far from the failed attempt to arm moderate rebel groups in their fight against al Assad, the effort to create proxy ground forces to counter ISIS benefitted from widespread support and recognition from disparate partners and entities. ISIS represented a common threat to key regional allies, namely Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia, while also supporting terrorist attacks on American allies abroad. This wholistic recognition of the ISIS threat removed many of the impediments which scuttled earlier attempts at proxy warfare and allowed for a comprehensive effort to build surrogate capacity.

The American proxy warfare strategy that was instituted in 2014 focused on three main actors. First, the ISF would receive an injection of lethal aid, coalition military advisor support, and airstrikes aimed at immediately bolstering their combat capabilities. Second, similar training and air support would be made available to ensure that the Peshmerga could continue to resist ISIS efforts in their territory. Third, the Syrian Democratic Forces would receive direct military aid, training, and air support to secure their territorial enclave in Northeastern Syria and provide for a cross-border effort to roll back ISIS's territorial gains and destroy their base of power. It is important to note that these three entities represented components of a broader single American proxy warfare strategy aimed at defeating ISIS, rather than three separate efforts. The common

⁶³ Cameron Glenn, "Timeline of the Rise and Fall of the Islamic State," The Wilson Center Middle East Program, 28 October 2019, accessed 04 November 2020, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/timeline-the-rise-spread-and-fall-the-islamic-state>.

threat posed by ISIS served as a binding agent that allowed for the alignment of otherwise disparate forces towards a common goal that could accomplish the American operational objective. However, these common interests would quickly unravel once that singular threat had been reduced by the very success of these proxy forces.

The primary benefactor of the renewed American engagement strategy was the ISF. The previous American efforts to build a competent Iraqi military modeled on the Western ideal had failed. Rather than repeat the many mistakes of the Operation Iraqi Freedom-era military reforms, the new American strategy was centered on building immediate combat capability. The US invested nearly \$1 trillion from 2014-2019 to accomplish this end, providing everything from ammunition to heavy equipment to training.⁶⁴ Although initially slow to materialize, these efforts did substantively improve the operational ability of the ISF and led to their successful offensives from 2016-2019 that retook much of the lost territory and reestablished the status quo ante bellum borders.

The American efforts to reconstruct the ISF into an effective military force was not opposed on the international stage. This represented a renewed partnership between the US and an Iraq which had been devastated by an American invasion a decade prior. Regardless of the lack of controversy, the American proxy warfare efforts were almost entirely focused on providing direct military benefit without addressing any of the structural underpinnings of the broader Iraqi defense enterprise.⁶⁵ Much of the corruption which had led to the disintegration of the ISF in 2014 still existed in 2019 and the supporting civilian governmental infrastructure remained equally fraught with existential challenges. Regardless of the unidimensional nature of

⁶⁴ Anthony Cordesman, “America’s Failed Strategy in the Middle East: Losing Iraq and the Gulf,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, 02 January 2020, accessed 04 November 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/americas-failed-strategy-middle-east-losing-iraq-and-gulf>.

⁶⁵ Cordesman, 2020.

the American approach, its focus on partnership with an internationally recognized sovereign government avoided many of the issues that would arise with its support elsewhere.

The second facet of the counter-ISIS proxy war was the American support to the KRG and its Peshmerga fighting forces. The Amero-Kurdish relationship extended at least as far back as 1972 and had been fraught with difficulties since its inception.⁶⁶ American support to the Iraqi Kurds had been intermittent throughout its lifespan however the Peshmerga had been widely recognized as a capable fighting force that could blunt ISIS advances if provided with training and coalition air support. These capabilities were largely based on existing international perceptions of residual Kurdish fighting prowess from the martial history of the Iraqi Kurds. However, the Peshmerga of 2014 faced significant challenges that prevented it from fulfilling these perceptions and defending its territory. Despite nearly 40 years of conflict, the Peshmerga of 2014 was an inexperienced and underequipped force that could not counter ISIS heavy weaponry.⁶⁷ They also faced many of the corruption and nepotism issues that had dissolved the fighting capabilities of the ISF. The US strategy sought to address these shortfalls and provide an additional ground combat capability to roll back ISIS gains in Iraq.

The American-led coalition provided significant air support, military advisors, and training to the Peshmerga beginning in 2014. These efforts produced immediate benefits as they were able to maintain much of their territorial integrity and push back ISIS forces. The continued American support influenced Kurdish leaders in their perceptions of how a Kurdish independence referendum would be received by the United States and its allies. These perceptions were reinforced by the construction of a new American consulate in Erbil and increased diplomatic

⁶⁶ Bryan R. Gibson, "The Secret Origins of the US-Kurdish Relationship Explain Today's Disaster," *Foreign Policy*, 14 October 2019, accessed 04 November 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/10/14/us-kurdish-relationship-history-syria-turkey-betrayal-kissinger/>.

⁶⁷ Kenneth M. Pollack, "Iraq: Understanding the ISIS Offensive Against the Kurds," *The Brookings Institute*, 11 August 2014, accessed 04 November 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2014/08/11/iraq-understanding-the-isis-offensive-against-the-kurds/>.

ties.⁶⁸ Despite American protests, the KRG held the ill-fated Kurdish Independence Referendum in 2017. The American and coalition protests centered on the likely detrimental impacts a referendum would have on the continuing coalition campaign against ISIS. These concerns were well-founded and the Iraqi retaliation was swift.⁶⁹ The ISF halted their offensive against ISIS positions and instead conducted a forced reoccupation of the ante bellum Iraqi-Kurdish borders which included retaking Kirkuk. The US-led coalition remained neutral, expressing their de-facto support to the Iraqi government and dealing a significant blow to the Iraqi Kurds.

The key difference between the support to the ISF and the support to the Peshmerga lay in the sovereign status of the supported entity. The KRG is a federally recognized territory that enjoys significant independence but is nonetheless a part of the sovereign nation of Iraq. This legal and diplomatic status complicates any perceived imposition of equality between the US-led coalition, the KRG, and Iraq. The relationship between the KRG and the Iraqi federal government also obscures the nature of military aid and how aid can be provided. It is likely that both sides see lethal military aid as a direct threat to their ability to either gain independence or maintain the status quo, depending on their perspective. The US again entered this complex relationship, having first done so in 1972, and thus exacerbated an existing source of regional friction. The final surrogate military force used by the US in their counter-ISIS campaign further aggravated these complex relationships.

Rojava Kurdistan in northeastern Syria, and their SDF military arm, was the third facet of the US efforts to conduct a proxy war against the Islamic State. This Kurdish-led enclave of northeastern Syria had resisted ISIS incursions using its Kurdish People's Protection Units

⁶⁸ Baxtiyar Goran, "US Builds Massive Consulate in Erbil," Kurdistan 24 News, 07 July 2017, accessed 04 November 2020, <https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/ffad700c-404f-4d1a-b06a-8d058839ec12>.

⁶⁹ Sardar Aziz, "The US-Kurdish Relationship in Iraq After Syria," The Washington Institute, 03 December 2019, accessed 04 November 2020, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/the-u.s.-kurdish-relationship-in-iraq-after-syria>.

(YPG). Turkey had openly declared the YPG to be a terrorist organization and an extension of the Turkish Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK), thereby complicating US desires to use the YPG as a surrogate in a renewed ground campaign.⁷⁰ The US persuaded the YPG to "change...[their]...brand" in 2014 because of the PKK associations, thus the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) were created.⁷¹ This rebranding did nothing to assuage the Turkish objections to American support nor did it change the relationships, real or otherwise, between the SDF and the PKK. Instead, this name change allowed for the US to continue its desired proxy efforts under the guise of building the military capacity of a democratic government in war-torn Syria. This American failure to consider the broader strategic implications of supporting a terrorist group, as perceived by a NATO ally, would cause severe strategic harm.

The SDF achieved military successes against ISIS and benefited greatly from lethal aid, military training, and coalition air support. The Peshmerga and the ISF were able to restore the territorial sovereignty of Iraq but it was the SDF who concluded the destruction of ISIS's physical caliphate in 2019.⁷² These military victories allowed the SDF to conquer highly productive regions that included substantial oil fields, thus bolstering the economic independence of their government: Rojava Kurdistan. This economic independence and de facto American air power allowed for Rojava to enjoy a high level of sovereignty and legitimacy, far surpassing the other factions in the Syrian Civil War. However, Turkey viewed these gains by the SDF as an exponential increase in the threat posed from Kurdish terrorist groups both on and within their borders.

⁷⁰ Chris Miller, "Putin and Erdogan's Deal for Syria Can't Last," *Foreign Policy*, 28 October 2020, accessed 11 November 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/10/28/putin-erdogan-deal-syria-kurds-agreement-war-continues/>.

⁷¹ "American General Explains Rebranding the YPG Away From the PKK," General Raymond Thomas' comments to the Aspen Institute Security Forum, Kyle Orton, YouTube, 22 July 2017, accessed 11 November 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kVZCIel_2Xw.

⁷² Ruby Mellon, "A brief history of the Syrian Democratic Forces, the Kurdish-led alliance that helped the U.S. defeat the Islamic State," *The Washington Post*, 07 October 2019, accessed 11 November 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2019/10/07/brief-history-syrian-democratic-forces-kurdish-led-alliance-that-helped-us-defeat-islamic-state/>.

Turkish objections to the rise of Rojava Kurdistan and American support to the SDF came to a head in August 2019 leading to a negotiated settlement between Presidents Erdogan and Trump. The agreement included the withdrawal of American forces from much of the Rojava region and the implicit American support to a Turkish invasion of Rojava in October 2019.⁷³ This invasion crippled much of the fighting capacity of the SDF, who had suffered an estimated 11,000 casualties fighting ISIS, and placed almost a third of Rojava territory under Turkish control.⁷⁴ This successful Turkish operation was implicitly meant to establish a border safe zone between Turkey and Syria to allow for the resettlement of Syrian refugees and to disrupt the supply networks between the PKK and the SDF. Debate exists regarding the veracity of this narrative and many have accused Turkey of numerous motivations for the offensive. Regardless of the root causes, the withdrawal of American support forced Rojava to negotiate with al Assad and Russia to legitimize their hold on territory and prevent further Turkish incursions. The United States could not continue its proxy war indefinitely and President Trump made clear his intentions to end the United States' involvement by late 2019.

⁷³ Laura Seligman, "Some of the Most Noble People I'd Ever Met: U.S. military officers who fought in Syria say they are devastated and ashamed by Trump's decision to abandon Kurdish-led forces," *Foreign Policy*, 19 October 2019, accessed 11 November 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/10/10/kurds-syrian-democratic-forces-us-donald-trump/>.

⁷⁴ Shawn Snow, "The end of an era: 60,000 strong US-trained SDF partner force crumbles in a week under heavy Turkish assault," *Military Times*, 14 October 2019, accessed 11 November 2020, <https://www.militarytimes.com/2019/10/14/the-end-of-an-era-60000-strong-us-trained-sdf-partner-force-crumbles-in-a-week-under-heavy-turkish-assault/>.

The Varied Results of the American Proxy War

We have done them a great service, and we've done a great job for all of them. And now we're getting out. A long time. We were supposed to be there for 30 days; that was almost 10 years ago.

-President Donald Trump, October 23rd 2019

President Donald Trump underscored the justification for the American withdrawal from Rojava. There was significant backlash against this withdrawal, with many seeing it as an abandonment of a key ally and as representative of an unstable foreign policy approach. However, it is important to recognize that although many saw the SDF as a perfect military surrogate it was also recognized as early as 2016 that such a patron-client relationship violated existing American strategic priorities.⁷⁵ This misalignment between the ultimate success of the SDF and the US-Turkish relationship meant that US support to Rojava was always limited in time and was directly tied to the military defeat of ISIS in Syria. Therein lies the difference between the three surrogates in the American proxy war against ISIS: each entity had a different diplomatic and legal status. These differing statuses led to an unbalanced perception of their successes against ISIS and their correlated expansion in military capabilities. A resurgent ISF posed a threat to Iraqi Kurdistan, a professional Peshmerga threatened the status quo sovereignty of "One Iraq," and an economically independent Rojava with a competent SDF directly threatened Turkey. The threat posed by ISIS had overridden some of these underlying security and diplomatic concerns but did not change the strategic environment of the region.

The broad use of proxy warfare to combat the rise of ISIS was politically viable for the US domestically and accomplished the stated theater goals. However, the failure to properly identify the types of partners to be coopted, and the hubristic belief that simply changing the name of YPG would dissuade Turkish objections, led to the operational success of these proxies outpacing their strategic utility. For example, the ISF are the armed forces of an internationally

⁷⁵ Lerman, 2016.

recognized sovereign power whose success would not hamper American strategic goals. The same could not be said for the Free Syrian Army or the SDF whose tactical successes could undermine broader American goals. The destruction of ISIS brought to the fore the existing threats to the region's primary actors that had existed prior to the 2014 offensive. Kirkuk, now free from an ISIS takeover, was still a lucrative oil producing region. Rojava was still seen as a terrorist haven that supported an existential threat to the prosperity of the Turkish state. These perceptions among regional American partners had not changed, yet the military dynamics within these systems had been altered by sustained American support.⁷⁶ The withdrawal of this support after ISIS's defeat was inevitable, but the impacts of that withdrawal could have been limited by a more precise US proxy warfare strategy at the outset.

The transition from a proxy conflict into the next phase of international intervention is an essential step in consolidating gains and realigning operational initiatives with strategic objectives.⁷⁷ Ending a proxy war must be a deliberate process that is structured to reduce any detrimental impacts that may result from a sudden withdrawal of American support. This is true both in the ISIS example and elsewhere. Proxy warfare must be given a more structured policy and doctrinal treatment so that its use may be better structured within the defense enterprise. The United States must structure its use of surrogate military forces because it is inevitable that the United States will continue to use regional military partners.

Proxy warfare is a staple of international politics and is a tool that is often used by powers that have goals or act in ways that are counter to American strategic goals. The continued use of surrogate forces by strategic competitors necessitates a continued proxy warfare strategy by the US. There is no denying the utility of surrogate regional forces being supported or coopted

⁷⁶ Enrique Galvin-Alvarez, *Rojava: A State Subverted or Reinvented?* Post-Colonial Studies, Vol. 23, No. 2., accessed 26 October 2020, Taylor and Francis Online Database.

⁷⁷ LTG Mike Lundy, et al. "Three Perspectives on Consolidating Gains," Army University Press, August 2019, accessed 06 February 2021, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/Online-Exclusive/2019-OLE/July/Lundy-Three-Perspectives/>.

to address regional goals in pursuit of broader strategic aims. Doing so using surrogate forces minimizes the lethal risks to American servicemembers. Abandoning the use of proxy warfare would cede this conflict space to adversaries and would limit the American ability to influence regional actors that may otherwise align their goals with American priorities.⁷⁸ However, the use of proxies and surrogate forces be viewed in context of both regional security dynamics and global strategic competition with those entities who may pose existential threats to American security. However, not all proxies are created equal and the selection of these partners must be accomplished using the existing tenets of operational art.⁷⁹

The American proxy war against ISIS achieved its theater objectives at the cost of broader strategic imperatives relative to the competition between the US, China, and Russia. The threat of ISIS was once more reduced to the accepted level shared by other organizations using globalized terror campaigns. The defeat of ISIS as a geographic entity was significant and costly, paid for largely by transactional American partners in the region. This campaign's success ended with what many describe as an abandonment of American allies in the SDF. However, a more important strategic abandonment is often ignored. The direct military support to the SDF was viewed as a threat to a key NATO ally since the inception of Operation Inherent Resolve. The abandonment of Turkey and the disregard for their status as a significant regional power represents a much greater detriment to global perceptions of American diplomacy than the ending of support to a minor tribal militia in northeastern Syria.⁸⁰ This prioritization of theater military goals above national strategic imperatives represents a misuse of proxy warfare and a failure to exercise the tenets of operational art.

ISIS never posed a level of threat to the United States that would justify the erosion of Amero-Turkish relations in an era of great power competition as outlined by the National

⁷⁸ Byman, 2018.

⁷⁹ Fox, 2019.

⁸⁰ Gibson, 2020.

Security Strategy. The threat posed by ISIS was not properly framed in the broader strategic context thereby allowing theater imperatives to run contrary to US strategic goals. This misalignment of priorities manifested itself in the selection of proxy forces and the failure to establish the transactional nature of benefactor support in a proxy war. Not all proxies are created equal and all relationships must be viewed as transactional. The diplomatic and legal status of proxy forces affects how support to their efforts will be viewed on the global stage and what potential strategic impacts their success may have. The SDF was a useful tactical tool but did not represent a logical use of proxy forces when viewed through the lens of global strategic priorities. The SDF successes at the theater level had a direct negative impact on broader American strategy.

Future proxy forces must be selected using the tenets of operational art to ensure that tactical goals, theater objectives, and policy aims are properly nested in a comprehensive national approach on a global scale. Internationally recognized legitimate federal governments represent the most beneficial proxy forces especially when the transactional nature of such a relationship can be codified by the leaders of each nation. Therefore, the support to the ISF was immensely successful while also being noncontroversial. The Peshmerga represented a middle ground between the ISF and the SDF in that they were a federally recognized entity with international legitimacy yet their military capabilities could jeopardize the stability of their nation. The SDF does not fit this criteria since, despite their rebranding, were a tribal militia identified as a terrorist organization by a key NATO ally.

Proxy Warfare will Continue, Operational Art is Essential

“We don’t want to get involved in a conflict that dates back nearly 200 years between the Turks and the Kurds and get involved in yet another war in the Middle East.”

- Secretary of Defense Mark Esper, October 13th 2019

Secretary Esper highlighted the missteps made in the American proxy warfare effort against ISIS. The US had gotten involved in the exact conflict that Secretary Esper referenced when it began supplying weapons and training to two separate Kurdish factions within the conflict. Regardless of the validity of the American intentions regarding the military defeat of ISIS, the support to the SDF placed theater objectives over national strategic goals in pursuit of regional aims that did not have broader global implications. This prioritization of an ethnic militia group over a NATO ally was not a sustainable proposition as evidenced by the eventual withdrawal of American support. The withdrawal should be viewed as the inevitable end state of transactional proxy warfare relationships but the nature of how the US/SDF relationship ended was indicative of the failure to consider the SDF partnership in the proper strategic frame.

Proxy warfare will continue to have a place in the interaction between great powers on the global commons. Consequently, proxy forces must be carefully selected through the use of operational art that blends national policy aims and the tactical capabilities of surrogate forces. This selection process must include a determination of the strategic aims of the proxies themselves, especially where those aims might diverge from American goals. The operational art framework can be applied directly to the selection and employment of proxy forces in 21st century conflicts.⁸¹ This will ensure that proxy tactical actions are properly nested in operational approaches that constantly strive to accomplish the desired policy end state. The deliberate use of

⁸¹ Nathan Jennings, Amos Fox, and Adam Talafiaro, “The US Army is Wrong on Future War,” The Modern War Institute, December 2018, accessed 21 February 2021, <https://mwi.usma.edu/us-army-wrong-future-war/>.

operational art in proxy warfare will lead to a great power advantage for the United States as it faces hybrid threats and conflicts below the threshold of war.

The modern era is one of multipolarity and great power competition that sees conflicts across the continuum in a globalized system of societies. Every tactical and operational action has the potential to cause outsized effects on this environment thereby facilitating or hampering the nation's strategic goals. Situations must be avoided which may lead to policy and strategy following tactical decisions instead of the inverse. The American involvement in the Syrian Civil War and its support to Rojava represents just such an instance where tactical decisions and operational expedients hampered strategic goals and limited policy options at the national level. The American support to the Rojava region represents a microcosm of the types of missteps that may occur when this perspective is lost. Understanding the nature and function of strategy is essential in arranging tactics that have relevance to enemies in a broader context. Using operational art in hybrid and proxy warfare is an indispensable element of the future LSCO/MDO paradigm. Russia has demonstrated the utility of operational art in these environments and the American defense enterprise must do the same to ensure military efforts are not wasted, at best, or counter to American policy aims, at worst.⁸²

⁸² Sinclair, 2021.

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