

Syria: Proxy Wars in the Middle East

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Abstract: The conflict in Syria quickly escalated into a complex and prolonged civil war where states outside the conflict fueled rebel groups to fight. The onset of multiple proxy wars befell Syria. Proxy war happens when a ruler of a state devises and facilitates the provision of support to a rebel group that is engaged in carrying out violent activities in another state. Thus, an external state can influence the outcome of a civil war without having to bear the heavy costs of sending its army forces. States that wage proxy wars risk a potential conflict escalation, and gamble with provoking retaliation by either the offending state or its allies. Furthermore, inadvertent consequences of backing rebel forces are also possible such as international condemnation. So, why does a state choose to form a relationship with a proxy group, instead of intervening directly? Why invest money and military power in a third party that could lead to a prolonged conflict? The analysis highlights that the political survival of regimes in the Middle East caused leaders to support rebel groups in Syria. I present a causal mechanism that is based on transnational threats to explain the phenomenon of proxy war in the Syrian civil war.

Keywords: *Syria, proxy war, Middle East, qualitative analysis, foreign policy.*

Introduction

Empirical research shows that external support to rebels fuels the groups to pose an “effective military challenge to their rivals” (Kalyvas & Balcells, 2010, p. 421) and “fight ferociously” (Cunningham *et al.*, 2009, p. 710). Scholars of conflict highlighted the risk that the type of warfare, either guerilla or irregular, can also change when a rebel group receives extensive and continuous external support that can result in a change in the balance of military capabilities between

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the two warring parties¹ (Lockyer, 2010) and demonstrates empirically, the instrumental role of the balance of capabilities in shaping the form of warfare that develops in civil wars. It contends that the current common practice of labelling civil wars as either guerrilla or conventional (which is usually meant to accurately characterise the type of warfare throughout an entire civil war. Indeed, states that support violent non-state actors (VNSAs) in conflicts may accelerate their military involvement in a conflict, and possibly provoke the retaliation of the offending state and its allies (Bapat, 2012). So, if research has shown that the presence of external actors in civil wars means that a conflict can last longer, be bloodier and negotiations for a settlement can be harder, why do states choose to provide external support to VNSAs instead of intervening directly?

Almost all scholars working on proxy war and external intervention agree on one aspect—that states calculate the costs and risks to decide which type of intervention they will choose. Still, when asking why states choose to carry out proxy war rather than sending their troops to a conflict zone to support their preferred warring side, this rational-choice explanation leaves a lot of questions unanswered. Notably, which cases are worthy of military intervention and which ones are not? Do these cases connect to geopolitical or economic interests? Theoretical contributions from the external interventions' scholarship have unearthed multiple linkages between actors to such an extent that it seems that numerous factors can lead to the same outcome (Hannigan, 2019). Indeed, studies on external intervention have created an abundance of potential motivations to send troops in a civil war. Their primary focus has deliberately been the linkages between the intervener and the target state.

In addition, proxy war is always presented as the state's dubious moral response to the international community's forceful norms of non-intervention in the internal affairs of third countries. The low popularity among domestic audiences of such a foreign policy as norms breaking is seen as another reason why states prefer a limited intervention. In other words, proxy war is understood based on facilitating low-cost foreign policy in an environment where intervention is constrained. Still, states do not choose proxy war only because they cannot choose a direct intervention. As recent events in Ukraine and Azerbaijan have shown, states are capable and willing to use their armed forces if necessary. Consequently, a proxy war is regarded as a foreign policy to respond to a threat in a regional setting.

The question this paper provides an answer to is: why did Saudi Arabia wage a proxy war to bring military and operational equality with Assad forces instead of intervening directly to challenge Iran's influence? And why did Turkey wage a proxy war instead of intervening directly to ensure that the Kurdish threat would not compromise its

1 Specifically, the change could be among three types of warfare: (i) guerrilla and counter-guerrilla warfare; (ii) irregular warfare; and (iii) conventional warfare.

borders? Why did Iran wage a proxy war with Assad, thus risking a direct confrontation with other regional powers and losing the ideological superiority against the US instead of not intervening in the war?

Drawing my argument from existing research I connect research on the transnational threat (Tamm, 2016) and research on revisionist states (Cooley *et al.*, 2019) to argue for a causal mechanism that leads states to proxy war in conflicts even if they have the military power to interfere in a conflict. In the causal mechanism that I propose, I make a case that states that have to deal with transnational threats and tend to support the order of the system tend to orchestrate a proxy war through rebel groups. If they must deal with a transnational threat, and they are against the international order then they tend to wage proxy wars through the state's paramilitaries. I propose a causal mechanism that works at the domestic level as well as the international and regional levels. There are four steps in the mechanism, with two steps focusing on the domestic and another two on the regional or international level.

This article contributes to the field of proxy war studies as it provides a qualitative-driven analysis of the civil war in Syria. The presentation of a causal mechanism on transnational threat is a contribution to explaining the phenomenon of the internationalization of civil wars. Furthermore, the focus on the Middle East serves the purpose of contrasting the foreign policy of states located in a single region.

The paper develops into five parts. First, I present the existing literature on proxy wars and the connection to the modern proxy war along with the concept. Secondly, I present the causal mechanism of proxy war and in doing so, I indicate how a proxy war is present and the causal connection between the steps of the proxy war mechanism. The last section of the paper focuses on presenting the way the mechanism was observed in the cases of Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey and discussing the findings and the validity of the hypothesized mechanism.

Modern Proxy Wars

The prevalence of proxy war should be linked to two major shifts in conflict studies. The first one points to the emergence of violent non-state actors and their essential involvement in challenging the state and its sovereignty through insurgencies (Cunningham *et al.*, 2009; Davies *et al.*, 2022). In addition, the second shift addresses the international aspect that internal affairs have come to have, especially in conflicts where third parties' interventions seem to have risen dramatically in the last decade (Byman *et al.*, 2001; Regan, 1996, 2000). Those two shifts have sparked the growth of examining and evaluating, both qualitatively and quantitatively, the role of the violent non-state actors in conflicts, either in the form of insurgent groups or terrorist groups and their motivations to receive support from external parties. Surprisingly though, much less attention has been paid to the motivation of states for enabling proxies in conflicts.

Proxy war is often regarded as a phenomenon of the Cold War. Bar-Siman-Tov (1984) argued that the motivations that drove the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. to proxy wars during the Cold War instead of intervening militarily and triggering a possible conflict escalation that would have led to a nuclear clash between them, can be summarized in five reasons: (a) they were no vital interests in a conflict that could justify a direct intervention; (b) even if there were vital interests in a conflict, the risk of direct intervention was too high; (c) the crisis could have been solved without intervention; (d) neither domestic nor international legitimacy for intervening; (e) military actions were lacking in options. Duner (1981) and Towle (2022) also pointed to these reasons that distinguished proxy war as a preferable policy to direct intervention. Indeed, these studies depicted the Cold War motivations where proxy wars fulfilled the needs of the Great Powers, and consequently, they cannot explain the motivations of states that do not have the status of a Great Power but still wage proxy wars, for instance, Congo, Uganda, and Sudan (Prunier, 2004).

I contend that proxy wars are still waged today, and the Syrian conflict is a case in point. The Syrian civil war is an internationalized intrastate but also a proxy war since interveners often aim to defeat each other's proxy and not necessarily to end the conflict. The onset of multiple proxy wars befell Syria (Fearon, 2013). Yet, even if the case of Syria is regarded as a complicated proxy war that plays on regional and international tensions, it does not belong to the Cold War period. As scholars studying conflicts in Africa highlighted as well, proxy wars are not outdated, and explanations for the onset of proxy wars need to be part of the research agenda. Indeed, the existing explanations for the onset of proxy wars do not seem to fully explain why states decided to wage them in the heart of the Middle East. Simply put, proxy wars are not limited to the Cold War.

Contemporary studies have debated the appeal of proxy wars and the reasons that states have to enable proxies in conflicts, even if the Cold War is over. Pattison (2015) and Salehyan (2010) argue that arming rebels is a less costly strategy for the sponsoring state, and it is achieved without the knowledge of the international community. In addition, Dombrowski & Reich (2015), who examined sponsorship strategies, underlined that the reduced financial costs for the states, the low number of casualties, and the possibility of easier disengagement attributed to the appeal of these strategies. Moreover, Salehyan (2010) added to these motivations arguing that the states that decide to support an insurgency can benefit from the rebels' knowledge of the intricacies of the specific conflict, such as the population and the terrain, while also presenting a "local" face that would prove to their advantage. While Mumford (2013) argued that the ideological motives and the obsolescence of major war are the two key factors that motivated states to proxy wars and not the realist approach based on interest, Loveman (2002), explained that proxy wars are closely linked to the technological progress and the institutional change that accounts for engaging civil societies and vibrant liberal

democracies that are strongly constrained to intervene directly to conflicts. Yet, despite these prevailing trends, Regan (2010), notes that despite all the research on interventions in civil wars “we know next to nothing about the goals of the interveners”.

So, despite prior scholarship on proxy war motivations, it remains unclear why some states decide to wage proxy wars instead of intervening directly.

Existing research on the Congo Wars identifies that political survival is the prime cause to explain external support for rebel groups. This study examines the presence of a hypothesized mechanism that focuses on the transnational threat (Tamm, 2016). Indeed, this mechanism can explain why there is a tendency for rulers of autocratic regimes to use third parties that will create a threat to the survival of the other ruler and, in the best case, overthrow them, instead of waiting for an opportunity to strengthen their army forces to attack their rivals. In the case of Syria, we can see that all states that decided to take an active part in supporting various warring groups face, in one way or another, a threat to their political survival, especially if we consider the timing of the conflict and the tensions present in the region.

Conceptualization of Proxy War

Although proxy war is identified by some as a Cold War phenomenon, it remains relevant and, as I argue, increasingly recurrent in today’s world affairs. Examples are abundant during the Cold War when proxy wars were waged in Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan, Nicaragua, Angola, and El Salvador (Mearsheimer, 2003). Current examples are more frequent: during the 2005–2010 Chadian civil war France supported the Chadian government against insurgent groups, shared logistics, and reconnaissance intelligence. Libya trained members of the Revolutionary United Front in Sierra Leone, and Liberia gave material support during the 1991–2002 Sierra Leone Civil War.²

The concept of proxy war was scarcely developed during the Cold War (Bar-Siman-Tov, 1984; Duner, 1981). However, recent scholarship has provided a more nuanced analysis of how proxy war is connected with external support in conflicts. Rauta (2021), as one of the leading scholars on proxy war, claims that indirect and direct intervention belong to the same concept using Sartori’s work on the concept to argue for the “inclusion of a sub-type” to military intervention, that is, proxy war. One attribute that all proxy war scholars agree on is delegation. A sponsoring state that supports a proxy is not officially at war with another state, but it employs a strategy to defeat its enemies indirectly. In

2 Third-party external support in civil wars is an empirical phenomenon closely related to a proxy war. External support describes a state’s decision to directly influence a civil war, putting the specific civil strife as the focal point of the analysis where the agent—the intervening state—interferes in a conflict, whereas proxy war describes the foreign policy of a state to indirectly engage in a conflict through a proxy.

other words, these states have delegated their monopoly of violence to the proxy in the conflict to achieve their goals. In addition, the sponsor in a proxy war can retreat from the conflict by solely stopping the provision of assistance to the proxy without having to bear the costs of defeat or negotiate for a conflict resolution. I propose that proxy war happens when a ruler of a state devises and facilitates the provision of support to a rebel group that is engaged in carrying out violent activities in another state.

Research design

My method is process tracing aiming to test a hypothesized causal mechanism using a case study. Given that the assessment of a mechanism requires a result that will confirm or deny the presence of a cause to an outcome, then the assessment of different theories of mechanisms against each other (difference-making evidence) cannot be done in the process tracing of a theory. Essentially, process tracing is answering the question “if a mechanism is present in a case to produce an outcome”, and not “if that mechanism is the only one producing the outcome” (Beach & Pedersen, 2016, p. 167).

Bennett (2013), advocating for the development of causal mechanisms in the study of transnational civil war, suggests that by pushing the border between observable and unobservable worlds we can infer our mechanisms. Checkel (2013) also agrees that causal mechanisms are “ultimately unobservable ontological entities”. However, “as scientific realists maintain, our theories about mechanisms often generate observable implications on what should be true if the posited mechanisms operate in the manner that we theorize. We can test these implications to assess the accuracy of our theories, even if we cannot observe mechanisms of causation directly or unproblematically assess how well our theories fit the observable evidence” (Checkel, 2013, p. 208). In the following section, I present the causal mechanism of proxy war based on transnational threats (Tamm, 2016).

Core assumptions and scope conditions of the causal mechanism

The unit of analysis is the leader of a state, specifically the leaders of autocratic regimes. The analytical focus is on the micro-level since the theory examines the strategic interactions of neighboring leaders, domestic coalitions, and opposition groups in a regime.

The first assumption is a leader’s willingness to hold on to office.³ After all, political survival is an existential aim for all leaders. The second assumption is uncertainty due to incomplete information about the preferences of other actors, as the beliefs of the

3 Bueno de Mesquita *et al.* *The Logic of Political Survival*, p. 21. Tamm (2016) mentions also a second assumption about the maximization of revenue, however, he argues that political survival is the cause that can explain most, if not all, the cases of transnational alliances in sub-Saharan Africa after the Cold War.

leader guide the choice of a policy. In this case, fear, and mistrust among leaders and between supporting coalitions inside the regime are always a given. A third assumption derives from the concept of proxy war specifically, namely the duration of the conflict. The duration of the relationship between the sponsor and the proxy is present for a significant period so that it is valid to infer that a state provides support for the achievement of a specific policy goal.

There is a limitation to the theory since it focuses on leaders who have an increased probability of facing a threat of removal from office through coups or rebellions. This limited scope of the theory affects the cases that may be applied to and evaluated. Nevertheless, the theory can apply in the cases of the leaders in the Middle East since most of them face challenges to their survival. Indeed, leaders of the Middle East saw a total of twenty-seven coup attempts, between 1980 and 2013, fifteen of which triggered the replacement of incumbents (Albrecht, 2015).

Causal Mechanism of Proxy War

There are four (4) steps in the mechanism (Figure 1). Here, I provide further explanation for each step:

In unconsolidated democracies, rulers want to ensure their grip on power by any means. Coup-proofing is one of the most common policies to avoid the capture of the regime by a small group within the regime's apparatus (Quinlivan, 1999). Indeed, it is common for the states in the Middle East to engage in coup-proofing where "pervasive division and personal rivalry" are part of the system (Bill & Springborg, 2000). Especially for the Gulf States "national security" often conflates with "regime security" (Ulrichsen, 2009). The funding of parallel militias and security forces in conflicts instead of army forces is a strategy of coup-proofing. After all, for rentier states such as Saudi Arabia where oil revenues allow the provision of ammunition and financial aid to rebel groups, it also ensures the proxy that the sponsor is a stable partner and in this case, it is easier for rebel groups to become amenable and loyal to the regime (Regan *et al.*, 2009).

In the first step, the ruler perceives a threat to the survival of the regime. This threat may be presented in two different forms: (i) as the belief of the ruler that a rival is about to provide arms to domestic opposition; and (ii) a neighboring ruler is providing arms to a rebel group inside the regime. Central for the mechanism to work is the ruler's perception of threats from neighboring states. The logic of political survival, based on rational choice and political economy theories, assumes that a ruler seeks to survive, and this is an instinctive political goal. Along with the assumption that the position of the ruler is envied, we can explain the constant worry of the ruler of external and internal threats (Bueno De Mesquita *et al.*, 2003). *Step 1: When a leader of an autocratic regime perceives a threat to their survival, either in the form of a coup or a rebellion, then they will seek a way to protect the regime from falling.*

As a second step, the ruler wants to respond to the transnational threat. A regional power has a specific stance towards the order, which might change when there are imbalances in the system, but more often than not it has a specific worldview and a strategy in the region. If the state is pro-order and the system is not unipolar then it follows that the regional power will not want to disturb the order by initiating a military intervention against another state, especially without the support of the international community. In this case, it will orchestrate a proxy war with a proxy providing mostly financial support as well as training. If the state is anti-order and the system is not unipolar then it follows that the regional power will want to disturb the system and decide to wage a proxy war with a proxy providing financial, technical, and military support and readiness to intervene with its army in a conflict. *Step 2: a leader evaluates the position of the state towards the regional system.*

As a third step, the ruler has clear intentions to respond to the threat but there are two possible caveats that concern the military effectiveness of the armed forces. Firstly, the repercussions of coup-proofing often render a military's effectiveness in undertaking a large-scale intervention operationally difficult. If the ruler decides to undertake a direct intervention to respond to the transnational threat, meaning that the army will be reinforced, then he compromises the survival of the regime. Indeed, rulers often have to counteract threats deriving from the anarchic international system as well as the domestic level that is coupled with external influence. In these competitive environments, the ruler seeks a safer reaction to a major threat without having to jeopardize his political survival. Secondly, even if the military is capable of conducting interventions then two incentives push rulers to support rebel groups. First, the value added to gain competitive advantages in a conflict through the use of militant groups that have expertise about the terrain, the targets, and the local populations. Second, due to the popular/widely acknowledged international norms of non-aggression, the possibility of international sanctions in the case of direct intervention rises exponentially, so rulers may find proxy war, especially covert actions, a more appealing policy. *Step 3: When a ruler decides to respond to the threat it weighs on two possible issues that rise against direct intervention: (a) the army becoming a threat to the regime; and (b) the danger of the international community to impose sanctions.*

The final step is that the ruler initiates a proxy war. The provision of support to a rebel group is consistent and continuous. The rebel group fights the common rival on its territory. The causes that prompt states to wage proxy wars inside a civil war are often presented as long abstract lists of potential causes that may lead to the onset of proxy wars.⁴ However, little attention has been paid to the development of theories

4 For example: (i) ideological solidarity with a particular group promoting a common cause; (ii) national/religious ties with a proxy that fights a common enemy; (iii) assisting a military

	Cause (Transnational threat)	Foreign Policy assessment	Domestic considerations	Outcome (Proxy war)
Entity and Activity	A leader of an autocratic regime perceives a threat to their survival	The leader and their elite group evaluate the position of the state towards the regional system	The leader intends to respond to the threat a. There is no military army b. The leader does not want to violate the non-aggression norms	The leader decides to establish a relationship with a proxy
Theoretical explanation/ motivation	Regime Survival (Bueno De Mesquita et al., 2003; Tamm, 2016)	Regional powers (Cooley et al., 2019)	Repercussions of coup proofing (Quinlivan, 1999)	Proxy war (Karlén et al., 2021; Rauta, 2021)

Figure 1. The causal mechanism of proxy war

and mechanisms that explain the decision to wage proxy wars. This mechanism works at the domestic level as well as the international and regional levels. Two out of four steps in the mechanism focus on the domestic and the other two focus on the regional or international level. Their steps have entities that act leaving behind “traces” that we can evaluate through empirical research. This way, we can integrate their actions into a framework that either sets a mechanism in motion or not. In any case, the mechanism proves that there were actions that were specifically aimed at the desired outcome that the states decided to pursue. *Step 4: When a ruler decides to respond to the threat and a proxy is available to be used against the state that posed the threat, the ruler prefers the added value of using that proxy rather than intervening directly.*

Case selection

The conflict in Syria is not just another civil war. Therefore, many of our understandings and analyses of the issue need to be tested or challenged to grasp the specific qualities of this conflict. For this reason, I contest that qualitative research is indeed fitting to examine the reasons that proxy wars erupted in the region. Second, using a theory that was applied in the cases of the Congo wars to test the case of the Syrian civil war is a good starting point since they might have underlying commonalities. I follow George and Bennett (2005) in defining a case study as a well-defined aspect of a historical episode that the investigator selects for analysis, rather than a historical event itself.

Syria’s proxy war

Situating the case

The Iraq War changed the regional balance of the Middle East: Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey rose to powerful regional players (Al Tamamy, 2012) its true consequence for the Kingdom was the changed regional and international strategic environment (It is important to note that the views stated in this paper do not intentionally represent any official stance.. These states have the power to shape outcomes in the regional system; however, for the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), the projection of this power is more negative than for other regions (Fawcett, 2005). Regionalization of security describes how regional states and other actors have engaged with local security dilemmas by becoming providers of security replacing or complementing the role of great powers or the UN (Fawcett, 2005). However, the demarcation of the region also creates the illusion of a common interest in cooperation which is not present in the case of the MENA. Insecurity and interdependences, however high, do not provide enough incentives for the states to cooperate more broadly and especially more effectively. Rather,

campaign to achieve shared objectives; (iv) greed that is linked to financial gain; and (v) revenge based on an enduring rivalry.

this push for cooperation that stems from external involvement in the region creates more tensions and incompatibilities among the states that lead to fragmentation and ephemeral results. States of the Middle East have a record of being “poor balancers and weak hegemons” (Fawcett, 2005).

Table 1. Middle East states in Syria’s proxy war, their foreign policy, sponsorship relationship, proxy and type of support.

	Foreign Policy	Sponsorship Relationship	Type of Support	Proxy
Saudi Arabia	Protect national interest in the “near abroad”	Orchestration	High	Free Syrian Army
Iran	Protect national interest	Orchestration	High	Syrian government
Turkey	Protect against the Kurdish threat and national interest in the aftermath of the civil war	Delegation	Low	Free Syrian Army

The protests in Dera’a and the transfusion of the Arab Spring to Syria took everyone by surprise and political calculations started from day one. However, at the beginning of the conflict, Syria seemed to have old and new allies, Russia and Iran, Turkey, and Qatar. None of them wanted Assad to lose power in the country. The stance of the allies and in general Middle Eastern rulers was to condemn the violence publicly and ask the protesters for a compromise. However, and this shows that in the Middle East mistrust is a given even among allies, the patience for Assad evaporated in just two months. In July- August 2011 Qatar and Turkey retracted their support.

The Syrian civil war became a “multi-layered, highly localized, and rapidly changing strategic conflict” (Sayigh, 2013). International rivalries, the rise of sectarianism, and the growing prominence of radical jihadist groups have created a chaotic situation on the ground. In Syria’s case, one of the features of the conflict that shaped its onset and evolution is that there are two unequal groups. These two groups are divided over secular and religious cleavages, ideological Baathist versus non-Baathist, and core versus periphery issues (Fearon & Laitin, 2003, 2011) post-Cold War international system. We also find that after controlling for per capita income, more ethnically or religiously diverse countries have been no more likely to experience significant civil violence in this period. We argue for understanding civil war in this period in terms of insurgency or rural guerrilla warfare, a particular form of military practice that can be harnessed to diverse political agendas. The factors that explain which countries have been at risk for civil war are not their ethnic or religious characteristics but rather the conditions that favor insurgency. These include poverty—which marks financially and bureaucratically weak states and also favors rebel recruitment—political instability, rough terrain, and large populations. We wish to thank the many people who provided comments on earlier versions of this paper in a series of seminar presentations. The

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Saudi Arabia

From its establishment onwards, Saudi Arabia has been an autocratic regime, and this remains so until today. The Arab Spring challenged the foundations of that regime and the social contract with both the Sunni and the Shi'a citizens legitimized its power. What is puzzling, though, in the case of Saudi Arabia was how King Abdullah dealt with uprisings in other states. For example, one of the crucial questions that this paper examines is why Saudi Arabia had a different reaction to the Arab Spring protests. In specific terms, why did the Kingdom support the regime in the case of Bahrain, by directly intervening through the Gulf Cooperation Council, but intervened indirectly in the case of Syria?

Iran was the main rival in both cases and Saudi Arabia was getting increasingly frustrated with the way the regional status quo was shifting towards Iran. What happened with Bahrain on 14 March 2011 when Saudi Arabia sent 1,000 troops was not repeated with Syria even though there was an engagement of Saudi Arabia in the Syrian civil war. In both cases, analyses have emphasized that the rivalry between the two states is key to understanding the policies that Iran and Saudi Arabia, have implemented in response to the protests. However, in the case of Saudi Arabia, we see that there is a different outcome. I hold that interstate rivalry explains why Saudi Arabia responded to the challenges, but it does not allow us to understand why it will go for an indirect instead of a direct intervention against a rival, since in both cases Iran and Shi'a groups were participating in the uprisings. Another question that we should consider is: why did Saudi Arabia prefer not to intervene, while it had the chance to challenge Iran in Syria?

The Arab Spring uprisings did reach Saudi Arabia, specifically in the Eastern Province where the residents of the province are mostly Saudi Arabian "Twelver" Shi'a citizens along with a Sunni minority (Wehrey, 2013). From 1979 until 2011 the whole population of the province was targeted by the regime, suffering from "economic neglect and political marginalization" (Wehrey, 2013). One of the salient/predominant issues was the minimal engagement of this group with the general administration. The Shi'a population of the Eastern Province continued to have grievances in 2011, even if these had changed over the years. When the Iranian Republic was established in 1979, the Shi'a people in Saudi Arabia endorsed the revolution and there were many protests in the province. Iran seized the opportunity to gain influence in Saudi Arabia by establishing an Office of Liberation Movements in Iran that aimed to spread the revolution to other Shi'a communities in the MENA region. Throughout the 1980's the "Movements" was responsible for two attacks in Mecca in 1986 and 1987 in Mecca (O'Hern, 2012, p. 71). However, Iran was not able to gain the influence it desired through the local support in Saudi Arabia and preferred to have an alternative approach. In 1996 it created a militant

group in Saudi Arabia named Hezbollah al-Hejaz that was responsible for the Khobar Towers bombings (Kirkpatrick, 2015). In the following years, the relations between the two states started to change and with the National Dialogue in 2003, the demonstrations in the province stopped. However, the rhetoric that the region has close relations with Iran did not disappear and was always raised in moments of crisis, especially by prominent clerical figures (Wehrey, 2013).

The catalyst to this threat was the “Day of Rage” on March 11, 2011 after a failed attempt of an elite group in the province to come to the negation table with the King and communicate the grievances of both Sunni and Shi’a communities failed. The “Hunayn Revolution” instigated by the Free Youth Coalition was backed by both Sunnis and Shi’as, but it failed to motivate many citizens to take to the streets (or mobilize many citizens). The situation changed when the intervention in Bahrain unraveled and the Shi’a community inside Saudi Arabia was framed by national TV as threatening to the national security. Even though the protests started as a local issue that both religious communities raised, from October 2011 onwards the Shi’a Saudi Arabian citizens protested and continued to escalate into what was called “the largest and longest protest movement in Saudi Arabia’s modern history” (Matthiesen, 2012; Amnesty International, 2011). Is the movement funded or found? a leader, the Shi’a cleric Nimr al-Nimr, who in his sermons and public speeches called for equality for the Saudi Arabian Shi’a community as well as the end of the monarchy while protesters shouted “Death to Al Saud” (Townsend, 2016; Staff, 2011)⁵ condemning the Saudi family (Al Jazeera, 2011).

Saudi Arabia, through the Minister of Interior Naif bin ‘Abd Al-‘Aziz, accused Iran of backing the protests in the eastern city of Qatif (Peel, 2011). The minister was reported to have said: “Evil surrounds Saudi Arabia from every direction. We have the problems of Iraq to the north, Yemen to the south, the problems of Iran, which is threatening Saudi Arabia, [to the east], and the problems of Africa to the west. But, praise God, despite all this, we are experiencing stability and progress”(Yehoshua, 2011) and also here “a group of troublemakers... assembled... some on motorbikes and carrying petrol bombs as they began their actions to disrupt security at the behest of a foreign country which tried to undermine the security of the homeland in a blatant act of interference” (Reuters, 2011).

In this case, the mechanism worked as follows. An entity, namely the protests in the Eastern province created a tense environment for the Kingdom. The Kingdom believed that this specific uprising was exclusively related to the Shi’a population, and it failed to dress the Sunni population that was also present in the region. The perception of

5 He was further accused in October 2014 that he is responsible for “foreign meddling” “in the Kingdom along with disobeying its rulers and taking up arms against the security forces”. (Reuters, 2011).

the threat was also evident in the way that Saudi Arabia's state press was framing the protestations as exclusively Shi'a. The connection to Iran was in this case quite easy to make since the region used to receive support from Iran.

In a similar tone, in October 2011 an alleged plot to kill the Saudi Ambassador in the US was also linked to Iran because Arbabsiar, the person responsible for the attempt according to Saudi Arabia, was recruited by his cousin who holds a senior post at the Quds Force of Iran (Finn, 2013).

The question if Saudi Arabia is a status-quo state or not has sparked a debate among analysts who take opposite stances on this matter (Kamrava, 2012; Reiger, 2013). But if one adopts the perspective of Riyadh, it was becoming more obvious by the day that Iran was gaining ideological ground and cashing in influence in states that were allies of Saudi Arabia, such as Egypt, where it could not do so previously. In this way, Iran was creating instability in the region with Bahrain and Yemen (Gulcan, 2016). Still, that does not prove that Saudi Arabia is a status quo state, rather it seems that in this specific instance, it regarded Syria as a pivotal case to prevent Iran from getting the upper hand in the region. It was opposing the status Iran was gaining, and in this way, Saudi Arabia was opposed to the possible balance of power in case Iran secured influence in Syria. In the meantime, though, Saudi Arabia was not explicitly against the order. Rather, it was pro-order concerning the international system and the regional system. That is why a confrontation with Iran would have meant that Saudi Arabia was challenging the order aiming to control the region and secure its place as the regional hegemon. Saudi Arabia wanted to stay in power but not in a way that could create friction with its allies and not in a way that could force the Kingdom to withdraw without securing a clear victory.

The ruling Saud family, which managed to unite the Arab peninsula during the period of state formation, understood that some concessions needed to be in place for the Al Saud family to be able to secure its reign over other tribes. In this case, rentier policies have been in place to ensure that political representation will be minimalized for the families that gain the privileges of running no-taxation businesses, a social contract that politically stabilizes the royal family (Mabon, 2012).

As Mabon mentions, Saudi Arabia has put different mechanisms of coup-proofing in place that perceived threats that stem not only from the military but also from oppositional groups inside the state (Mabon, 2013). First, he points to the fact that Saudi Arabia and the royal family focused on establishing itself as the legitimate ruling elite. The Al Saud was not just an elite that gained power over other elites but rather the elite that connected closely to Saudi Arabian identity, the link to the religious aspect of the regime that ensures the safety of the two holy Muslim places. Of course, one cannot overlook the parallel military, the National Guard, which as Quinlivan points out has to "ensure the security of the regime", under the Ministry of Interior that ensures that external threats will not affect the regime (Hertog, 2011; Quinlivan, 1999). So, we see

that Saudi Arabia has gone through coup-proofing strategies that could not take on such an extended engagement in Syria against the Assad regime by itself.

By the summer of 2011, many opposition groups in Syria wanted to receive external funding to secure their survival (Phillips, 2016). The Kingdom openly supported the rebel forces but was reluctant to be involved in the conflict since there were other pressuring situations in the region at the time (Zarras, 2018). In 2012, Saudi Arabia financed a large transfer of arms from Croatia to the Free Syrian Army in southern Syria. From then on the involvement of Saudi Arabia has continued to evolve (Chivers & Schmitt, 2013; Worth, 2013).

Iran

In many cases, such as Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, the Iranian Republic effectively supports proxies that can promote Iranian interests on the ground. In similar ways, Iran used proxies in other conflicts from 1979 onwards that helped the state to facilitate relations with neighboring states while also having a revolutionary agenda against the international order (Ostovar, 2018; Tabatabai, 2018). Instrumental to that is the use of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) which was formed by militias that participated in the revolution and opposed the Shah. Of course, not all these groups unanimously supported Khomeini and once the regime was established, it had to undergo serious coup-proofing, especially after the Iraq-backed Nozheh coup plot in July 1980 to eliminate any threats of overturning the regime and also make sure that Artesh, the regular military force could stay, loyal to Khomeini (Axworthy, 2013, p. 185; Defense Intelligence Agency, 2019). The Artesh became more of a secondary force to IRGC, benefiting from privileges from access to resources and gaining influence over the regime, even if they gradually lost influence through the Constitution of the Islamic Republic. (Alfoneh, 2011). But IRGC, despite its initial difficulties, proved to be an effective force using guerrilla warfare that could ensure the security of Iran against Iraq (Defense Intelligence Agency, 2019). The perception that the IRGC and its asymmetrical warfare could ensure the security of the revolutionary regime against a Western invasion was further entrenched with the idea that Iran was a David to the American Goliath. In this way, the Iranian Republic continued to facilitate relations with Shi'a and Sunni groups in the region, providing support through financial and military assistance but also providing social services and ideological influences (Wehrey *et al.*, 2009).

Iran responds to domestic but also to foreign groups that pose a threat to the regime. Access to sources on domestic politics in Iran is indeed very limited and they could also be misleading. , However, three main sources of externally funded sides act inside Iran: Al-Qaeda, ISIS, and some Sunni groups like Jaish ul-Adl, Jundallah, and Harakat Ansar Iran. ISIS began to be a threat to Iran before the beginning of the Syria civil war

and it was believed that Saudi Arabia was funding the group⁶ (Williams, 2017). This sentiment was shared by Joe Biden, who said: “The Turks... the Saudis, the Emirates, etc, what were they doing? They were so determined to take down Syrian President Bashar al Assad and essentially have a proxy Sunni-Shi’a war, what did they do? They poured hundreds of millions of dollars and tens, thousands of tonnes of weapons into anyone who would fight against Assad” (Usher, 2014).

However, the situation on the ground was evolving rapidly. In July 2011, ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi sent close followers to set up a jihadist group in Syria, something that Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani succeeded in accomplishing by becoming the leader of JN (al-Nursa) in January 2012, and a few months later al-Nursa was one of the strongest forces fighting against Assad and was winning local support (Zelin, 2013). In the meantime, the FSA started to see al-Nursa as one of the best chances it had against Assad (Fletcher, 2012). The connection between AQI and al-Nursa is also supported by the American State Department sees al-Nursa as a front of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI): “Through these attacks, al-Nusra has sought to portray itself as part of the legitimate Syrian opposition while it is, in fact, an attempt by AQI to hijack the struggles of the Syrian people for its malign purposes” (Fletcher, 2012).

Meanwhile, a few months later the campaign “Breaking the Walls” started, which posed a serious threat not only to Syria but also to Iraq and Iran since the campaign was successful in freeing jihadists who participated in AQI attacks in 2006 and 2007 (Lewis, 2013; Wilson Center, 2019). The threat is real to the regimes of Syria and Iraq, both important states from the Iranian perspective.

The transnational threat was presented in Iran in the form of ISIS since Iran perceived that it was one of the top three targets of ISIS alongside the US and France (Tabatabai, 2018). It was also connected with the fact that the security of Iraq is very much connected to that of Iran (Malakoutikhah, 2018). So, the first part of the mechanism, that is an entity in the form of a transnational group, was ISIS in this case: it presented Iran with a threat to its regime. The threat of ISIS was evident to the world and especially the West in 2014 but Iran had a different perception of the crisis. In an interview the Iranian Foreign Minister mentioned “If Iraq dissolves, there will be chaos in the region. No one wants that” (Esfandiary & Tabatabai, 2015). That belief comes from the fact that Iran wants to oppose the scenario of Iraq splitting into three states based on their religious connection since such a scenario will pose a big threat to the borders of Iran (Esfandiary & Tabatabai, 2015).

6 It is important to highlight that ISIS was not present in Iran. However, the belief of the Iranian government was that ISIS was active in its territory, something that can be seen also in the official statements that are discussed here.

Iran is a revisionist state, therefore it is not satisfied with the balance of power nor with the order in the regional system primarily (Ehteshami & Molavi, 2012; Russell, 2014). The official ideological stance against the system can be traced by Press TV as the English-language division of the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) established in 2007. Radio and television broadcasting is controlled by the head of IRIB who is appointed by the Supreme Leader according to the constitution (Maysam, 2013). Of course, the ideology that is broadcasted is revisionist and adds proof to the fact that Iran is not content with the status quo and the order of the system (Firooz-Abadi, 2012; Wolf, 2018). However, the balance of power in the region does not allow Iran to directly challenge that order even if it is a revisionist state. It tries to challenge the order through indirect ways and influence key players of the regional system representing the “anti-Western axis” against Israel, the U.S., and Saudi Arabia. One can regard Iran as a “thin revisionist” (Behraves, 2018) “state revisionism” has been theoretically and empirically understudied. This article attempts to fill the lacuna by further conceptualizing revisionism and subsequently investigating its relationship with ontological (in. If we look at Iran through this lens as a “thin revisionist” that wants to influence the regional system it makes sense that they prefer to support Assad: they did want to change the regional status quo and the fall of Assad would probably mean that the order will be dictated by the international power, the U.S., and the regional power, Saudi Arabia.

In the ways to indirectly confront a regional player, Iran simply had a better chance to employ Hezbollah and the IRGC in the Syrian civil war. These actors both had strategic and battle knowledge that Assad was lacking (Fulton *et al.*, 2013). They could provide top-level support to Assad as well as intelligence support as part of the advisory mission, while they could also provide support to proxies in Syria and Hezbollah (Fulton *et al.*, 2013).

There is ample evidence that Iran stepped up its support as a response to the transnational threat of ISIS. Even if it was already engaged in the Syrian civil war by supporting Assad, the shift in material and strategic aspects is evident. Apart from that, we also see that what started as cautious support to an ally with some voices inside Iran calling to stop supporting Assad, changed in the following months (Abdo, 2011; Erlich, 2015).

According to U.S. officials, Iranian support for Syrian paramilitaries started in August 2012, when U.S. Secretary of Defense Panetta testified that there are “indications that [Iran is] trying to develop or trying to train a militia within Syria to be able to fight on behalf of the regime.” General Dempsey furthermore clarified that Iran called this militia Jaysh al-Sha’bi, or “the People’s Army,” and that it was “made up of Syrians, generally Shi’a and some Alawite” (BBC News, 2012).

The engagement of Iran in the conflict had been limited in the beginning, with only the provision of arms and ammunition through Iraq, while officers from IRGC’s Quds Force also had been transferred to the battlefields. In the months that followed the

involvement increased and Major-General Mohammed Ali Jafari publicly admitted that Iran was fighting alongside Assad (Hughes, 2014; Phillips, 2016).

Iran had intensified its involvement in Syria by late 2012 (Phillips, 2016, p. 161). One of the other pieces of evidence is that 48 Iranians were captured by a group of the Free Syrian Army in August 2012. Saudi Arabia broadcasted the event as a way to demonstrate the right decision they are making by supporting the rebels to their people (Cave & Saad, 2012). Iranians are stepping up their game from January 2012 onwards, when IRGC General Qassem Suleimani proposed a comprehensive strategy to Assad. General Ismail Gha'ani, deputy commander of the Quds Force said "If the Islamic Republic was not present in Syria, the massacre of people would have happened on a much larger scale" (Hokayem, 2014).

Turkey

When the Syria uprisings started Turkey had domestic issues pending attention and resolution. There were two important trials—Ergenekon (after 2008) and Sledgehammer (2010)—Erdogan asked for the removal of hundreds of military figures and journalists on the accusation of conspiring to a coup d'état (Litsas & Tziampiris, 2015; Phillips, 2016). In November 2010 there was the accusation that Sledgehammer, a case of a military coup in 2003 against the AKP had just seen the light of justice (Basaran, 2016) with 300 army personnel being jailed. Coup-proofing was a high priority on Erdoğan's political agenda. The military in Turkey has always exerted a powerful influence on domestic politics as well as foreign policy decisions. Indeed, the threat of a coup from the army in Turkey is high since they have been successful in plotting and succeeding in four cases in the past 50 years (Unver, 2009). The "deep state" with the code name Ergenekon allowed Erdoğan to bring selected members of the military to trial and accuse them of undermining the rule of law (MacDonald, 2019)⁷. The argument was so powerful that it caused the European Commission to state in 2010 that these trials could give "an opportunity for Turkey to strengthen confidence in the proper functioning of its democratic institutions and the rule of law" (European Commission, 2010). In the end, Erdoğan accomplished the overturn of the dominance of the military in shaping outcomes in the country, through the implementation of AKP's constitutional changes and through the popular support it gained through the 2010 referendum. This time they were not just accusations or reshuffling of the staff but rather AKP gave the prosecutors the power to investigate the military forces based on alleged conspiracies by secularists against AKP (Tait, 2010).

In June 2011 the collapse of negotiations talks with PKK sparked a domestic threat (Ser, 2017). This is evident in the tenfold increase of terrorist attacks from 10 in 2011

⁷ These accusations were fabricated as was revealed during investigations.

to 54 in 2012 that were also more intense causing the deaths of 226 people (GTD). In the meantime, the secret talks with PKK failed (Kadioğlu, 2019). The situation has become more complicated for Turkey since the Syrian started and the Assad regime receives Iranian support to sustain itself. The Kurdish issue will become particularly important for Turkey in 2012 since all the terrorist attacks were instigated by PKK while Turkey knows that Iran has backed YPG. Even if a strong PKK is a security threat to both states, Iran is making sure that Turkey will not start to disrespect the northern borders of Syria (Crisis Group Middle East Briefing, 2016; Oktav *et al.*, 2018, p. 206). When Assad surrendered control of key towns in northern Syria to the PKK-aligned Democratic Union Party, one of Erdoğan's worst fears materialized since areas such as Afrin, Kobani, and Rasulayn became the territorial base of the organization (Phillips, 2016). The timing of the threat was very important since Turkey had to recompose itself in no time and show certainty against the threats. In a way the strategic place of Turkey allows it to participate in the conflict without having to do anything other than just allowing it. However, this stance changed with the coming of the transnational threat in the form of PKK and Turkey started supporting groups more openly. Turkey started to engage more openly in May 2012. Iran could create what some analysts have called the "Shi'a Axis" but more importantly, they were able to cut the energy route to central Asia as well as Turkey's with that region (Olson, 2000). Iran on the other side also supported opposition groups in Turkey in other instances, such as the Kurdish party and the Turkish Hezbollah (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2007).

For Turkey, after the elections of 2002 and Erdogan's rise to power, along with Davutoglu, the aim was to become a regional power in three different regions, including the MENA region (Parlar Dal, 2016). Concerning the MENA region and especially the balance of power it seems that Turkey accomplished this. The political changes in the region and the uncertainty especially at Turkish borders created a situation that impacted the vital interests of Turkey. However, if Turkey decided to intervene militarily without provocations in Syria, it would automatically oppose the order of the international system, something Turkey was not willing to do at the moment since it would mean a confrontation with the US (Bagdonas, 2015). In essence, Turkey was opposed to the ways the balance of power was shifting towards Iran but at the same time did not want to oppose the order of the region (Harrison, 2018).

Coup-proofing tactics might create a safer space for the regime to survive but they have repercussions for the military effectiveness of a state especially regarding the coordination of military units and the soldier's ability to autonomously manage a unit (Pilster & Bohmelt, 2011). In Turkey, there is a political elite that aimed for democratization to achieve a high level of coup-proofing, which was mainly aimed at military elites, and former army commanders, who support a secular Turkey and oppose Erdoğan's and AKP efforts to Islamize Turkey (Güler & Bölücek, 2016).

The option of supporting one of the opposition groups was very convenient for Turkey. Indeed, Turkey turned a blind eye to the Free Syrian Army meetings being held on its territory. The Turkish involvement in the Syrian civil war was treated with caution. Even if they allowed for the FSA to hold meetings on its territory it did not actively start to fund the rebels until July 2012, when they created a “nerve center” to allow for rebel forces to train and get weapons alongside Qatar and Saudi Arabia (O’Bagy, 2013; Regan & Amena, 2012). Turkey though had a paramilitary ally, the Muslim Brotherhood, and its affiliates such as the Liwa al-Tawheed and later Ahrar as-Sham that had knowledge of guerilla warfare and could cooperate with MIT, the Turkish intelligence agency (Phillips, 2017).

The proxy war that Turkey waged can be analysed as a different stage within the engagement leading to escalation and ultimately Turkey wanting to be more active in the war. It is important to mention that the decision to have a more meaningful engagement comes in the same month that the Syrian army decided to withdraw from the North of the country when the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the People’s Protection Units (YPG), the military wing of the party, are gaining ground in Syria (Federici, 2015).

Conclusion

In this paper, I explained why interstate rivalry cannot explain why Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey decided to support paramilitary and rebel groups in the Syrian civil war. I proposed an alternative explanation based on the transnational threat. I provided a concept of the phenomenon of proxy war and presented the theoretical causal mechanism of proxy war. The empirical part of the paper explored whether the causal mechanism of proxy war was set in motion in the three case studies.

The findings indicate that there was a transnational threat that all the states had to respond to. The threat stemmed from opposition groups inside the states that received external support from third states and created a threat to the regime, either through protests or terrorist attacks. The states had to respond to the threat based on their position within the regional order and their intentions towards the international order. Lastly, the decision to go to proxy war was influenced by the coup-proofing activities of the states before the Syrian civil war, which had an impact on the military efficiency and coordination of the national armies.

The case of Saudi Arabia seems to fit the mechanism best since it followed the steps of the mechanism, and the empirical record explains the decision to change from supporting the Assad regime to orchestrating a proxy war and responding to the transnational threat of Iran. The case of Iran was also positive, but we had to take Iran’s responses to threats into consideration since the probability of having a confrontation with anyone who poses a threat to the regime is low. This case was also affected by the fact that the access to resources for the domestic debate regarding Iran’s position towards the Assad regime was ideal.

Finally, the case of Turkey was also positive and explained how the domestic calculation at the time of the initiation of the Syrian uprisings until the decision of Turkey to support rebel groups was gradually developed in conversation with the developments in the northern part of Syria. It is important to notice that Turkey was already more engaged in the Syrian civil war since the spillover of the civil war reached the borders of neighboring Turkey quite quickly. The sources for Turkey were very indicative of the calculations that Erdoğan had to consider before deciding to wage a proxy war.

We see that the mechanism of proxy war in the case of Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey explains how the states decided to support rebel groups or paramilitaries to respond to transnational threats that were present in the MENA region during the Arab Spring. The mechanism of proxy war to explain why, despite the multiple interests that states may have had in the conflict, their initial decision to wage proxy wars instead of intervening directly, was guided by domestic as well as international calculations for surviving the crisis, remaining in office, and remaining regional powers in the MENA region.

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