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# Iran's New Interventionism: Reconceptualizing Proxy Warfare in the Post-Arab Spring Middle East

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Reconceptualizing Proxy Warfare in the Post-Arab Spring  
Middle East*

Emmet Hollingshead

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“...difference arises from the social condition both of states in themselves and in their relations to each other. Out of this social condition and its relations war arises, and by it war is subjected to conditions, is controlled and modified.”

-Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*

#### Abstract:

Iranian proxy groups in the Middle East pose a continuing challenge to stability, American interests, and peaceful self-governance in the region. From a strategic standpoint, Iran's innovative use of proxy groups to pursue their political and military interests has proven difficult to understand and respond to within a comprehensive framework. This paper will argue in favor of reviving and modifying the 'new wars' literature as a theoretical framework for understanding Iranian proxy groups and regional interests. It analyses Iranian actions in fostering relationships with non-state actors in the region as an extension of the state into 'new wars' dynamics and concludes that Iran foments or pacifies 'new wars' tensions as those tensions fit broader Iranian security interests.

## INTRODUCTION

As the Global War on Terror fades from security discourse and state ambitions return to the fore, Iranian activities in the Middle East stand out as a particularly troublesome challenge.<sup>1</sup> Iran has cultivated relationships with proxy groups throughout the region which share interests and ideologies with Tehran. The groups wage war and conduct political activities generally in line with Iranian interests, and in exchange, Iran provides financial and military support, as well as occasional political advising. Through this network of proxy groups, Iran has managed to construct a regional security network despite general opposition to Iranian interests and influences among regional states. Iran's is an innovative and unusual strategy, thus presenting a complex and pressing challenge for US policymakers and for academics interested in the political puzzle.

In attempting to understand the workings of the Iranian proxy group strategy, policymakers have long grappled with some variation of a core question: what does Iran seek in their region and how do they go about obtaining it? That question has gone through a long debate, with many insightful perspectives but without a comprehensive answer. The factors which influence Iranian decision making are overlapping, difficult to discern, and at times contradictory. In the most basic terms, the two main drivers of the Iranian proxy group strategy are defensive security concerns and expansive ideological goals. On one hand, Iran seeks to bolster its security by deterring regional adversaries, as well as the United States, from

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<sup>1</sup> "Mattis: US National Security Focus No Longer Terrorism." BBC News. January 19, 2018. Accessed January 20, 2018. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-42752298>.

interfering with, influencing, or perhaps even toppling Iran's domestic system of governance. Here, Iran's regional allies and proxy groups are primarily security partners. Iran relies on this network of proxy groups as an active fighting force, albeit under significantly different conditions than those faced by a traditional military. On the other hand, Iran seeks to export the revolutionary Shia political ideology on which its government is based. For this reason, among others, nearly all of the proxy groups with which Iran pursues and maintains relationships share the political ideology of *Wilayat al-Faqih* or "rule of the jurist." Furthermore, the proxy groups are rarely state governments, since state governments in the region are mostly Sunni. Notably, both Iranian security doctrine and theocratic ideology take US influence in the Middle East as one of their main obstacles.

Yet as US influence in the region wanes, the proxy group strategy must be viewed primarily in the context of the Saudi-Iran rivalry, which dates back to the birth of the current Iranian government in 1979. Though Saudi Arabia had enjoyed a friendly relationship with the U.S.-backed Shah of Iran during the 60's and 70's, their relationship Iran's new government was more antagonistic. Over the following decades, the relationship between the two countries soured and began to take on greater religious and sectarian importance. Saudi Arabia, heavily Sunni and home to Islam's two holiest cities in Mecca and Medina, stood staunchly against Iran's export of their Shia Islamic Revolution. Iran, predominantly Shia and home to many of the greatest Shia theologians and theological universities, promoted their philosophy of *Wilayat al-Faqih* as a political principle throughout the Muslim world.

In more recent years, two particular sets of events shaped the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, both increasing tensions: the US invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, and the Arab Spring.<sup>2</sup> These sets of events removed powerful, centralized state actors and eliminated the monopoly on violence which those state actors held in their borders, thereby creating areas for competition between the two regional adversaries. The 2011 uprisings in particular reintroduced and reinforced the idea that domestic revolutionary factions could play key roles in issues of international affairs between states themselves. It is widely noted that Iran has always supported proxy groups. After the Arab Spring, however, the regime's support for non-state actors skyrocketed.

Experts studying the surge of Iranian proxy groups in multiple theaters post-2011 hold divergent views on the nature of the conflicts. Many have suggested that there has been a shift back to an old way of warfare. Such thinking is in line with the broader observation that the world system is moving away from the unipolar moment, back towards an era of state competition. For instance, Brookings Senior Fellow and Vice President Bruce Jones wrote in his introduction to a project on “the new geopolitics” that “[i]n politically unstable environments such as Syria and Yemen, we’ve witnessed the re-emergence of old-fashioned proxy warfare.”<sup>3</sup> In a similar vein, others have argued that the proxy wars between Saudi Arabia and Iran — like that in Yemen — harken back to ancient competitions over third-party states carried out by parties bought and paid for by the ruling powers.<sup>4</sup> While such lines of thinking have merit, it is

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<sup>2</sup> Council on Foreign Relations Center for Preventive Action, “Managing the Saudi-Iran Rivalry,” 25 October 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Bruce Jones, “The New Geopolitics,” *Brookings Institution*, 28 November 2017.

[https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2017/11/28/the-new-geopolitics/?utm\\_campaign=Foreign%20Policy&utm\\_source=hs\\_email&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_content=60558728](https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2017/11/28/the-new-geopolitics/?utm_campaign=Foreign%20Policy&utm_source=hs_email&utm_medium=email&utm_content=60558728).

<sup>4</sup> Martin Reardon, Saudi Arabia, Iran and the 'Great Game' in Yemen,” *al-Jazeera*, 26 March 2015.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/09/saudi-arabia-iran-great-game-ye-201492984846324440.html>.

far from a complete picture of the goings-on in the region, and by suggesting that this has all been done before, may in fact only serve to obscure the deeper changes at play.

Others have noted that these events do indeed constitute a shift toward something not quite like the proxy wars of the past. Calling it “A new kind of proxy warfare,” Max Fisher writes in *The New York Times* that the Iranian proxy strategy tends to eschew hard-line militias in favor of exploiting failing and weak democratic institutions.<sup>5</sup> Fisher’s article focuses on the political nature of the new proxy groups as they were forged under the sectarian Hussein regime and resulting political vacuum. Viewing Iran’s proxy groups as something new allows for the possibility to understand them in their own contexts and to see how they differ organizationally from previous proxy wars such as those of the Cold War. Dr. Stig Jarle Hansen’s examination of cohesion mechanisms among African jihadist groups serves as a pioneering example for this kind of work.<sup>6</sup>

Of particular importance, it has been stressed that these new proxy wars take politics and development not as tangentially related factors but as fundamental elements of the conflict. J. M. McInnis at the American Enterprise Institute has elaborated on how Iran and Iranian proxy groups build soft power through political activities, efforts for education, and involvement in social life. McInnis identifies Iranian charity work as a point of contention in the battle for the greater Middle East, singling out mass weddings sponsored by the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee as one such way in which Iran economically indebts surrounding populations.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Max Fisher, “How the Iranian-Saudi Proxy Struggle Tore Apart the Middle East,” *The New York Times*, 19 Nov. 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/20/world/middleeast/iran-saudi-proxy-war.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Stig Jarle Hansen. 2017. “Unity Under Allah? Cohesion Mechanisms in Jihadist Organizations in Africa.” *Armed Forces & Society* (2017). doi:10.1177/0095327X17740086.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Rubin, “Deciphering Iranian decision making and strategy today,” *AEI*, 28 Jan. 2013. <http://www.aei.org/publication/deciphering-iranian-decision-making-and-strategy-today/>.



Similar criticisms are levelled at Hezbollah's budding welfare state and other social services, which act as a means of building popular support for political enterprise.<sup>8</sup> Experts worry that such seemingly benign and even immediately beneficial activity could pave the way for alternative structures of governance which ultimately run counter to U.S. interests.

The extent to which Iran commands or controls the proxy groups' activity in such arenas is also contested. Some explicitly argue or at least seem to imply that Iran has direct control over the affiliated groups. Scholars at American Enterprise Institute often paint a picture of a direct relationship in which Iran, as the supplier of arms and cash and the politically more powerful organization, can tell proxy groups what to do. For instance, McInnis has suggested that in the event of a first strike on Iranian nuclear and military facilities by either Israel or the US which neutralized the possibility of an Iranian response, Iran would be able to work through Hezbollah to target US assets in the Middle East or Israel itself.<sup>9</sup> Others see the Houthi rebels in Yemen through a similar lens. In that situation, the Houthis supposedly act as an offshoot loyal to Iran as a state and Ayatollah Khamenei as a religious figure. A loyal state under Iranian direction located directly on Saudi Arabia's southern border would then serve to both antagonize Saudi regional interests and incite Shia populations towards domestic unrest in Saudi Arabia. In Iraq, a similar situation is predicted with the Shia militias. That understanding in particular is based on the previous relationship between Iraqi Shia militias and Iranian military forces during the Iran-Iraq War.

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<sup>8</sup> Melani Cammett, "How Hezbollah helps (and what it gets out of it)," *Washington Post*, 2 Oct. 2014. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/10/02/how-hezbollah-helps-and-what-it-gets-out-of-it/?utm\\_term=.135003e9dff0](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/10/02/how-hezbollah-helps-and-what-it-gets-out-of-it/?utm_term=.135003e9dff0).

<sup>9</sup> J. Matthew McInnis, "Iranian Deterrence Strategy and Use of Proxies," *AEI*, 6 Dec. 2016. <http://www.aei.org/publication/iranian-deterrence-strategy-and-use-of-proxies/>.

Others, however, argue that Iran has only limited ability to control and direct proxy groups. They point to the fact that arms sales and cash support from Iran to the Houthis in Yemen have been limited at best, granting Iran little leverage to direct their actions. Furthermore, Houthi leaders have made statements in the past professing their independence from Iran and their desire to remain an independent movement. Similarly, Taliban fighters in Afghanistan are by no means a product of Iranian activity, even if the political connections between the Taliban and Iran are numerous and growing. The conflict in Afghanistan was in full swing before any Iranian involvement, and as will be detailed later on, Iran first fought against the Taliban. The Balochistan separatists in Pakistan and the Shia dissidents in Bahrain also began their political campaigns without Iranian involvement, and so would be unlikely to accede to Iranian direction.

Upon examining the debate on Iranian proxy groups in the Middle East, what stands out is the state-centric way in which many approach the problem. Though the policy debate on transnational security issues such as terrorism has not receded from either general public or public intellectual consciousness, the neo-realist approach to international politics based on inter-state competition has regained prominence in the discourse. This has led to a tendency to describe the myriad of Iranian-linked proxy groups across the Middle East as extended arms of the Iranian security apparatus, working towards a common goal as subordinated affiliates. In reality, the situation is quite different. The Iranian network of proxy groups is loose, often haphazard, and fraught with conflicting interests even as many of their interests align. Iran plays neither commander nor acute inspiration for many of these conflicts. Rather, the conflicts arise on their own. Once a conflict has emerged as either an active war zone or a tension-filled political situation, it is at that point that the Iranian strategy comes into play. Experts who have

correctly noted this political distance between Iran and the proxy groups have not yet elaborated on a framework through which to approach and understand those political interactions.

Incomplete approaches to understanding the relationships between Iran and the affiliated proxy groups mean that policymakers are ill-equipped to engage with Iran and with other actors in the region. If we misunderstand where the political power lies and what the groups' agendas are, there is an increased chance of flawed policy which inadvertently empowers the wrong actors. This was precisely what happened in negotiations with the Balkan states in the 1990s. A thorough assessment of the underlying political, military, and economic situations must be the foundation to write and implement policy which constructively addresses the problems currently plaguing the Middle East. As such, what is needed is a framework through which we might view the already existing situation on the ground to which Iranian military and political leaders have attached their own interests and how those Iranian leaders have attempted to push and nudge those pre-existing conflicts towards outcomes favorable to Iran.

To build such an understanding, this paper will argue that Iran's regional strategy of cultivating relationships with non-state proxy groups is an innovative approach to a certain regional dynamic most prominently detailed in the 'new wars' literature of the late 1990s and early 2000s. This literature examined a specific social mode of conflict and warfare in the Balkans and sub-Saharan Africa which was characterized by the dissolution of both state bureaucracies and of the monopoly on violence. I argue that a similar situation has occurred in the Middle East, but while the most prominent intervening powers of the earlier wars were the countries of the global North allied under the unipolar moment, the wars in the Middle East have seen regional actors — specifically Iran — intervene in the conflict to further their regional

interests. The Iranian intervention, unlike the old Northern intervention, does not necessarily seek to quell violence and restore a centralized state. Rather, Iran takes advantage of this ungoverned space to pursue its own interests in the region. Often, Iran is better able to pursue their interests within the context of low-intensity conflict. That low-intensity conflict, perpetuated in part by Iranian arms and cash, allows for smoother operation of Iranian special forces such as the Quds Force, prevents competing regional hegemony from emerging, and maintains Iran's status as a locus of revolutionary politics. While this strategy is not as irrational and chaotic as common phrases such "rogue state" suggest, it has clear negative impacts on stability, prosperity, and US interests in the Middle East.

To make this argument, I will first outline the 'new wars' literature and explain how certain concepts from this literature can help build an understanding of the regional security situation in the Middle East. I will also explain how this literature must be tweaked and re-examined in order to gain thorough insight into the puzzle of the Iranian proxy network. Then, I will give a historical account of how Iran has built and cultivated relationships with proxy groups in the region, beginning all the way back in 1982 with Hezbollah and reaching a peak in the current post-Arab Spring Middle East. By incorporating a longer-term historical perspective, I will be able to more fully detail my arguments and show how the Iranian strategy has latched onto certain historical contexts and evolved over the years. Finally, I will conclude with a brief recap of the insights gleaned from this method of approach.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

For this project, I will apply a groups of texts known as the ‘new wars’ literature. Started by and named after Mary Kaldor’s book *New and Old Wars*, published in 1999, this literature grew out of the post-Cold War moment during which inter-state competition was relatively low — or at least out of sight for most Westerners. Broadly, this literature addresses the seemingly unique security situation of the 1990s and 2000s which focused on, according to Duffield’s assessment at least, returning (or creating) governance in ungoverned spaces. Some scholars argued that the new geopolitical arrangement would last indefinitely and that a new mode of global politics had been born. Others, somewhat more cautious in their predictions, stuck to acknowledging and examining a certain, distinct security dynamic that began brewing during the Cold War and erupted almost immediately after its resolution. With the resurgence of inter-state competition and conflict — see Defense Secretary Mattis’s recent comments that the main security priority of the United States is no longer terrorism but great powers — the ‘new wars’ approach lost favor as media attention and research dollars returned to more traditional realist schools of thought.<sup>10</sup>

Yet, history does not flow backwards. Though minor world powers have regained lost statuses and reasserted their interests following the unipolar moment, the social upheavals of the ‘new wars’ did not simply vanish. Instead, as I will show, they have been regrouped under state interests — in this case Iranian interests — in complex and curious ways. In a way, then, one might say that this project has two starting points. Primarily we have the problem of how to best understand Iranian activity in the Middle East so that we might counter its more negative effects.

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<sup>10</sup> “Mattis: US National Security Focus No Longer Terrorism.” BBC News.

This problem is the impetus for the project. However, in order to answer that problem, we must first delve into the secondary problem of how state collapse and the ‘new wars’ have evolved and interacted with resurgent state interests even as the conflicts retain many of the same characteristics which Kaldor et. al. addressed over a decade ago.

Mary Kaldor was first to argue that the political and social organization of warfare had significantly shifted since the era between Clausewitz and the end of the Cold War. No longer did the state constitute the primary locus of warfare. Münkler, building on Kaldor, examined the economic relationships which fostered this ‘new’ brand of warfare and stressed that it was only possible due to the unfolding era of globalization. Finally, Duffield responded that these economic networks, as well as the socio-political reorganization which occurred after the Cold War, imposed the interests of global North upon the global South in ways which caused, manipulated, and exacerbated these ‘new wars’ even as the North ostensibly set out to end them. Once I have reviewed certain key ideas from these authors, I will demonstrate how this literature, though it has its roots in the Balkan and sub-Saharan African conflicts of nearly decades ago, can be profitably applied to the current situation in the Middle East.

### *A Note on Newness*

One of the primary criticisms of the ‘new wars’ literature has been that what the literature described was not entirely “new”. War and conflict between non-state actors has an extensive history which begins far before even Clausewitz set the stage for the examination of warfare in the West. In fact, Münkler addresses this criticism early in his book, writing that “I am well aware that [the conflicts] are not so new and in many respects even involve a return of something

thoroughly old.”<sup>11</sup> Yet he goes on to argue — as does Kaldor in a 2013 paper responding to critiques of her original thesis — that the term ‘new’ does not so much suggest the complete originality of the form of warfare described as it denotes a change from the state-centric model which dominated international security discourse for centuries.<sup>12</sup> To illustrate this point, both Kaldor and Münkler open their books with a description of the formation of ‘old wars’ and old empires before moving on to how that model for conflict has become inadequate in their current moment. The term ‘new’ succinctly recognized this break from the past, and it made for catchy titles to boot.

In this paper, the term ‘new’ will be used almost entirely as a signifier. If the ‘new wars’ were arguably not new twenty years ago, they are certainly not new today. The term ‘new wars literature’ simply signifies the set of texts which provide the basis of my theoretical framework. Similarly, the term ‘new wars’ connotes the collection of intra-state fighting, transnational politics, and splintered economies which has emerged in the Middle East. I do not argue that this is a particularly recent development. Indeed, my approach to understanding Iran’s method of proxy warfare begins in the 1980s with Hezbollah, the Iran-Iraq War, and the earliest days of the current Iranian government. Thus, the ‘new wars’ are not actually that new. Still, the ‘new wars’ literature holds enticing possibilities for contemporary application, and some ideas and concepts in that literature are clearly present in today’s conflicts. Therefore it is possible to reexamine the ‘new wars’ not as the sea-change in international relations which they were originally purported to be, but as a more temporally and spatially limited change. ‘New wars’ did not change the fact that the state is the dominant type of actor in international security, but they did impact the way

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<sup>11</sup> Herfried Münkler. 2005. *The New Wars*. Translated by Patrick Camiller. Oxford: Polity, p. 2.

<sup>12</sup> Mary Kaldor (2013). “In Defence of New Wars.” *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development*. 2(1), p.Art. 4. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5334/sta.at>

that states organize, prepare for, and conduct war. Thus, the ‘new wars’ are neither new nor extinct.

### ***Kaldor***

Mary Kaldor begins her book with the premise that war as we know it is not an immutable characteristic of human interaction but has in fact changed and evolved over centuries and continents. In her words, “Every society has its own characteristic form of war”<sup>13</sup>. From this premise, we can then determine that “what we [Western academics and policy-makers] ... define as war, is, in fact, a specific phenomenon which took shape in Europe somewhere between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries.”<sup>14</sup> Over the course of those centuries, European warfare took on somewhat different forms. We saw the ages of the absolutist state in the 17th and 18th centuries, the nation-state of the 19th century, coalitions during the World Wars, and finally the bloc system throughout the Cold War.<sup>15</sup> Each mode of organization for conflict was also accompanied by its own technological innovations, political objectives, and economic systems. During this period, Kaldor argues, war progressed towards Clausewitz’s idea of ‘total war’ as military technologies attained greater and greater ability to destroy. ‘Total war’ peaked during the Second World War. Then, with the advent and proliferation of nuclear weapons, total war became unviable. Following the Cold War, and prodded on by the shift of global political power which came with its end, societies once again changed the way they organize for and conduct war.

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<sup>13</sup> Mary Kaldor. 1999. *New and Old Wars : Organized Violence in a Global Era*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, p. 13.

<sup>14</sup> Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*, p. 13.

<sup>15</sup> Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*, p. 14.



Kaldor locates the starting point for the ‘new wars’ in the erosion of the monopoly on organized violence<sup>16</sup>. As state structures disintegrated and were no longer capable of controlling violence within their territory, low-intensity conflict took hold. This was accompanied by a breakdown of vertically-organized political structures, providing a key component in the way the ‘new wars’ were organized. General decentralization of violence and political power was a fundamental component of the ‘new wars’. In Kaldor’s central case study, the conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina, decentralization and collapse was brought about by the end of the USSR. From the wreckage of the now-defunct political institutions of the USSR, and lacking a guiding political philosophy in place of communism, new and virulent forms of nationalism arose.

Identity politics, according to Kaldor, now dominated the political space left empty by the collapsed state. Kaldor defines ‘identity politics’ as “movements which mobilize around ethnic, racial, or religious identity for the purpose of claiming state power.”<sup>17</sup> Such politics is “fragmentative, backward-looking and exclusive” based on “nostalgia,... the reconstruction of a heroic past, the memory of injustices, real or imagined, and of famous battles, won or lost.”<sup>18</sup> These identities fill the “political vacuum” and provide a founding narrative for political movements.<sup>19</sup> The fragmentation in political identity plays off the similar fragmentation of the monopoly on violence, resulting in a political landscape filled by networks rather than unified groups. Kaldor quotes Robert Reich in observing that while old political structures resembled pyramids, these new network were more akin to spider webs.<sup>20</sup> This type of ‘network war’ or ‘network violence’ is more fully explored by Duffield. For her part, Kaldor identifies five types

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<sup>16</sup> Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*, p. 5.

<sup>17</sup> Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*, p. 76.

<sup>18</sup> Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*, p. 78.

<sup>19</sup> Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*, p. 82.

<sup>20</sup> Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*, p. 74.

of fighting units: “regular armed forces or remnants thereof; paramilitary groups; self-defence units; foreign mercenaries; and, finally, regular foreign troops generally under international auspices.”<sup>21</sup>

As a final part of the puzzle, Kaldor elaborates on the economic systems which drive the ‘new wars’. In a conflict preceded by the erosion and collapse of a centralized political system, most individuals face extreme economic insecurity. Nascent political groups are also unable to secure supplies. There is little or no infrastructure for economic production, and thus there can be no taxation either. In place of production or taxation, groups rely on criminal activity and external funding. Kaldor notes four primary modes of external funding: remittances, direct assistance from the diaspora, assistance from foreign governments and humanitarian assistance.<sup>22</sup> In tandem with the networked political organization of the ‘new wars’, economic organization is decentralized and horizontal. Groups rely on small weapons, civilian equipment, and stores of guns and ammunition left over from the collapse of the state. Since this economic system does not have the social or physical infrastructure to produce goods and supplies, pre-existing and increasing poverty are nearly uniform features of the ‘new wars’. Duffield picks up this observation later as a starting point for analyzing the Western (or Northern) reaction. To conclude, Kaldor states that although economics underlie the situation, “[t]he new wars have political goals” and “economic motivation alone is insufficient to explain [their] scale, brutality, and sheer viciousness.”<sup>23</sup> Münkler goes on to dispute this point.

Kaldor provides the earliest sketches of the ‘new wars’, and provides some important fundamental concepts. The first of these concepts is that the ‘new wars’ occur in the areas of

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<sup>21</sup> Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*, p. 92.

<sup>22</sup> Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*, p. 103.

<sup>23</sup> Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*, p. 110, 106.

collapsed states. Münkler agrees with this assessment, writing that we see them in the “margins and breaches of former empires.”<sup>24</sup> Fragmentation leads to low-intensity, long-term fighting, among horizontal ‘spiderweb’ political structures. The second is that they are fueled by identity politics. In the Balkans, this was nationalism and religion. In sub-Saharan Africa, it tended to be ethnicities. In today’s Middle East, the warring identities are mainly religious sects. Third and finally, the political groups rely on small arms, criminal activity such as looting, and external funding. They are produced by and reproduce extreme economic insecurity and poverty. Münkler and Duffield concur with most if not all of these preliminary points, and then expand into their own analyses.

### ***Münkler***

Herfried Münkler’s focus in *The New Wars* argues that economics play a vital role in the conflicts. He writes that “the financing of war is always an important element in the actual fighting” and this is why the ‘new wars’ can stretch for decades unlike the “classical conflict between states.”<sup>25</sup> Like Kaldor, he begins with a history of warfare as a state-conducted and state-building activity throughout the past few centuries. In Münkler’s history, war is an activity used to enrich both states and individuals, not merely a political tool consolidate power. War as it formed in 17th through 19th century Europe was an economically rational endeavor and “[t]he ranks soon filled up with soldiers of fortune.”<sup>26</sup> As the state came to dominate war-making, the practice of warfare then became uniform. Literal uniforms, as well as assigned duties, rigid command structures, and rules of war were introduced. The symmetrical relationship of power

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<sup>24</sup> Münkler, *The New Wars*, p. 5.

<sup>25</sup> Münkler, *The New Wars*, p. 1.

<sup>26</sup> Münkler, *The New Wars*, p. 52.

between states added to this clear-cut understanding of what war was, how it was conducted, and who conducted it. Eventually, with the development of ultra-powerful militaries, war became no longer worthwhile. The economic disincentives were simply too great. With this shift in both technology and economic feasibility, we could then reasonably expect that individual actors would shift the way they conducted war to find a profitable way to do it.

Central to Münkler's analysis of the 'new wars' is the idea that the 'new wars' provide economic incentives to wage war which classical state conflicts no longer do. This starts with individuals. Though warlords conduct recruitment via "subcultures of urban youth," individuals' choices are primarily based on economic opportunities and chances to attain social status. In the midst of mass poverty and warfare, individuals sometimes face no better choice than to pick up a cheap gun. Herein lies the problem sustaining the 'new wars': they are "war on the cheap."<sup>27</sup> Using light weapons and civilian infrastructure, groups avoid the cost of the heavy artillery and high technology on which state militaries rely. What's more, to obtain these cheap goods it is not even necessary to produce them internally. Instead, war is funded "through robbery or trade in illegal goods" as well as assistance from foreign sources in the form of either humanitarian aid or direct funding. Groups rely on these sources as a fundamental part of a broader economic system in which the best path to economic security is through fighting the 'new wars'. Münkler's purpose in his economic assessment is to negate the idea that the conflicts are irrational. In his conception, if the West conceives of these wars as irrational episodes of ethnic and racial tensions, "then the obvious course is to tackle them with the instruments of the Enlightenment."<sup>28</sup> However, this approach would fail to address the rational incentives underlying the 'new wars'.

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<sup>27</sup> Münkler, *The New Wars*, p. 74.

<sup>28</sup> Münkler, *The New Wars*, p. 91

So long as this type of warfare is a “lucrative proposition,” treating the superficial ethnic motivations will do little to alleviate the problem.

Münkler’s main point is that while the new wars can often seem disorientingly chaotic and even irrational, it is in fact possible to understand them through a rational lens. Within the political context of collapsing empires and failing economies, individuals and groups turn to low-scale violence as a means of attaining a living and pursuing political power. Whereas Kaldor argued that economics could not explain the brutality of the new wars, Münkler stresses that economic analysis can still provide an understanding of why participants do what they do. Identity politics in Münkler’s view is layered on top of a framework more recognizable to academics steeped in Enlightenment thought: that of the ‘rational actor’. The asymmetry, autonomization, and destatization of the new wars are, according to Münkler, products of the political and economic incentives present in the contexts in which the actors exist. Duffield, in *Global Governance and Development, Security and Unending War*, attempts to elucidate how exactly those contexts arose and how the West/North has responded.

### ***Duffield***

Duffield, in both *Global Governance and the New Wars* and in *Development, Security and Unending War*, focuses on how the global North addressed the ‘new wars’, and how the ‘new wars’ fit into broader international contexts and global trends. Duffield begins *Global Governance* with a note on the historical placement and description of the new phenomena, arguing that trying to fit it into past models belies “an inability to imagine that the nature of

power and authority may have radically changed.”<sup>29</sup> In Duffield’s view, with new changes in technology come more fundamental changes in political and economic organization. These in turn result in new forms of international political power.

Duffield summarizes the shift in international political power as “a noticeable move from the hierarchical, territorial and bureaucratic relation of government to the more poly-archival, non-territorial and networked relations of governance.”<sup>30</sup> This observation echoes Kaldor’s description of the shift from pyramid structures to spider web structures. Duffield describes this type of organization as “network war”, “an extreme form of the competition that exists between non-state and state systems of regulatory authority”.<sup>31</sup> Additionally, network war “is concerned with social, cultural and politics relations” and therefore operates somewhat differently than traditional states. Duffield disagrees with Kaldor that the ‘new wars’ are about ethnic cleansing, countering that “genocide is possible [but] it is an exception rather than the rule”.<sup>32</sup> Comprised of “strategic complexes” rather than traditional mass mobilization operations, ‘new wars’ blur the line between conflict and peace, civilian and combatant, ally and enemy. The networks are integrated into modes of production in such a way that they “cannot be easily separated out and criminalized in relation to the networks which characterize peace”.<sup>33</sup>

Northern leaders tend to treat these complexes antagonistically. Duffield argues that the political complexes of the global South have grown out of liberalism’s failure to provide fulfilling political identities. Therefore, Southern peoples often turn to illiberal leaders who

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<sup>29</sup> Mark R. Duffield. 2001. *Global Governance and the New Wars : The Merging of Development and Security*. London: Zed Books, p. 33.

<sup>30</sup> Duffield, *Global Governance*, p. 11

<sup>31</sup> Duffield, *Global Governance*, p. 190

<sup>32</sup> Duffield, *Global Governance*, p. 192.

<sup>33</sup> Duffield, *Global Governance*, p. 190.

create new social fabrics through warfare. Northern academics and policymakers dismiss these leaders as illegitimate because ultimately, in Duffield's view, the North views ungoverned spaces as a threat to the global reign of liberalism. Therefore, their "preferred future of the ungoverned space is the governance state".<sup>34</sup> To go about this project, the North employs a slew of NGOs, development organizations, and security measures as it attempts to impose a governance structure on the ungoverned space. Provocatively, Duffield argues that if the Cold War were World War III, then liberal peace vs. the 'new wars' constitutes World War IV<sup>35</sup>. Such a sentiment takes after both Kaldor and Münkler who argued that there are two dynamics in play: the fighting between political groups involved in the 'new wars', and the global divide between particularist ideologies and global cosmopolitanism.

A final interesting point from Duffield is that he takes a somewhat different understanding of the relationship between war and society than Kaldor and Münkler do. Whereas Kaldor and Münkler tend to view the nature of warfare reacting to the conditions which broader society places upon it, Duffield seems to see it the other way around. He takes "war as a given: an ever-present axis around which opposing societies and complexes continually measure themselves and reorder social, economic, scientific, and political life."<sup>36</sup> Warfare and security, rather than being a condition of the market, occupy a central place in social and political life. Duffield later weighs in on the debate as to whether the 'new wars' constitute a social transformation or a social regression, writing that "conflict and displacement, while introducing elements of change and adaptation, often act to reconfirm or even strengthen social and cultural

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<sup>34</sup> Mark R. Duffield. *Development, Security and Unending War: Governing the World of Peoples*. Wiley, p. 29.

<sup>35</sup> Duffield, *Global Governance*, p. 15.

<sup>36</sup> Duffield, *Global Governance*, p. 13.

ties.”<sup>37</sup> Though war destroys physical infrastructure, it can produce and reproduce social and political infrastructure in new and adaptive ways.

Duffield showcases two important concepts. First, he describes the ways in which Northern leaders and institutions have attempted to intervene in the ‘new wars’ in order to stop them. Through peacekeeping missions, development, and aid, Northern leaders have attempted to instill replicas of their own institutions in an effort to foster good governance. Second, Duffield critiques this approach. By trying to create replicas of their own institutions, liberal Northerners have taken a stubborn and limited perspective on what good governance looks like. They have also denied the agency and legitimacy of illiberal Southern leaders and political organizations, leading to an echo chamber in policy formation. The next step then should be to explore how non-Northern leaders and organizations have intervened and handled ‘new wars’ situations in their own right.

## **IRAN’S HISTORY WITH PROXY WARFARE**

### *The Early Days*

Iran’s non-state proxy group strategy has its roots in the Revolution of 1979 and Shia Islam. Vali Nasr’s *The Shia Revolution* provides a good starting point for understanding this nexus. Nasr explains that while Shiism is primarily a religious denomination, in practice it has cultivated certain political ideologies and modes of organization which further distinguish Shia populations from Sunni populations. According to Nasr, “Shias place... a strong emphasis on their imams and the rituals associated with their deaths.”<sup>38</sup> As a political application of that

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<sup>37</sup> Duffield, *Global Governance*, p. 125.

<sup>38</sup> Nasr, Seyyed Vali Reza. 2006. *The Shia Revival : How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape the Future*. 1st ed. New York: Norton, p. 50.



ideology, “[t]ruth is vested not in the community of of believers but in the virtuous leadership of the Prophet and his descendants.”<sup>39</sup> Khomeini, during the 1979 Revolution, successfully placed himself as the leader among this class of highly respected jurists. Iran’s governing ideology of *Wilayat al-Faqih* takes this political philosophy and applies it to state governance. Educated theologians interpret the Quran and other holy texts and apply them in government policy. Since Khomeini positioned himself as both the highest ranking jurist in the Shia tradition and the Supreme Leader of the Iranian state, Iran became the de facto leader of a transnational Shia population. Coupled with the fading of nationalism over the following years, this unified Shia religious identity slowly gained traction as a political force among Muslims in the Middle East.

Kaldor’s argument that in regions and times of fading or fracturing national authority individuals will turn to identity politics to provide them with a political home describes Khomeini’s political success well. As Iran became “the modern face of Islam,” the Shia Muslim religious identity became more and more of a claim to state or political power.<sup>40</sup> Khomeini based his governance on the idea that “[s]ince Islam is threatened and in constant danger, only the jurist can save it from its plight. It is his duty to do so through the establishment of an Islamic administration whose precedent was that of the Prophet himself.”<sup>41</sup> Though this philosophy took shape in the 1970s, it established the national base for an internationalist politics based on exactly what Kaldor wrote about in the 90s. This was a non-political identity which pushed itself into the political sphere on the presumption that it was under attack by global forces. As Shiism

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<sup>39</sup> Nasr, *Shia Revival*, p. 51.

<sup>40</sup> Nasr, *Shia Revival*, p. 213

<sup>41</sup> Abbas Kelidar, “Ayatollah Khomeini’s Concept of Islamic Government,” in *Islam and Power*, ed. Alexander Cudsi and Ali Dessouki, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, p. 80.

became a political identity, it became part of Iran's global identity and played a key role in Iran's foreign policy.

The newly formed Islamic Republic's first experience with proxy groups and their military potential came quickly, in two simultaneous processes. In 1982, Israel invaded southern Lebanon under the pretenses of responding to the attempted assassination of their ambassador to the U.K., Shlomo Argov. However, the true motives were more likely an attempt to wipe out PLO resistance in Lebanon and install a more amicable government in Beirut.<sup>42</sup> In response, a group of Shia organizers formed what would later become Hezbollah and based its principles on an adapted version of Khomeinism.<sup>43</sup> Drawing "direct aid—ideological as well as political, military, and financial—from Tehran," Hezbollah coalesced its political program over the next few years before issuing its official founding document, "Downtrodden in Lebanon and in the World", in 1985. As Hezbollah transformed over the years from a military resistance group to a political organization and welfare provider,<sup>44</sup> leaders in Tehran continued to build the relationship and to rely on Hezbollah as a fundamental part of Iran's geopolitical security and legacy.

Hezbollah and Iran share a governing philosophy of *Wilayat al-Faqih* as well as self-made identities as global resistance movements.<sup>45</sup> Hezbollah invokes Shi'ism as a foundation for their political orientation and pledged loyalty to Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in

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<sup>42</sup> Augustus R. Norton. 2007. *Hezbollah: A Short History*. Princeton Studies in Muslim Politics. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

<sup>43</sup> Gilbert Achcar and Michel Warschawski. 2007. *The 33-Day War: Israel's War on Hezbollah in Lebanon and Its Consequences*. Boulder: Paradigm.

<sup>44</sup> Augustus R. Norton. *Hezbollah: A Short History*.

<sup>45</sup> Hussain Abdul-Hussain, "Hezbollah: A State Within a State," *Hudson*, 21 May 2009. <https://www.hudson.org/research/9801-hezbollah-a-state-within-a-state>.

their founding document.<sup>46</sup> The group’s 2009 manifesto similarly praised Khamenei’s leadership, specifically citing his “outstanding victories for the very first time in the history of the struggle with [Israel].”<sup>47</sup> Hezbollah, like Iran, also roots their political rhetoric not solely in domestic politics but in a global struggle against oppression of Muslims. Due to its founding moment in opposition to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon — and also due to the broader history of the Middle East conflict — this political project focuses mainly on Israel and on the United States as Israel’s strongest supporter. Hezbollah “defines itself in direct opposition to what it views as a basic imbalance in global and regional power in favor of the United States and Israel” and “categorically refuses to recognize Israel’s right to exist”.<sup>48</sup> This ideological similarity with Iran has made Hezbollah Iran’s “crown jewel” in their array of affiliated non-state groups.<sup>49</sup>

Overlapping the formation of Hezbollah was Iran’s experience in the Iran-Iraq War. Lasting from 1980-1988, the war drained the new Republic both politically and materially. During the fighting, a few militia groups took sides inconsistent with their place of residence. Kurdish forces mainly sided with Iran, while the People’s Mojahedin Organization of Iran (MEK) fought for Iraq. “IRGC-QF played a crucial role in facilitating the creation and training of Iraqi Shi’a militant groups, including both Kata’ib Hezbollah (KH) and Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH).”<sup>50</sup> Iranian leaders’ awareness of this fact at times led them to overconfidence. They “assumed that popular militias infused with revolutionary spirit and Islamic fervour could more

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<sup>46</sup> Hezbollah, “Open Letter to the Downtrodden in Lebanon and the World,” 16 Feb 1985.

<sup>47</sup> Hezbollah, “The New Hezbollah Manifesto,” *Lebanon Renaissance Foundation*.  
<http://www.lebanonrenaissance.org/assets/Uploads/15-The-New-Hezbollah-Manifesto-Nov09.pdf>.

<sup>48</sup> Casey L. Addis and Christopher M. Blanchard. “Hezbollah: Background and Issues for Congress,” *Congressional Research Service*, 3 Jan. 2011. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R41446.pdf>

<sup>49</sup> J. Matthew McInnis, “Iranian Deterrence Strategy and Use of Proxies,” *AEI*.

<sup>50</sup> Will Fulton, Joseph Holliday, and Sam Wyer. “Iranian Strategy in Syria,” *Institute for the Study of War*, May 2013. <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/IranianStrategyinSyria-1MAY.pdf>.

than match any putative... threat.”<sup>51</sup> In fact, internal factionalism in this case hindered more than helped Iran’s cause. The result was that “[t]he divisions in Iranian politics seemed to prevent the formulation of a consistent... response to the Iraqi use of force.”<sup>52</sup> Thus, Iranian leadership observed the same lesson from two different cases. In both themselves and their rivals, factionalism was a highly present and troublesome problem. Therefore, they seem to have concluded, the collapse of their rival’s monopoly on violence and an infusion of identity politics could reap significant geopolitical rewards

### *U.S. Invasions*

Though Iranian activity and links to proxy groups surged after 2011, the situation which allowed that strategy to thrive began with the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq in 2001 and 2003. Though neither Saddam Hussein in Iraq nor the Taliban in Afghanistan were highly stable governments, they operated a monopoly on legitimate violence in their respective territories. The destruction of this monopoly was precisely the goal of the U.S. invasions, and they were successful. The Iraqi economy collapsed, creating incentives for many to turn to alternative sources of income. This combination of a lack of order and a lack of opportunity, as Münkler pointed out, can push individuals into roles which further break apart the social networks of the state. Said one Iraqi refugee in Jordan in 2014 “I really wish the Americans had thought more about what they were doing before they came to Iraq. That’s what started all this. Without that, we would be normal.”<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp. 1988. *Iran and Iraq at War*. Boulder: Westview Press.

<sup>52</sup> Chubin and Tripp. 1988. *Iran and Iraq at War*.

<sup>53</sup> Scott Anderson, “Fractured Lands: How The Arab World Came Apart,” *The New York Times*, September 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/08/11/magazine/isis-middle-east-arab-spring-fractured-lands.html>.

In addition to the immediate effects in Iraq and Afghanistan, the U.S. invasion had spillover effects into the rest of the region. The refugee crisis produced by the war left hundreds of thousands stranded, and left regional government with limited resources to take care of both their own citizens and the refugees flooding their borders. At the same time, these governments, aware of their own autocratic leanings and the now-apparent U.S. desire to bring democracy to the region by force, were scared for their own security. If Saddam Hussein's Baathist government, probably the most militarily equipped government in the region at the time, could be toppled so easily, what were their own chances? The same sentiment was reflected in citizens as well; Hussein, once thought to be one of the Middle East's indomitable forces, had proven entirely mortal. The hierarchies of political power were beginning to come into question.

### *Iraq*

Following Saddam Hussein's defeat, Iranian leadership perceived an important opening to expand their influence in Iraq by building and strengthening their relationships with Shiite groups. Since that time, Shiite political parties, organized under the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) bloc, have come to dominate electoral politics in Iraq. Within the bloc, there are numerous political parties, some of which have associated militias. The two most prominent political parties within UIA are the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) and the Da'wa Party. The Da'wa Party was founded in 1957 by Mohammad Baqr al-Sadr, who was one of Ayatollah Khomeini's allies during the latter's time in exile in Iraq. Da'wa currently has no affiliated militia, but was accused of orchestrating attacks against the Kuwaiti royal family in the 1980s. Former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki was a member of the Da'wa party, and remains

leader of the party, while Haydar al-Abbadi, another senior Da'wa leader, is the current Prime Minister. In 1982, Tehran helped two prominent leaders in the Da'wa party split from the group and form their own political group which would be much more favorable to Iran. This group eventually became the ISCI, and is considered both the best organized and most pro-Iran Shiite political party in Iraq. ISCI is allied with the Badr Organization or the Badr Brigades, a militia within the Iraqi security forces. Led by Hadi al Ameri, a member of the Iraqi parliament the Badr Brigades have gained prominence fighting against ISIS. In addition to the Badr Brigades, prominent Iraqi Shiite militias include the Promised Day Brigade and Kata'ib Hizballah.

In post-Saddam Iraq, contrary to the assertions of Bush administration officials such as Paul Wolfowitz, Shiism held significant political sway.<sup>54</sup> That political power would only grow under savvy Shia leaders, the most prominent of which was Muqtada al-Sadr. In April 2003, even before Baghdad officially fell, al-Sadr's supporters seized the Al-Thawra district of the city and renamed it Madinat al-Sadr (Sadr City). In the district, the group "installed a new local power, ensured public order, regulated the life of the inhabitants, and instituted its own police force and a justice system based on sharia."<sup>55</sup> Thus, "Madinat al-Sadr... became the first part of Iraqi territory to experience the power of local militias".<sup>56</sup> Following the U.S.-instituted Iraqi constitution of February 2004, al-Sadr and other Shia leaders such as Ayatollah Ali Sistani resisted, eventually leading to clashes between their supporters and the interim Iraqi government. Unable to reach an agreement with the government and unwilling to submit to forces which he saw as undemocratic, al-Sadr was attacked by U.S. troops in May. Coalition forces were unable

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<sup>54</sup> Sabrina Mervin and Institut français du Proche-Orient. 2010. *The Shi'a Worlds and Iran*. London: Saqi.

<sup>55</sup> Mervin. *The Shi'a Worlds and Iran*.

<sup>56</sup> Mervin. *The Shi'a Worlds and Iran*.

to force al-Sadr from his position, and his influence in Iraq as a noble Shia resistance fighter only grew.

Though U.S. military leaders were quick to blame Tehran for the actions of al-Sadr and other Shia resistance fighters, the actual relationship between Iraqi Shias and Iranian leadership is more complicated. al-Sadr visited Iran in June 2004 where he met “with Iranian leaders including Khamenei, Mahmud Hashemi Shahrudi, the leader of the Iranian judicial institutions... and Qasem Sulaymani, commander of the Quds Force.”<sup>57</sup> U.S. officials maintain that following this visit to Iran, al-Sadr became a strong supporter of the regime in Tehran, and that the Quds Force provided his Mahdi Army with 400 satellite phones, \$80 million, and training for around 1,000 troops. However, “religious leadership [in Iraq was] beginning to escape from the hold of the religious authorities,”<sup>58</sup> and reformers in Iran both denied and argued against the sensibility of aligning the regime with factional politics such as al-Sadr’s. As the Sadrists have become a political group rather than just a rebellious militia, they have repeatedly asserted their independence from Iran and their Iraqi nationalism. al-Sadr also rejected Iran’s *Wilayat al-Faqih*, though there are few who believe he is a true proponent of democracy as he claims to be. There is little evidence that al-Sadr operates under orders from Tehran, though his actions and Tehran’s are often mutually beneficial. This sort of loose relationship is characteristic of Iran and the proxies.

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<sup>57</sup> Mervin. *The Shi’a Worlds and Iran*.

<sup>58</sup> Mervin. *The Shi’a Worlds and Iran*.

### *Afghanistan*

In 1996, when the Taliban emerged victorious from the Afghan Civil War and created its government in Kandahar, it was recognized internationally by only three governments: Pakistan, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia. Iran, a majority Shia nation bordering what was now an extremist Sunni government to the east, quickly moved to support the Afghan Northern Alliance, officially the United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan.<sup>59</sup> Iran provided arms and military training to Northern Alliance factions, seeing to undermine Taliban leadership. The Northern Alliance was composed of a wide array of ethnic groups and political ideologies united under the single common goal of overthrowing the Taliban. Iranian support for the group at the time was not based on spreading their political or Islamic ideology so much as it was about preventing or disrupting the coalescence of a possible regional power at its border.

When the U.S. invaded in 2001, Iran was all too happy to cooperate with operations against the Taliban. Former ambassador Ryan Crocker stated that “the Iranian thrust was, you know, what do you need to know to knock their blocks off? You want their order of battle? Here’s the map. You want to know where we think their weak points are? Here, here, and here. You want to know how we think they’re going to react to an air campaign? Do you want to know how we think the Northern Alliance will behave? Ask us.”<sup>60</sup> The possibility of deposing a regional adversary created an easy strategic decision for Iran, especially as that decision came with the added possibility of warming relations between the U.S. and the moderate Khatami administration. Iran’s decision here for a disintegration of the monopoly on violence on their

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<sup>59</sup> Fiona Symon, “Afghanistan’s Northern Alliance,” *BBC Online*, 19 Sept. 2001.  
[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/1552994.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/1552994.stm)

<sup>60</sup> “Ambassador Ryan Crocker on Afghanistan,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 17 Sept. 2012.  
[http://carnegieendowment.org/files/091712\\_transcript\\_crocker1.pdf](http://carnegieendowment.org/files/091712_transcript_crocker1.pdf)



border comes as a sensible strategic decision given that the monopoly was wielded by a hostile power. Later though, we will see how Iran ended up aligned with the Taliban as their regional strategy coalesced around the formation of ungoverned spaces.

### *The Arab Spring*

Iranian funding and connections to proxy groups increased significantly following the 2011 revolutions throughout the Arab world. The revolutions, by breaking down the monopoly on state violence, provided Iran with an opportunity to further their connections to political-military groups throughout the region and build a network of non-state political power. In particular, 2011 marked the beginning of the resurgence of instability in Yemen and the collapse of the Syrian government. As I will show, the situation in Syria proved to be somewhat different from the situation which Iran exploited in other countries. Part of this was that Iran initially supported the Syrian government rather than the rebels as they had in so many other conflicts. Another part of the difference has been in the methods and tactics which Iran has employed in Syria. Iranian special forces have played an important role in supporting the Assad regime, much more so than in other conflicts.

### *Yemen*

In Yemen, the Houthi rebellion began in 2004. The timing means that the political motivations are inseparable from the U.S. invasion of Iraq. The political narrative of the post-colonial strongman states shifted in that moment, giving rise to the possibilities of revolution. Fighting continued at a low level through a never-implemented peace deal in 2007

and through the Arab Spring. In 2011, in the midst of Arab Spring-inspired anti-government protests in Sanaa, Abdul Aziz Abdul Ghani was mortally wounded during an assassination attempt on Yemen's president. Ghani was one of the last of Yemen's revolutionary political leaders, and his passing "created not only a crisis of national identity but also one of governance".<sup>61</sup> With him passed the prospects of a unified Yemeni state, and the Houthi rebels gained control of the rebellion against the government in Sana'a.

US analysts and regional states have concluded that Iran funds and equips the Houthi rebels to a limited extent. Kenneth Katzman at the Congressional Research Service notes "Iran's provision of anti-ship and coastal defense missiles to the Houthi rebels in Yemen," and cites a specific incident in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait when Houthi rebels used Iranian supplied missiles to damage a ship from the United Arab Emirates.<sup>62</sup> Others have argued that Iran has few ways in which they might directly control Houthi policies, and there is reason to believe that the Saudi government has overstated Iran's involvement in order to win international support for their own intervention.<sup>63</sup> While it may be true that Iran's role has been exaggerated in some policy circles, the Iranian government is basically alone in their position that they are not involved at all. In the rest of the international community, there is broad consensus that Iran has lent material support to the Houthi rebels.

The Iranian relationship with the Houthis is real but limited. Undoubtedly, Tehran would prefer a Shia Houthi government in Yemen rather than the Saudi-backed regime currently in place. But the highly limited arms shipments to the Houthis hardly constitute deep support for

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<sup>61</sup> Asher Orkaby, "Yemen's Humanitarian Nightmare," *Foreign Affairs*, Nov/Dec 2017.

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/yemen/2017-10-16/yemens-humanitarian-nightmare>.

<sup>62</sup> Kenneth Katzman, "Iran's Foreign and Defense Policies," *Congressional Research Service*, 20 March 2018. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R44017.pdf>.

<sup>63</sup> Orkaby, "Yemen's Humanitarian Nightmare," *Foreign Affairs*.

the cause and would not buy the Iranians much political sway should the Houthis prevail. Additionally, the Houthis have publicly declared their desire to remain separate from Iran and build their own government. They do not wish to be strictly loyal to Tehran. Thus, Iranian ties to the Houthis, limited as they are, seem to be more inclined toward letting the conflict continue than to winning it outright for their affiliated group. A strategy which opts for a protracted civil war on Saudi Arabia's southern border rather than an aligned state shows awareness and exploitation of what Duffield called transborder shadow economies. These were the economic models through which destabilization spreads across conflict zones and into surrounding areas. The goal seems to be not so much to force Saudi Arabia to manage an Iranian-aligned state on its southern border as it is to force Saudi Arabia to manage instability.

### *Syria*

The Syrian situation evolved quite differently. It began when fifteen boys painted on a wall a slogan for revolution: "The people want to topple the regime". The boys were taken into custody by the Assad regime, tortured and beaten, and released after two weeks. The reaction from the Syrian people organized thousands of people in mass demonstrations, which the government cracked down on, ultimately killing dozens. At first, the Syrian war seemed like it might follow the same route as the other revolutions. The government was rapidly weakening, and its attempts to suppress the politics with military force were not gaining it many supporters. International support for the rebels also appeared to be strong. However, as the fighting drew on, Syria descended into chaos.

Of the first period of the Syrian Civil War, NBC Chief Foreign Correspondent Richard Engel wrote that “We could feel a community spirit.”<sup>64</sup> There was at first a sense of unification among the rebel groups trying to topple the regime. Yet as international support continued to remain merely political rather than material, rebel groups “were becoming increasingly disheartened and desperate.”<sup>65</sup> This division within the movement to overthrow the Assad regime allowed for opportunistic rather than politically motivated individuals to gain military power within the movement. Those individuals further divided the once-moderate Syrian rebellion. Engel continues in his reporting on the war that “[by the end of 2012] the rebels were increasingly a mix of hard-core Islamists, criminals, and moderate fighters.”<sup>66</sup> As this mixture of ideologies and motives for fighting increasingly fractured the Syrian rebel groups, what emerged was a turbulent “tangle of tacit cease-fires or temporary alliances that are often forged between various militias and the regime, or even with just a local army commander.”<sup>67</sup> The increasingly fractured nature of the fighting broke down the structured dynamic of rebel vs. government, resulting in myriad groups each competing for dominance with no clear path to victory. The conflict stagnated, becoming the protracted war that it is today.

Syria has become the area of greatest Iranian involvement, signalling that it is the area of greatest concern for the leadership in Tehran, and is perhaps the most apparent example of the mixture of ‘new wars’ military and political dynamics with state interests. In addition to the Afghan foreign mercenaries fighting in Syria but facilitated by Iran, both Iranian Quds Forces and Hezbollah soldiers have assisted the Syrian government during the fighting. Many parties to

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<sup>64</sup> Richard Engel. 2016. *And Then All Hell Broke Loose : Two Decades in the Middle East*. First Simon & Schuster hardcover edition. New York, N.Y.: Simon & Schuster, p. 178.

<sup>65</sup> Engel. *And Then All Hell Broke Loose*, p. 180.

<sup>66</sup> Engel. *And Then All Hell Broke Loose*, p. 183.

<sup>67</sup> Anderson, “Fractured Lands,” *The New York Times*.

the Syrian Civil War, particularly ISIS, are funded by stolen oil sold on transnational black markets. It was reported that “[b]y the summer of 2014, ISIS was so flush with funds from its control of the oil fields of eastern Syria that it could offer even untrained foot soldiers up to \$400 a month for enlisting — vastly more than an unskilled 19-year-old... could make from pickup construction jobs.”<sup>68</sup> The competing rebel groups often break down along religious sectarian lines, with the main divide being between the Kurds in the north and the other loosely affiliated rebel groups in isolated regions in the south and west.<sup>69</sup>

### ***Through the Present Day***

Finally, it is worth examining two specific developments. First, Iran has funded foreign mercenaries to travel around the region fighting in different conflict zones. Second, Iran has directly involved its own special forces, the Quds Force, in Syria. These actions further complicate the political and economic relationships underlying the simmering conflict throughout the region, and show how Iran understands both its role and its opportunities within the context of simmering conflict.

In Afghanistan, Iran was initially eager to help the U.S. take down the Sunni Taliban government. The Taliban were not friendly to Iran or the notion of a Shia-led Islamic revolution, so Iranian leaders leapt at the opportunity to remove them from Iran’s eastern border. However, when the 2012 Strategic Partnership Agreement between the U.S. and Afghanistan made it clear that rebuilding the Afghani state would include a U.S. presence, Iran was opposed. Since that time, their tactics have shifted to support the Taliban and build connections to local policing and

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<sup>68</sup>Anderson, “Fractured Lands,” *The New York Times*.

<sup>69</sup> “Map Of Syrian Civil War”. 2018. *Syria News Today*. <https://syria.liveuamap.com/>.

military authorities, thereby undercutting the federal government. The Iranian approach shows due diligence for the long history of decentralized government in Afghanistan which the U.S. approach has tried to overhaul. Recognizing that building a strong government in Kabul is a difficult task, Iran has opted to work through transborder networks and political relationships.

The attempt to destabilize Afghanistan might appear to contradict Iran's destabilization of Yemen. In Yemen, Iranian support seems geared towards sustaining the conflict so that Saudi Arabia has to grapple with a conflict on its border. Destabilization is bad for the bordering state. In Afghanistan, Iran seems to desire conflict and instability on its border. The difference stems from the parties to the conflict and their relationships with Iran and Saudi Arabia, as well as Iran's confidence that it can manage instability better than Saudi Arabia can. In Yemen, Saudi Arabia has a clear ally in the internationally recognized Hadi government. Therefore, their point of victory is to end the conflict and restore the Hadi government to a position of power. In the same context, Iranian interests might be well served by a Houthi victory, but are also well served by continued fighting. In Afghanistan on the other hand, Iran has no clear partner which they might wish to help win a place of significant power. Additionally, "[p]ost-Taliban politics in Afghanistan is defined more by ethnic and class politics, than it is by sectarian rivalry."<sup>70</sup> Though Iranian attempts to exploit domestic conflicts have tended to rely on transnational Shia unity, in Afghanistan they have built political relationships and exploited areas of weak security through other means. As such, a fractured Afghanistan in fact provides opportunities for Iran to build political connections through networks which have fragile loyalties and are in desperate need of material support.

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<sup>70</sup> Ali Reza Sarwar, "Afghanistan: Not Another Proxy Battleground," *The Diplomat*, 18 May 2015. <https://thediplomat.com/2015/05/afghanistan-not-another-proxy-battleground/>.

A BBC report from 2015 further demonstrates how Iran is able to exploit a fractured Afghanistan: Iran has been recruiting and paying refugees from Afghanistan to go fight in Syria on behalf of the Assad regime.<sup>71</sup> These recruited mercenaries are part of the Fatimid Brigade, a group of Shiite soldiers who are “known for their prowess and fight alongside Hezbollah Lebanon and Iraqi and Pakistani Shiites.”<sup>72</sup> Iran operates a similar program among Pakistani Shiites, who are organized under the Zainibuin Brigade. They are also sent to fight in Syria, and are paid an estimated \$600 per month. In facilitating these foreign mercenaries, Iran has taken advantage of the economic incentives of the ‘new wars’. As individuals face dismal economic prospects in the war economy, soldiering becomes a more enticing option. In Afghanistan, Iran has contributed to the formation of that economic incentive structure and then exploited it.

## ON IRANIAN INTERVENTIONS

### *The Conflicts in Perspective*

Today, the Iranian strategy operates across the region within contexts of low-intensity conflict often formed along sectarian or ethnic lines. Across all areas of conflict, Iranian support encompasses all five different types of groups which Kaldor laid out in her book. Iran works with the remaining armed forces in Syria, paramilitary and self-defence groups like the Badr Brigades and Hezbollah, coordinates foreign mercenaries in Afghanistan and Syria, and send its own special forces to fight for the Syrian government under the international auspices of fighting terrorism. In the context of rapidly shifting alliances, dysfunctional economies, and international

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<sup>71</sup> “Shiites from Afghanistan and Pakistan, including Iranian expeditions to the Syrian Civil War,” *BBC Persian*, 23 April 2015, translated via Google Translate.

[http://www.bbc.com/persian/iran/2015/04/150422\\_iran\\_syria\\_pakistan\\_afghan](http://www.bbc.com/persian/iran/2015/04/150422_iran_syria_pakistan_afghan).

<sup>72</sup>Shiites from Afghanistan and Pakistan,” *BBC Persian*.

intervention — all features of the ‘new wars’ — Iran has grouped together several different types of organizations with overlapping interests and coordinated their efforts around a common goal. The Iranian strategy has become a sort of multilateral coalition building among transnational non-state groups.

Iran’s significant historical experience with building relationships with proxy groups has led to a well-crafted balance between state and non-state organizations. By acting through proxy groups, the Iranian state saves on logistical planning and remains less culpable for the actions carried out by the proxies, but are less able to control and direct the affiliated groups. This structure allows Iran to take a more indirect approach to attaining security and waging war. Ranj Alaaldin at Brookings writes that “Iran doesn’t have to direct each and every one of these groups—instead, it relies on its “principal” militia organizations, such as Iraq’s Badr Brigade or Lebanon’s Hezbollah to manage an array of subsidiaries.”<sup>73</sup> The result is a diversified array of groups which does not have the organizational structure or coordinated mission that U.S. foreign policy has traditionally dealt with but which also has more of a formation than the terrorist organizations to which U.S. foreign policy has recently had to adapt.

Earlier, I argued that the Iranian strategy was not always anti-stability though it seems to be generally anti-state. This non-state security strategy can be examined through either political or economic lenses. First, the political perspective examines how Iranian proxy groups fall across a whole range of insurrectionary activities, from full blown civil war to peacefully integrated political groups. Specific questions for this line of inquisition include how political ties are established and how the balance between political and military is met. Second, the

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<sup>73</sup> Ranj Alaaldin, “Iran’s complicated but resistible influence in Syria,” *Brookings Institution*, 19 May 2017. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2017/05/19/irans-complicated-but-resistible-influence-in-syria/>



economic lens includes questions about group funding, individual economic incentives, and transnational market structures. Ultimately, this research raises another question: what kinds of internationally competitive political networks can be built within a regional framework which eschews centralized states? Iran has taken steps towards an answer on this front, and seem poised to continue down that path.

At first glance, it might seem that Iranian proxy groups span a range of classification from political to military groups. Some are active participants in relatively democratic institutions; others are engaged in active warfare against their internationally recognized government. Yet, following closer examination, these groups in fact all perform the duties and aspirations of combined political-military organizations. The difference is not in the orientation of the groups themselves, but in the context in which they exist. Therefore, rather than a political/military distinction, we might better classify Iranian groups as active/latent. An “active” situation connotes that the group is actively engaged in violence against the government of the state in whose territory it resides, other armed groups within that territory, or both. A “latent” situation conversely indicates that while the situation does not involve fighting at the moment, there is at least the possibility of a hostile political environment which plays on the new wars dynamics. Iran uses each to its advantage in different ways.

Currently active proxies include the Houthi rebels in Yemen and Hezbollah in Syria. Aid to active proxy groups, perhaps unsurprisingly, comes mainly in the form of small arms. Iran has provided the Houthi rebels in Yemen with “anti-ship and coastal defense missiles,”<sup>74</sup> and has provided other groups with such weaponry as “specialized anti-tank systems

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<sup>74</sup> Katzman, “Iran’s Foreign and Defense Policies,” *CRS*.

(“explosively-forced projectiles” EFPs), artillery rockets, mortars, short-range missiles, and anti-ship cruise missiles.”<sup>75</sup> Active groups destabilize broader regions even as they work to secure small parts of territory as Iranian allies. For instance, the Houthi rebels in Yemen work toward the ultimate goal of state power which will presumably be somehow allied with Iran, but at this moment provide the benefit of bringing instability to Saudi Arabia’s southern border. Similarly, Hezbollah’s consistent engagement with Israel functions to disrupt Israeli counter-terrorism and border security operations.

The latent proxy groups are not currently engaged in active fighting but tend to exist in significant political tension with the state which officially governs the areas in which they reside. Iran for the most part limits interaction with these groups to political support rather than small arms or monetary aid, though many of the affiliated political groups do have associated militias. The Iraqi Shia political groups are an example of latent proxy groups. These political groups currently engage in domestic politics and favor a relatively pro-Iran agenda within Iraq. Stemming from and supporting these activities, they have affiliated militias like the Badr Brigades and the Peace Companies, which fight alongside the Iraqi Popular Mobilization forces but could feasibly favor Iran in a potential renewed conflict between Iraq and Iran.

From another perspective, we can examine the economic relations between the proxy groups, their surrounding markets and available resources, and Iran’s place within that dynamic. First, the proxy groups as independent organizations face clear incentives to find an international ally. Since they tend to begin and grow in areas already facing a disintegration of order and the monopoly on legitimate violence, possibilities for domestic economic support are limited; the

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<sup>75</sup> Farzin Nadimi. “How Iran’s Revived Weapons Exports Could Boost its Proxies.” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August 17, 2015.

contexts within which the proxy groups exist tend not to foster a stable functioning market. The usual recourse in this chaotic context would be the transnational black market networks described by Duffield. They provide non-negligible but limited economic benefit. Therefore, an influx of foreign cash, weapons, and aid proves highly useful. Since, as Münkler argued, these types of conflicts ultimately depend on the economics of the situation and the actors' ability to acquire material support and economic value through the act of fighting the war, the outside support from Iran proves useful to proxy groups even if those economic factors were not at the core of the conflict to begin with.

It is also helpful to apply this economic perspective to examining Iran. There are two things to consider here. First, Iran is able to stretch resources further by attaching its resources to groups which have additional, if insufficient, means of income. Rather than having to fund the entirety of a military operation, Iran can count on some measure of self-support from proxy groups. This means that Iran is unlikely to give up the proxy strategy so long as it remains an economically viable means to regional security. Iran is able to avoid the high costs of state-run warfare — which Münkler noted — by relying on proxy groups. Second, it is clear that Iran understands the economic incentives faced by the individuals and groups which the state deals with. In the context of limited market options, individuals and groups on the ground often turn to warfare less as a political tool than as an economic tool. Iran most clearly demonstrates this with the program paying Afghan and Pakistani refugees to fight in Syria. By providing that economic outlet, Iran can turn regional economic insecurity into their own geopolitical security.

The Iranian example provides us with the beginning of a case-specific answer to a larger question: what political and security projects can be built on these types of transnational,

non-state networks? So far, Iran has managed to construct a network certainly capable of provoking worry across Sunni and Western-allied blocs in the Middle East; the spectre of ‘destabilizing Iranian activities’ remains one of the region’s most prominent security concerns. Thus, it could be argued that Iran’s transnational proxy network plausibly functions as a deterrent within a regional balance of power. Going forward, it remains to be seen if this network will be able to manage a long-term balance of power against an ambitious Saudi Arabia and an assertive U.S. administration. The advantages which the Iranian network gains through its decentralization — among them an ability to quickly retaliate, forward positions within other states, and independently motivated proxies — will have to stack up against the costs of the very same strategy — an inability to directly control proxies, and weak long-term financial prospects.

### ***Reviewing the New Wars Literature***

Additionally, this project grants some insight into the continuing documentation of the changing nature of warfare and security which was the original focus of the texts in the literature review. Prominent throughout all these texts is the idea that the new security dilemma will be characterized by the clash between global, liberal, cosmopolitan society and the ungoverned spaces at the edges of former empires. It was correctly foreseen that ungoverned spaces would prove a threat to many political institutions as they provided safe haven for terrorists and became a drain on the global economy. Tied to Münkler’s concept of destatization, this security problematic examined the clash between governed and ungoverned. The observation was that “the classical model of war between states... appears to have been discontinued.”<sup>76</sup> Yet the

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<sup>76</sup>Münkler, *The New Wars*, p. 1.

resurgence of state competition as the liberal world order waned somewhat changed this trajectory. Even as ungoverned spaces continue to pose a threat to states, these ungoverned spaces also become areas for state competition. It is not simply a matter of state and international institutions building some form of governance within the region, but *which* states or international institutions will do so and how they will structure that governance. In this context, McInnis's warnings about Iran's sinister practice of sponsoring mass weddings begins to make sense, if in a roundabout way. Iranian activities "similar to those conducted by Western nongovernmental organizations for orphans, the disabled, and the elderly" pose a threat to the developmental security regime that Duffield outlined because they compete for political space.<sup>77</sup> Whereas Kaldor imagined a united global cosmopolitan front against a fractured particularist front, that cosmopolitan political network itself has fractured, leaving a host of states to compete for ungoverned space by leveraging international political networks.

This idea of networked violence has demonstrated the most acuity. Total wars between states have remained, as Münkler pointed out, economically infeasible. Given the massive amounts of damage which modern wartime technology can inflict, there is simply not enough to be gained from waging total war. Instead, limited engagements, small arms, special forces, and local political connections are the primary tools of maneuvering the state apparatus into ungoverned spaces. These tools allow for state and state-linked organizations to participate in certain forms of violence and posturing without incurring the high costs associated with total warfare. This project focused on how one particularly problematic state with a somewhat

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<sup>77</sup>Rubin, "Deciphering Iranian decision making," *AEI*.

different approach than most, Iran, has gone about this task of creating networks that link the state to the ungoverned space in which it would like to operate.

## CONCLUSION

Examining the relationships between Iran and the affiliated proxy groups raises the question of whether these relationships can be called “proxy” relationships at all. Since the political dynamic and the goals of the involved actors are so significantly different from past proxy wars, it may be useful to leave the terminology of those conflicts behind. While I’ve used ‘proxy groups’ in this project in order to ground my work in the current discourse, terms such as “militia networks,” “regional non-state affiliates,” or “non-state alliances” more accurately summarize the relationship between Tehran and the groups in the region. Future scholars and policy-makers should re-examine this issue and come to a consensus on new, more precise terminology. Looking forward to that research, I would like to conclude by pointing out two which are of particular importance and which might take into account the arguments which I have just made.

First, as noted earlier, the Saudi Arabia-Iran regional rivalry appears to be heating up. Proxy groups play a central role in this regional struggle, as Iran does not have positive relationships with many state governments. As I have argued, Iran has little direct power to control and organize the proxy groups within this regional struggle, though they often serve Iranian interests in opposition to Saudi interests, most notably in Yemen. Since the proxy group network is so decentralized and at times relies on lack of clear power structures, what is its capacity to resist persistent and conventional Saudi influence in the region? One might guess that

the Saudis' overwhelming economic and military power, coupled with their dominant alliance structure, would be enough to give them geopolitical power over the Iranians. Yet we live in an age of asymmetrical warfare, and Iran's proxy group network has its advantages. If there were to be a more pointed confrontation between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the near future, to what extent might Iran be able to rally proxy groups to its defense?

Second, I argued that the Iranian strategy is not necessarily anti-stability but it is generally anti-state. Iran tends to rely on sub-national modes of governance and politics in order to leverage the proxy network. In contrast, interventions by non-regional states and institutions have tended to focus on state-building, that is, the construction of centralized governance in opposition to fragmented politics. But what if policymakers were to reverse this? What are the prospects for alternative modes of governance which do not match the more centralized model which we have tried to place on the region in places like Afghanistan and Iraq? In a more politically fragmented and less interconnected society, options for localized, federalist government show more promise. Exploring the details of these possibilities will be important work for future policymakers.

The social conditions which Clausewitz argued form the foundation of armed conflict are forever changing, and Iran's specific brand of proxy warfare is the latest iteration of that ever-changing social mode of warfare. It is a proxy warfare which relies on transnational politics and illicit economies, loose political relationships and deliberate obscurity of funding and supplies. Though Iran constitutes a central node in this network of proxy groups, it is by no means the main instigator, and these conflicts would undoubtedly continue even without Iranian intervention. The Iranian intervention merely turns those conflicts towards Iranian interests such

as fostering local security ties, implementing a forward defense posture, and antagonizing regional rivals. Iran seems to be attempting to directly manipulate the social condition of warfare by changing the politics and military power at play in each of the conflicts. Such an intervention is both innovative and dangerous, and understanding how the social organization of conflict is changing is the first step towards a more stable and more prosperous Middle East.