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Foreign Sponsorship of Pro-Government Militias Fighting Syria's Insurgency:

Whither Proxy Wars?

Reinoud Leenders and Antonio Giustozzi

Abstract

Exploring the role of foreign-sponsored pro-government militias in counter-insurgency efforts, this article shows how the proxy war concept maps onto the Syrian conflict as we demonstrate both its contributions and limitations. Drawing on rare access to Syrian and foreign security actors inside Syria, we argue that the Syrian war, while rightly labelled a proxy war, sits uneasily with and at times even contradicts a set of scholarly assumptions and emphases on proxy wars when looked at from a counter-insurgency perspective. Accordingly, proxies were relevant not just as rebels but also as counter-insurgents. Sponsors included state and non-state actors alike, were manifold, and did not necessarily have exclusive relations to their proxies. They were also much more intensely involved with their proxies than generally expected from a war at arm's length. Principal-agent relations this way ceased to be dyadic and hierarchical. What emerged was a heterarchical order, with parallel hierarchies tying proxies to their sponsors fiercely in competition with one another. This allowed and encouraged proxies to carve out leverage and agency of their own just as it fed into the Syrian regime's resilience in averting a 'double crisis of sovereignty'. Given the scale and success of its counter-insurgency efforts, the Syrian case calls for reconsidering proxy wars of the past while it may constitute a watershed development for how proxy wars are to be waged in the future.

[Appendices at bottom of the document]

Since the Syrian crisis escalated into a full-blown armed conflict in 2012, a dazzling number of foreign-sponsored pro-government militias (PGMs) have been key in efforts to defeat a vicious insurgency. The highly effective role of these foreign-sponsored PGMs captures an important dimension of Syria's proxy warfare wherein foreign actors have encouraged and enabled protagonists to fight each other in a strikingly lethal and destructive conflict. But while media pundits and academics alike have near-unanimously applied the 'proxy war' label to the Syrian conflict, this was done without much conceptual consideration. In turn, and from the perspective of the country's counter-insurgency

efforts, established insights and common understandings professed by scholars on proxy wars appear to sit uneasily with the Syrian case. As a result, both proxy wars generally and the Syrian case are still to be fully understood.

Some would conclude from the discrepancies between the Syrian conflict and the literature on proxy wars that the latter is of little use in the Syrian context, or inversely that Syria's armed conflict simply is not a proxy war. In contrast, our intention is to show how the proxy war concept maps onto Syria's counter-insurgency, which should therefore be a case of interest to that literature, as we demonstrate both its contributions and limitations. In doing so, we show how proxies act as effective counter-insurgents as they are linked to multiple sponsors that are both state and non-state actors. Together these actors are engaged in complex relationships wherein sponsors play a much more intrusive role than generally expected but with their proxies or the host state retaining much of their own agency. Borrowing from the literature on PGMs and the devolution of state violence, we conceptualize the resulting order governing Syria's counter-insurgency as a "heterarchy" (Santini and Moro, 2019), wherein an array of state and non-state coercive actors variously proliferated and complemented each other in parallel hierarchies. This analytical perspective allows us to demonstrate and better understand how sponsors and proxies have been involved in shifting relationships wherein compliance and leverage were constantly under negotiation. Sponsors competed among one another and proxies carved out room to bargain for resources and privileges. In this environment the host government --the Syrian regime— endeavoured to stave off what we call a 'double crisis of sovereignty'; one in which PGMs would have fully undermined its strict monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force and where their foreign sponsors' interference with Syria's internal affairs would have been unbridled.

For our research we drew on local researchers (former journalists) inside Syria who between 2013 and early 2018 conducted interviews with about thirty senior and mid-ranking members of a number of key militias as well as members of the Syrian armed forces and government, and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC).¹

I. Proxy Wars and the Outsourcing of State Violence

The Syrian conflict since 2011 has been widely viewed as a ‘proxy war’ or the arena of several proxy wars fought in parallel. Media and think tanks resorted to the term when reporting on the large-scale violence involving proxies of regional and international actors at several frontlines throughout the country. Foreign political leaders similarly dubbed the Syrian conflict a proxy war (Pengelly, 2015; BBC 2015; Baczynska, 2017). Academic researchers followed suit as they analysed how and why foreign actors including Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, Russia and Iran have meddled in Syria’s sectarian-tinted conflict, financed and armed combatants, pushed military developments to their advantage, and in the process sustained and intensified the violence at the behest of their wider struggles regionally and globally (Van Dam, 2017; Hinnebusch, 2018; Phillips and Valbjørn, 2018; Berti and Guzansky, 2014). Recent work on proxy wars generally echoed such assessments and presented Syria as a case in point to reinforce their argument that proxy wars demand scholarly attention since the phenomenon has become near endemic from southeast Asia to the Middle East (Marshall, 2016; Hughes, 2014; Mumford, 2013).

¹ For a more detailed discussion of our methodology and a list of interviewees see Appendix (1).

Despite common usage of the term, there is no agreement on what a proxy war exactly entails. Mumford defines proxy wars as “indirect engagement in a conflict by third parties wishing to influence its strategic outcome,” thereby juxtaposing such wars with such parties’ “direct intervention or covert action” (Mumford, 2013, 1). By extension, third party engagement involves “a relationship between a benefactor, who is a state or non-state actor external to the dynamic of an existing conflict, and their chosen proxies who are the conduit for weapons, training and funding from the benefactor” (Hughes, 2012, 2). In another book-length exploration of proxy wars, Hughes defines such wars as armed conflicts “in which belligerents use third parties as either a supplementary means of waging war, or as a substitute for the direct employment of their own armies” (Hughes, 2012, 2). He then describes a proxy as “a non-state paramilitary group receiving direct assistance from an external power” (Hughes 2012, 11). Others like Berman and Lake (2019), however, adopt much wider definitions, to include states. What all authors appear to have in common though is that they assume foreign sponsorship to be of overriding importance to their beneficiaries’ military capabilities to warrant labelling their involvement a proxy war.

Some of these features certainly capture part of the Syrian conflict, and they appropriately draw attention to its international or external dimensions. In this respect foreign states’ significant support to an array of rebel forces in Syria most readily resonates with the literature on proxy wars (Baylouny and Mullins, 2018; Gadeh et al., 2019). Yet the otherwise fluid nature of proxy wars, which Mumford, Hughes and others (Salehyan, 2010; Innes and Banks, 2012) acknowledge and seek to conceptualize, comes to full light when looking more closely at Syria’s counter-insurgency efforts; the focus of this article.

From this perspective, Syria's conflict sits uneasily with and at times even contradicts a set of assumptions and emphases often made in the small but growing literature on proxy wars, at five levels: (1) proxies typically are rebel forces or insurgents; (2) external actors mostly act alone in sponsoring their proxy; (3) external sponsors predominantly are state actors; (4) the latter's pursuit of a conflict at arm's length is primarily motivated by a desire to conceal their involvement in a conflict abroad, and; (5) the sponsor-proxy relationship resembles that between a principal and an agent in a dyadic and hierarchical bond riddled with steep and often unresolvable dilemmas of moral hazard.

A small number of authors on the Syrian war similarly observed an ill fit with the literature on proxy wars (Harris, 2018; Beehner, 2015; Oğuz and Çelik, 2018). Yet while this causes them to reject the relevance of the proxy war label, we argue that closer scrutiny of Syria's counter-insurgency may help improve our understanding of proxy wars, show the strength and limitations of the literature on them, and give important clues about the directions in which proxy wars are developing. We propose that stronger engagement with another approach, found in the budding literature on the outsourcing of state violence, can help a much-needed effort to refine perspectives on proxy wars. Pro-government militias (PGMs) have attracted scholarly attention as weberian assumptions about states inherently insisting on a monopoly on violence have made way for more flexible and multifaceted approaches (Carey and Mitchell, 2016). The latter point at historical trajectories or repertoires of violence and to benefits ascribed to states' outsourcing of violence to explain how, why and to what effect states delegate tasks of combat and repression to PGMs (Ahram, 2016 and 2011). Frequently, negotiated prerogatives of violence involving multiple actors are the result, blurring the lines between state and non-state actors and without either necessarily or unambiguously

coming out on top (Staniland, 2012, 244). Underscoring the negotiated nature of authority and coercion in armed conflict following the Arab uprisings, Santini and Moro point out that state devolution of violence may manifest itself in “heterarchical orders” wherein an array of state and non-state coercive actors variously proliferate side by side and complement each other (Santini and Moro, 2019). With only a few exceptions (Groh, 2019), such approaches and the study of PGMs generally have been formulated predominantly in a domestic setting without paying full attention to the role of foreign actors as key players. This seems an important shortcoming given that nearly half of intra-state armed conflicts or civil wars since the Second World War featured foreign involvement or were deeply internationalized (Cunningham et al., 2009). Against this background, our case study of foreign-sponsored PGMs in the Syrian war is framed as an opportunity to extend the research agenda on state devolution of violence in armed conflict to counter-insurgency in its external or international context. This way, we aim to bridge and feed into the literature on PGMs that focuses on primarily domestic dimensions of armed conflict and the literature on proxy wars that emphasizes their international dynamics.

II. Foreign-sponsored PGMs in the Syrian War

Foreign-sponsored PGMs appeared early in the Syrian conflict and have since come to define the regime’s counter-insurgency campaign. An overview of the largest foreign-sponsored PGMs active in the Syrian war, broken down by their estimated manpower and sponsors, can be found in Appendix (2). An assessment of their contribution to the regime’s war effort shows that such proxies gained support from multiple sponsors (and often from more than one at the same time), that these sponsors included both states and

non-state actors, and that they have been key to counter-insurgency operations. These features stand in contrast to the literature on proxy warfare wherein the emphasis has been on proxies almost exclusively being insurgents or rebels (Hughes, 2012; Salehyan, 2010; Loveman, 2006; Towle, 1981; Mumford, 2013b; Maoz and San-Akca, 2012; San Akca, 2009),² their receiving support unilaterally from just one sponsor,³ and on such sponsors exclusively being state actors.⁴

The IRGC has been the most important sponsor and architect of the emerging landscape of PGMs in the Syrian war. Already at the end of 2011, as the Syrian uprising gradually turned into civil war, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), an Iraqi Shiite militia close linked to and sponsored by the IRGC, was reportedly fighting alongside Syria's regular forces (France 24, 2013). In 2012 the IRGC significantly stepped up its involvement as it began to restructure and sponsor haphazardly organised and poorly resourced Syrian PGMs, helped to create and staff new pro-regime militias, and facilitated the arrival of foreign militias and Shiite recruits from Iraq, Lebanon, Afghanistan and Pakistan.⁵ In January 2013 these efforts culminated in the establishment of the Abu Fadl al-Abbas Brigades (AFAB), encompassing several militias and subsidiaries of mostly Iraqi recruits mobilized by the IRGC (Al-Jazeera, 2016; Smyth, 2016, appendix 3). They were soon deployed all over the country. Around the same time, Lebanon's Hizbullah, also heavily sponsored by Iran and having acted as its proxy in other conflict theatres, stepped up its military

² Groh (2019) again forms an exception as his case studies include pro-government militias.

³ However, Groh (2019), 110 briefly cites the possibility of proxies seeking support from multiple sponsors. Krieg and Rickli (2019) make a similar observation for rebel groups in Syria. Mumford (2013, 103) notes a "revealing trend" of collective, multilateral proxy sponsorship, citing NATO-led support to rebel groups in Libya (2011) as an example.

⁴ In his typology of sponsor-proxy relations, Mumford (2013, 45) mentions "a non-state actor using another non-state actor as a surrogate." He does not develop this, prompting Sozer (2017, 639) in his review of the typology to regard it as "largely theoretical".

⁵ Interview with IRGC senior officer, Damascus, 20 January 2016.

operations in defence of the Syrian regime, mostly in close collaboration with the IRGC. Also largely at the behest of the IRGC, an overarching structure was set up to regroup and reinforce disparate Syrian PGMs operating locally, the Local Defence Force (LDF). In parallel, in January 2013 the National Defence Force (NDF) was established to reorganize an array of PGMs initially manned by local Syrian fighters but soon receiving heavy reinforcements from foreign, mostly Shiite fighters.⁶ A Syrian army Colonel liaising with NDF units confirmed that the latter were largely an Iranian project from the start, even if President Bashar al-Assad and his aides fully accepted its rationale.⁷ By late 2013, the IRGC created another large pro-regime militia, the Fatimiyun Brigades, comprised of mostly Afghan Shiites recruited, trained, paid, and guided by the IRGC.⁸ The IRGC also established strong links with home grown PGMs including the Tiger Forces and Ba'ath Battalions.⁹

While sustaining their own strong links to Iran and the IRGC, several foreign non-state actors active in Syria provided support to Syrian and foreign PGMs, just as they established numerous subsidiaries or offshoots in Syria. Lebanon's Hizbullah played a key role as it trained fighters, and embedded advisers and commanders within PGMs. This granted it considerable influence over a host of militias including AFAB, Imam Zain al-Abidain Brigade (IZAB), and al-Mahdi Brigade.¹⁰ A Hizbullah source estimated that, as a result of its support to PGMs, in early 2018 one-third of militiamen belonging to the NDF paid allegiance to his organisation.¹¹ In May 2014 Hossein Hamadani, a senior IRGC

⁶ Interview with senior Palestinian PGM fighter, Damascus, 26 January 2014.

⁷ Interview with Syrian army colonel, Deir Ez-Zur, 12 November 2017.

⁸ Interview with IRGC general, Damascus, 19 Jan 2016.

⁹ Interviews with Tiger Force commander, Deir az-Zur, January 2018, IRGC adviser in the LDF, Damascus, February 2018, and Ba'ath Battalion commander, Hama, January 2018.

¹⁰ Ibid; Interview with IZAB commander, Deir az-Zur, January 2018.

¹¹ Interview with Hizbullah adviser, Damascus, February 2018.

commander who was killed in October 2015, announced that Iran had helped to set up a “second Hezbollah in Syria” (Smyth, 2016). Hezbollah also had close relations with, and dispatched advisers to militias that were more tightly linked to Syrian state institutions and security forces.¹² By 2018, many of the PGMs linked to Hezbollah and the IRGC had integrated into the LDF (Al-Tamimi, 2018).

Iraqi militias, too, established their own links to PGMs active in Syria and, in some cases, created subsidiaries for combat. From the spring of 2013 onwards the IRGC collaborated with Hezbollah in the deployment of the Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba’ (HHN) and of the Kata’ib Hezbollah, both of which had been operating in Iraq before and drew on recruits from Syria, Iraq and Yemen. In October 2013, AAH formed the Haidar al-Karar Brigade. It also sustained ties with Hezbollah-affiliated PGMs. The Badr Organisation, another large Iraqi militia closely linked to the IRGC, created a subsidiary in Syria, the Shahid Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr Force, which remained active at least until February 2016. It reportedly recruited for and sponsored militias within AFAB and the Kata’ib Hezbollah. Iraqi advisers embedded with militias in Syria were from a variety of Iraqi militias.¹³

Following Russia’s intervention in the Syrian war in September 2015, its massive air support proved to be crucial to the regime’s advances against rebel forces. Airstrikes were closely coordinated with PGMs on the ground. Yet Russia also sustained direct links to and supported several PGMs. It embedded Russian army cadre, Federal Security Service (FSB) officers and personnel from private security companies with such groups in

¹² These include the Tiger Force and Ba’ath Battalions. Interview with Syrian army official working with the Tiger Force, Damascus, January 2018.

¹³ These include the Badr Organisation, Kata’ib Al-Imam Ali, Kata’ib Sayyid al Shuhada, AHH, and Jaysh al-Mahdi. Interview with Syrian Army intelligence officer, Homs, February 2018.

counter-insurgency operations (Schaap and Werner, 2018).¹⁴ By doing so, Russia established itself as another key state sponsor of PGMs in Syria. The latter included home-grown militias of Syrian regime loyalists such as the Tiger Force, the Desert Hawks (disbanded in 2017), the Ba'ath Battalions, the Palestinian Al-Quds Brigade, and IZAB (Mortis, 2016; Polit Rossiya, 2017; Federal'noe Agentstvo Novostey, 2017).¹⁵ Russia also provided some modest support to and built operational ties with Nusur al-Zawba'a, a subsidiary of the Lebanese Syrian Socialist National Party (SSNP), Imam al-Baqr Brigade, and some militias operating under the umbrella of the NDF and LDF (Grinstead et al., 2019).¹⁶ Since November 2016, many of Russian-supported PGMs have been gradually integrated into the Syrian regular forces' 4th and 5th Assault Corps, but with some retaining a quasi-autonomous status.

Iraqi state forces also established ties with PGMs in Syria, albeit to a much more modest degree than Iran and Russia. Accordingly, the Iraqi regular armed forces and the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) dispatched a small number of advisers to militias within AFAB, and they are believed to have had links to the smaller al-Imam al-Hussein Brigade (Smyth, 2016, Appendix 2).¹⁷ Iraqi legislation adopted in November 2016 integrated militias belonging to Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units (*al-hashd al-sha'abi*, PMU) into this country's security forces and placed them under state control (Rudolf, 2018). Indirectly, this tightened Iraqi state ties to a number of PGMs active in Syria as the latter are also on the PMU's payroll and, at least formally, turned into state-sanctioned entities responding

¹⁴ Interviews with AFAB commander, Damascus countryside, 23 November 2017, and IRGC adviser to the LDF, Damascus countryside, February 2018.

¹⁵ Interviews with Tiger Force commander, Deir az-Zur, January 2018, Ba'ath Battalion commander, Hama, January 2018, and IZAB commander, Deir az-Zur, January 2018.

¹⁶ Interviews with Imam al-Baqr commander in Aleppo, January 2018, LDF commander in Deir az-Zur, January 2018 and Syrian army colonel, Deir az-Zur, 12 November 2017.

¹⁷ Interviews with Syrian Army intelligence officer, Homs, February 2018 and IRGC officer, Damascus, February 2018.

to the Iraqi prime minister's office. Iraqi PGMs active in Syria also benefitted from state sanctioning as they performed border guard functions from the Iraqi side generating significant revenues (Exxeddine et al, 2019). Regardless, rarely did Iraqi militia leaders advertise their involvement in Syria as being within the PMU framework,¹⁸ and some of them insisted that their involvement in Syria was separate from it (Rudolf, 2018, 20). This caused Iraqi state sponsorship of PMUs in Syria to be ambivalent.

We estimate that, at their peak in 2017, foreign-sponsored PGMs together mobilized some 160,000 men; slightly more than the estimated total of rebel forces.¹⁹ Reports about the high numbers of casualties these groups incurred suggest a significant role in combat.²⁰ Likewise, claims by PGM members about their momentous contribution to the regime's counter-insurgency efforts seem vindicated by them having played an essential role in winning key battles that first halted rebel gains and then, since 2016, turned the war back into the regime's favour.²¹

III. Proxies Beyond Remote Control

What sponsors actually do, and how they relate to their proxies, points up some features of Syria's foreign-sponsored counter-insurgency, which, in the literature on proxy wars, are rarely observed or, from its perspective, appear to be unusual. Yet first on more familiar ground, and much like what the literature on proxy warfare expects from

¹⁸ However, in November 2016 PMU leader Hadi al-Ameri claimed that the PMU was heading to Syria at the invitation of Bashar al-Assad (Al-Waqt, 2016).

¹⁹ For details see Appendix (3).

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ For details see Appendix (4).

sponsors, the IRGC provided Syria's PGMs with weapons, financial means and other material support, both through Syrian state institutions and the armed forces, and directly to the militias (Charbonneau, 2013; Ansari and Bassiri Tabrizi, 2016; Jenzen-Jones, 2014; Kozak, 2017; Nadimi, 2015).²² Extensive training programs for PGM recruits have been run in Iran, and by the IRGC and Hizbullah at numerous facilities in Syria. Russian forces also paid for salaries and provided weapons and training to a select number of armed groups close to the regime and the Ba'ath party (Al-Jabassini, 2019).²³ Yet the role of sponsors exceeded such conventional support and grew to be far more extensive and intrusive.

Especially Iran, Hizbullah and Iraqi militias have actively recruited volunteers to provide PGMs in Syria with manpower, both domestically and internationally. The transnational reach of these efforts targeted Shiite communities in Iran (mostly Afghan Hazara refugees), Iraq, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Yemen. PGMs' total manpower included a large number of foreigners; an estimated 10,000 in March 2014 and 37,400 in April 2018.²⁴ Next to material incentives, the propagation of a profoundly sectarian ideology has been key to their recruitment and mobilization, as sponsors framed the cause in Syria as a jihad to defend Shiite shrines, and as an appeal to pan-Shiism against Sunni extremists and their Saudi and Western benefactors (Ostovar, 2016; Smyth, 2016). Such framing was endorsed by Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamanei and IRGC-backed Shiite clerics in Iran, Iraq and Syria (Mamouri, 2013; Naame Sham, 2016, 46-48),

²² Interview with Iraqi militia commander, Damascus, 9 April 2014; Interview with Palestinian cadre, Damascus, 26 January 2014.

²³ Interview with Syrian army official working with Tiger Force, Damascus, January 2018; Interview with Tiger Force commander, Deir az-Zur, January 2018. For footage on Russian instructors training Syrian PGM fighters: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f56K2SlSg34> and Rusvesna (2019).

²⁴ Interview with Iraqi militia commander, Damascus, 9 April 2014; Interview with adviser to Assad, Damascus, April 2018.

and as such became constitutive of the overall master frame whereby Syria's proxy war came to be narrated. Several Iraqi militias linked to Iran, including AAH and the Badr Organization, were most intensively involved in recruitment (Smyth, 2016, 15; Naame Sham, 2016, 51-52). Strikingly, transnational recruitment by external actors, and recruitment more broadly, has received scant attention in the literature on proxy wars and, to our knowledge, none when serving PGMs deployed for counter-insurgency purposes (Mumford, 2013, 27-29; Kalyvas and Balcells, 2010; Malet, 2013). For scholars on proxy wars the Syrian case should be of interest as sponsors' heavy involvement in transnational recruitment suggests a mode of support beyond what they commonly expect from them.

A narrow understanding of proxy wars as wars waged by remote control and outsourced to armed groups on the ground also sits uneasily with sponsors' heavy attachment of their own military personnel to Syria's PGMs and their direct involvement in combat. By early 2018, PGM sources claimed that the IRGC had some 1,800 advisers and trainers embedded with PGMs (up from 1,100 two years earlier), Russia about 200 (half the number 18 months earlier and a third six months earlier), and Hizbullah about 450.²⁵ Iraqi groups, primarily the Badr Organization, dispatched a smaller number of advisers to various PGMs.²⁶ This resulted in foreign adviser-fighter ratios in key militias ranging from 58 for AFAB, 63 for the Fatimiyun Brigades, 91 for the Tiger Force, and 115 for the Ba'ath Battalions.²⁷ Such ratios compare roughly to that of US advisers to the South Vietnamese

²⁵ Interviews with senior Syrian official, Damascus, 7 July 2017, Syrian Army intelligence officer, Homs, February 2018, IRGC adviser in the LDF, Damascus, February 2018, Afghan militia commander, Damascus, 13 November 2013.

²⁶ Interview with Syrian Army intelligence officer, Homs, February 2018.

²⁷ Interview with AFAB commander, Damascus countryside, 23 Nov 2017, Interview with commander of Fatimiyun in Deir az-Zur, 7 November 17, Interview with commander of Tiger force, Deir az-Zur, January 2018, Interview with Ba'ath battalion commander, Hama, January 2018.

Army (75 in 1971) (Giustozzi and Kalinovsky, 2016, 81, 257). This suggests that the advisers embedded with Syria's militias had the capacity to act beyond merely offering advice, just as US advisers in Vietnam were involved in all aspects of planning and executing combat operations (Willbanks, 2009).

Indeed, and notwithstanding their formal job titles, there is evidence that advisers embedded with Syria's PGMs gradually began to take part in combat by taking on command functions, and planning and leading PGMs' operations (Media Monitor, no date; Roche, 2016; Bucala and Kagan, 2016).²⁸ For instance, PGMs such as the Ba'ath Battalions and al-Quds Brigade were placed under direct Russian command, and Russians embedded with such militias were credited for planning the highly successful battle of Aleppo in 2016-17 (Al-Jabassini, 2019). Video footage obtained by rebel forces in August 2013 showed that IRGC officers embedded with an AFAB unit near Aleppo routinely carried out reconnaissance missions, gathered intelligence, provided training, advised on weaponry use, laid landmines and roadside bombs, engaged with local civilians, and participated in raids.²⁹ At times of intense fighting, the IRGC, the Basij (the volunteer state militia subordinated to it) and Iran's regular army sent thousands of additional cadres and combat troops to fight with and reinforce PGMs, as happened for instance during the battle of Aleppo (Bucala, 2017). Iran's and Hizbullah's strong engagement with PGMs at the frontlines and their direct role in combat is reflected in casualties they are believed to have suffered. By March 2018, Iran had reportedly lost 2,100 men in Syria, likely to be mostly members of the IRGC and the Basij (International Iran Times, 2018). By May 2018,

²⁸ Interview with IRGC colonel, Damascus, 20 January 2016; Interview with adviser to Assad, Damascus, 26 December 2016.

²⁹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZI_88ChjQtU

Hizbullah was believed to have suffered over 2,000 combat deaths, including 78 PGM advisers (Juneau, 2018).³⁰

Judging from their much lower losses, Russian forces appear to have been less directly involved in combat roles.³¹ Yet Russian claims about thousands of its ground soldiers receiving “combat experience” suggest that Russian personnel did take part in fighting with or alongside PGMs (BBC News, 2018). In July 2019, Turkish-backed rebel groups claimed that Russia had sent special forces to take part in the regime’s ground offensive to recapture Idlib.³² Russian private security companies occasionally played an active role in combat, including PSC Slavyanskii Korpus and the Wagner group which were sent to Syria in 2013, initially to fight IS in Deir az-Zur. Numerous media reports, including one citing a former Wagner contractor, alleged that Wagner is a front for the deployment of Russian military forces (Tsentr Upravleniya Rassledovaniyami, 2017; Korotkov, 2015). The purpose of these companies’ deployments appears to have been to send in fighters better able to use relatively advanced technologies than the typical militia member recruited in Syria. A glimpse of their role in combat was revealed in February 2018 when Wagner group contractors were reportedly involved in a PGM assault on US forces in Deir az-Zur, causing them to suffer high casualties (Gibbons-Neff, 2018; Varfolomeeva, 2018).

Sponsor-proxy relations in Syria have been exhaustive and intrusive, and involved a significant number of sponsors’ military personnel. In this they contrast the “arm’s length conflict engagement” (Mumford, 2013, 1, 63 and 102; yet contrast Hughes, 2012, 2) by

³⁰ interview with Hizbullah adviser, Damascus, February 2018.

³¹ By February 2019, Russia confirmed 116 fatalities among its regular armed forces in Syria, while between October 2015 and December 2017 up to 100 Russian private military contractors are believed to have been killed (EA Worldview, 2019; Vasilyeva, 2017).

³² Russia’s defence ministry denied the claim (al-Khalidi, 2019).

which the literature on proxy wars commonly portrays the role of sponsors. Efforts by the latter went way beyond remote support, like supplying arms, as their roles encompassed staffing and leading PGMs, and fighting with them. Especially in the case of Iran and Hizbullah, such intrusive and tight engagement with proxies allowed sponsors to create PGMs in their own image as some of these proxy groups resembled the ideological outlook, imagery and military organization of their sponsors.

Heavy and direct sponsor involvement has important implications for our understanding of Syria's proxy war. Firstly, as sponsors have been undeniably and intensely involved with their proxies on the ground to help create, shape, guide and reinforce them, the main rationales often believed to be behind proxy wars –allowing for plausible deniability and avoiding combat exposure to one's own troops (Mumford, 2013, 42-3, 100; Mcinnis, 2016; Dalton, 2017)³³—loses much of its currency. Key sponsors like Iran, Hizbullah and Russia indeed have initially been rather secretive about their involvement in the Syrian conflict, and formally denied their role in combat. Iraqi state officials were never upfront about regular states forces' or the PMU's support to the Syrian regime, directly or indirectly, likely fearing this would upset their relations with the U.S. On their part, Iraqi PGMs and the IRGC may not have been keen to see their autonomy abroad diluted by having to stick to PMU and Iraqi state directives. Yet in the case of Iran, Russia and Hizbullah concealment rapidly gave way to acknowledgement and even celebration of their involvement. Some Iranian officials and websites linked to the IRGC heralded Iran's contribution to empowering and supporting PGMs in Syria, and claimed credit for their counter-

³³ Krieg and Rickli (2019) also focus on sponsors' motivations to seek deniability, but see equal relevance in their efforts to increase their capacities and capabilities through "surrogates".

insurgency achievements (Naame Sham, 2016, 19-20, 22-23, 76-77).³⁴ At publicised ceremonies, Russian officers handed out medals for services to the Russian Federation to their counterparts in Syrian PGMs, including leaders of the Tiger Force and al-Quds Brigade (Adra, 2016; Rusinros.ru, 2015). In these cases, plausible deniability may be of less relevance as sponsors can claim to act on behalf of an allied government; not an insurgent. In this respect sponsors' use of proxies appears to have been guided more by considerations of force augmentation and cost effectiveness. Secondly, and due to sponsors' intense involvement with PGMs, sponsors and proxies no longer unambiguously appear as fully distinct from one another; sponsors, proxies and subsidiaries came to constitute fluid networks connecting and merging numerous actors and organizations involved in counterinsurgency efforts. That alone already had important implications for the interactions between counter-insurgency actors in Syria and the management of proxy warfare, to which we will turn next.

IV. Managing and Negotiating Proxy Warfare

Syria's foreign-sponsored counter-insurgency points up to principal-agent relationships and associated dilemmas explored in the literature on proxy wars. Yet in contrast to the common emphasis on the conduct of proxy warfare under conditions wherein only one (state-) sponsor delegates war making to proxy rebel forces (Salehyan, 2010; Loveman, 2006; Mumford, 2013b, 40; Salehyan et al. 2011; Fox, 2019, 7-9; DeVore, 2012, 89), Syria's counterinsurgency involved much more complex constellations. Given Syria's heterogeneity of counter-insurgency actors, and how they constituted a collective effort

³⁴ See also pro-IRGC video channel PureStream's clip "We Are Where We Should Be!," no date, <https://bit.ly/3dl4FaR>

in fighting the rebels, sponsor-proxy relations ceased to be hierarchical in a dyadic manner. Instead, what emerged was a heterarchical order that has been continuously re-negotiated, and struck by competition and significant friction. As conceptualized by Polese and Santini, such heterarchic security orders are characterized by:

a) the lack of a clear superimposition of state coercive institutions over other coercive agents; b) the existence of an oligopoly of violence, with blurred boundaries and tasks' definition among different security actors, even within the state; and c) the existence of different (and tangled) hierarchies within a given political order (.. (Polese and Santini, 2018, 383).

We argue that such features allowed Syria's multiple counter-insurgency actors – sponsors, proxies and the regime-- to each enjoy considerable leeway to affect and alter their relationships and to assert themselves in the process, even when power asymmetries were maintained.

- *Principal-Agent dilemmas in sponsor-proxy relations*

Principal-agent dilemmas involving rebel forces have been noted to include problems of “adverse selection” --when “principals do not have enough information about the competence or reliability of agents prior the establishment of a contractual relationship”- - and “agency slack” --“when the agent takes actions that are not consistent with the preferences of the principal once delegation has been established (Salehyan, 2010,

495).³⁵ The Syrian case suggests that sponsors of PGMs struggled with similar dilemmas but were remarkably inventive in finding ways to address them. Iran's elaborate measures to recruit fighters transnationally, either directly or via its long-time proxies in Iraq, can be viewed as a way to reduce the risks of adverse selection. The same, of course, applies to sponsors' intense involvement in training of recruits. Embedding sponsors' own personnel with PGMs to take on command roles and at times lead them in battle can equally be assumed to have helped in preventing or countering agency slack. In addition, building a material relationship of dependency between sponsors and proxies arguably helped to keep fighters in line. Thus, next to weapons and logistical support, both Iran and Russia provided fighters with salaries while Iran offered citizenship to foreign, mostly Afghan, fighters as compensation for them serving in Syria, and it paid pensions to relatives of 'martyrs' (Sputnik, 2017; Ostovar, 219). As one LDF commander said, "every order issued to us by the Iranians or Hizbullah, whatever they say we need to do; we are following them because we are dependent on their support such as salaries."³⁶

Iran's sectarian approach to the Syrian conflict reinforced its control over at least some of its proxies. Such mechanisms have also been noted in the context of foreign sponsorship of rebel proxies elsewhere as shared ethnic or sectarian identities foster "similar preferences over the means and outcomes of conflicts (while) shared cultural understandings ease the process of screening, monitoring, and sanctioning of agents, thus reducing agency slack (Salehyan, 2010, 509)." Accordingly, the IRGC used Shi'a identity to underwrite their trust in PGMs' commanders. One IRGC officer noted in this context that his organization was not willing to accept Sunnis to be commanders of any of its militias:

³⁵ On challenges of "agency loss" involving state sponsorship of "terrorist" proxies, see Byman and Kreps (2010, 1-18).

³⁶ Interview with LDF commander in Deir az-Zur, January 2018.

“We want control to be in the hands of Shi’a; the Sunnis didn’t cooperate with the government, they are fighting against it, so why should we give them any power?”³⁷ Interestingly, and despite Hizbullah’s own sectarian narrative on the Syrian conflict (Daher, 2017), a Hizbullah adviser in Syria indicated that his party did not subscribe to the IRGC officer’s view, stressing that it was working with militia members of all sects.³⁸

In some cases the bond between sponsor and proxies was tightened further by ideological affinity with Iran’s state doctrine of the “guardianship of the Islamic jurist” (*velayat-e faqih*), and recognition of Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as the eminent source of religious emulation and authority (*marja’iyya taqlid*). Hizbullah for its part transplanted its own ‘resistance’ brand into Syria by helping to create PGMs that mimic its ideological outlook and adherence to Iran’s state doctrine. Such ideological affinities allowed for command structures of the IRGC and Hizbullah to be merged with those of their most loyalist proxies including AAH, the Badr organisation, HHN, and Kata’ib Hizbullah. Creating PGMs this way in their own image considerably eased handling them; a point stressed by IRGC and Hizbullah advisers.³⁹ More specifically, the significance of *velayat-e faqih* for Iran’s ties to Hizbullah appears to have been replicated in relations with its PGMs in Syria as “(..) Iran’s supreme religious leader (through emissaries) could adjudicate disputes within Hezbollah or define new broad directions for the organization to follow (Devore, 2012, 93).” However, some of Iran’s proxies did not subscribe to *velayat-e faqih*, and Khamenei’s *marja’iyya* has been contested among members of militias closely aligned to the IRGC (Smyth, 2016, 33, 37). One example is the Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Forces, which split from AFAB in 2013-4 and, despite not supporting Khamenei’s

³⁷ Interview with IRGC colonel, adviser to the NDF, Damascus, January 2018.

³⁸ Interview with Hizbullah adviser, Damascus, February 2018.

³⁹ Ibid; Interview with IRGC adviser to Shi’a militias, Damascus, February 2018.

marja'iyah and Iran's ideological outlook, maintained close relations with Iran and its closest proxies at least until 2018 (Smyth, 53; Al-Tamimi, 2019).

- *Multiple sponsor competition in proxy warfare*

What is rarely noted in analyses of sponsor-proxy relations generally is that proxy warfare may involve multiple sponsors and that this renders principal-agent dilemmas much more complex and unpredictable. Rivalry between Iran and Russia has marked their efforts to establish overarching organisational structures incorporating PGMs with the aim to centralize command structures and firm up control and discipline. Initially such attempts are likely to have been prompted by growing coordination problems a few years into the war as counter-insurgency operations began to involve scores if not hundreds of militias with complex links to the IRGC, Hizbullah and the regime's regular armed forces and numerous intelligence agencies. An IRGC officer mentioned that coordination problems needed to be addressed especially after the arrival of the Russian air force, as the air campaign required tighter synchronization of ground troops' operations.⁴⁰ The IRGC subsequently set out to draw PGMs into the NDF and the LDF. Together with the Syrian Ministry of Defence (MoD) it placed both umbrella organisations under their joint command. Hizbullah too moved many of its proxies and subsidiaries into both the NDF and LDF.

Soon after their arrival in Syria, the Russians appear to have viewed the IRGC's efforts as an undue concentration of power in Iranian hands that went at the expense of its own

⁴⁰ Interview with IRGC colonel, adviser to the NDF, Damascus, January 2018.

control over PGMs and that of the Syrian state. In light of this, Russia favoured an ambitious support effort to ramp up Syria's regular armed forces by boosting the number of its soldiers and their capabilities.⁴¹ Consequently, the 4th Assault Corps was established in October 2015 with the aim to dissolve the NDF and other PGMs, take in their fighters, and place the corps under the joint command of the Russian military, the IRGC and the Syrian regime. The IRGC, however, balked at the idea, clearly resenting the loss of control this would imply. One IRGC officer quipped, "we invested a lot in the NDF (...) so we do not want it to join the army."⁴² The IRGC argued that the regime owed its survival to the NDF, and that the Russian plan to rehabilitate the Syrian armed forces was both financially unattainable and unhelpful as regular forces were unlikely to be effective against highly localised and adaptive insurgents.⁴³ After the IRGC's request to defer the restructuring to after the war fell on deaf ears, it instructed its proxies not to cooperate. When disagreements about the issue peaked at the end of 2015, the IRGC temporarily shifted its funding away from the NDF in favour of the Fatimiyun Brigades and other militias insulated from the influence of both the Russians and the regime.⁴⁴

Until early 2018 continued efforts by the Russians and the regime to establish the 4th Assault Corps drew in a limited number of PGMs and, reportedly, up to 18,000 fighters.⁴⁵ The Russians were more successful in persuading PGMs to join when the latter already received Russian aid and advice.⁴⁶ Yet the initiative soon stalled when no more militias

⁴¹ Interview with adviser to Assad, Damascus, 26 December 2016; ⁴¹ Interview with IRGC colonel, adviser to NDF, Damascus, 12 November 2017.

⁴² Interview with IRGC colonel, Damascus, 1 December 2016.

⁴³ Interview with IRGC colonel, adviser to the NDF, Damascus, January 2018.

⁴⁴ Interview with IRGC colonel, Damascus, 1 December 2016.

⁴⁵ Interview with officer of military intelligence, Damascus, January 2018; Interview with Army colonel in NDF, Deir az-Zur, 12 November 2017; Interview with IRGC adviser in the LDF, Damascus, February 2018; Interview with Syrian Army intelligence officer, Homs, February 2018.

⁴⁶ Interview with Syrian Army intelligence officer, Homs, February 2018.

volunteered to be incorporated. Regardless, Assad and Russia did not give up on the plan altogether, as it was still being negotiated with the IRGC by the end of 2017.⁴⁷ Meanwhile, however, the IRGC and Hizbullah set their eyes back on the NDF. They replaced commanders of several NDF units whom they did not trust.⁴⁸ By the end of 2016, NDF groups linked to the IRGC and Hizbullah started to operate autonomously from the Syrian MoD. The IRGC and Hizbullah's control over the LDF also tightened as Hizbullah increased the number of its advisers while all ties of command to the Syrian MoD were severed.⁴⁹ Consequently, numerous Iran-supported PGMs started to operate independently from the MoD and regular armed forces.⁵⁰ As Iran worked toward expanding its control, even some militias that hitherto fell under the exclusive remit of the regime's intelligence agencies seem to have buckled. These included some units of the regime-aligned Tiger Force and Ba'ath Battalions.⁵¹ IRGC advisers allegedly tried to convince commanders of other militias under the control of the army to join the now Iran-dominated NDF or the LDF. For instance, several commanders of the Desert Hawks reportedly became answerable this way to the IRGC.⁵²

In November 2016 Russia countered the IRGC's assertive policies by announcing its 5th Assault Corps initiative, this time without inviting Iran to take part. Intentions behind the initiative appear to have again been to ultimately dissolve PGMs and integrate their fighters into the Syrian armed forces. Yet only some of the groups that joined, such as the Desert Hawks, were disbanded while others, such as the al-Quds Brigade, retained their

⁴⁷ Interview with Syrian army officer, 15th division, As-Suwayda, December 2017.

⁴⁸ Interview with IRGC colonel, Damascus, 1 December 2016.

⁴⁹ Interview with commander of LDF in Deir az-Zur, January 2018.

⁵⁰ Interview with AFAB commander, Damascus, 23 November 2017; Interview with Syrian army officer, 15th division, As-Suwayda, December 2017.

⁵¹ Interview with IRGC adviser in the LDF, Damascus, February 2018; Interview with Ba'ath battalion commander, Hama, January 2018; Interview with commander of Tiger force in Deir az-Zur, January 2018.

⁵² Interview with Tiger Force commander in Deir az-Zur, January 2018.

separate status within it as long as they accepted the Russian-led command structure and strict discipline (Al-Jabassini, 2019). The 5th Assault Corps also took in former rebel groups and their fighters, and this way began to serve the regime's "reconciliation" approach designed to encourage rebels to surrender; an initiative supported by Russia (Haid, 2018). By April 2019, the 5th Assault Corps comprised an estimated 25,000 men (Al-Jabassini, 2019).

In their tussle for control over PGMs, Iran and Russia essentially helped to bring about multiple, parallel hierarchies governing the counterinsurgency. While their common interests in supporting the fight against the rebels sustained its heterarchic features, relations between the two sponsors and their proxies deteriorated as each pulled the Syrian regime in different directions. One IRGC officer complained that the regime, spurred on by the Russians, warned homegrown regime-aligned militias not to cooperate with Iranian-backed PGMs carrying out operations outside the MoD's chain of command.⁵³ The Russian and Syrian air force allegedly refused to back up the Fatimiyun Brigades and other militias falling under exclusive IRGC command.⁵⁴ For instance, an AFAB commander claimed that such air support was refused when in 2016 the militia came under attack by rebel forces near Aleppo, causing it to lose its base.⁵⁵ At times PGMs clashed violently as sponsors shielded their respective proxies from attempts to dissolve them and prevented each other and the regime from taking disciplinary measures against some militias' lawlessness, looting and extortive practices. For instance, in December 2015 and amidst controversy over the establishment of the Russian-supported 4th Assault Corps to assimilate the NDF, regime regular forces engaged in armed scuffles in Homs

⁵³ Interview with IRGC colonel, adviser to the NDF, Damascus, January 2018

⁵⁴ Interview with Fatimiyun commander in Deir az-Zur, 7 November 2017.

⁵⁵ Interview with AFAB commander, Damascus countryside, 23 November 2017.

with fighters loyal to a fiercely pro-Iranian commander of Quwat al-Ridha, a group within the NDF backed by Hizbullah and the IRGC (Hage Ali, 2019; Alsouria, 2016).

Growing tensions involving the PGMs and their sponsors were at times tangled up with broader strategic differences, as Russia grew uncomfortable with Iran's aim to gain a quasi-permanent foothold in Syria as a key asset in its wider confrontation with its Saudi-led rivals in the region, Israel and the US. For example, in June 2018 a confrontation set off Hizbullah against Russian forces stationed in the outskirts of al-Qusayr nearby the Lebanese border, which was only resolved when Syrian regular forces replaced the Russians (Mroue, 2018). Shortly before, a Hizbullah arms depot nearby and several other Hizbullah and IRGC targets on the Syrian-controlled side of the Golan had been hit by Israeli airstrikes. The tensions occurred against the backdrop of Russian President Vladimir Putin's comment that given recent victories against the insurgency "foreign armed forces will be withdrawn"; a remark that solicited a strong rebuke from Iran's Foreign Ministry insisting "no one can force Iran to do anything." (Bachner, 2018). Russian-Iranian relations deteriorated further when it became clear that Russia was doing little to thwart Israel's numerous airstrikes against IRGC and Hizbullah targets in Syria.

- *Proxies' leeway toward sponsors*

Competition and rivalry among the sponsors significantly boosted proxies' ability to extract resources and privileges from them, and to carve out some real leverage and

agency of their own.⁵⁶ Theorists on proxy wars often warned against proxies' tendency to get out of control as they pursue their own agendas in contravention of sponsors' preferences (Hughes, 2012, 39, 47-61, 139 and 141; Mumford, 2013, 108-110; Popovic, 2017; Brown, 2016, 248). In contrast, critics argued that the notion of proxy war wrongly perceives of local combatants' own agency as negligible and that proxies are erroneously assumed to be subordinate entities without autonomous decision-making capacity (Harris, 2018, 6, 32; San-Akca, 2016, 2). Neither are necessarily right or wrong; proxies' agency and leeway are a function of negotiation and bargaining, which in turn is mediated by the ways in which they and other relevant security actors relate to one another. In Syria this bargaining has occurred within a heterarchic order involving multiple actors. Such allowed proxies to capitalize on competition between sponsors, prompting the latter to use their respective leverage over the Syrian regime to satisfy some of their demands. One carrot provided by the sponsors to keep their proxies in line and lure other groups into their sphere of influence was to extract concessions from the regime in favour of their members. Thus, Iran persuaded the regime to waive military conscription obligations for members of the LDF, thereby providing an incentive for PGMs to remain in the group and for others to join (Haid, 2018). Russia does not appear to have obtained the same concession for those serving in the 5th Assault Corps. The IRGC and Hizbullah also arranged for the appointment of numerous militia officers in senior positions in the Syrian armed forces, with the added advantage of further penetrating their ranks.⁵⁷ Fighters with Iran-supported PGMs were also given land and real estate after the IRGC intervened on their behalf. As of January 2018, about 900 such militiamen were reported to have been given land by the Syrian government in Damascus, Latakia, Aleppo and Homs, and 2,000

⁵⁶ This point is also emphasized by Groh (2019, chapter 4).

⁵⁷ Interview with IRGC colonel, adviser to the NDF, Damascus, January 2018; Interview with Hizbullah adviser, Damascus, February 2018.

were on a waiting list.⁵⁸ Others were granted Syrian nationality (Ali, 2017). Yet also those militiamen who agreed to be incorporated in the 5th Assault Corps supported by Russia demanded senior appointments and other rewards including land, real estate, and even membership in parliament, some of which the regime granted.⁵⁹ Furthermore, the IRGC protected its proxies from occasional regime measures to counter their undisciplined behaviour, or it turned a blind eye to such practices; in both cases allowing PGMs to loot newly conquered areas and continue their lucrative extortive practices at checkpoints even long after rebels had been driven out.⁶⁰ The Fatimiyun Brigades even threatened to pull out of Syria if the IRGC did not intervene on their behalf when in June 2016 the regime cracked down on their undisciplined behaviour in Aleppo and, later on, elsewhere in the country, causing the militia to suffer nearly a hundred casualties.⁶¹ The IRGC duly put pressure on the regime to end the clampdown.

Hizbullah particularly managed to gain considerable clout vis-à-vis its sponsor, largely thanks to its own direct contribution to the war effort, its handling of its own proxies, and its managing of many others on the IRGC's behalf. By Hizbullah's own admission, the organization heavily depends on Iran's "moral, political, material and financial support." (Hassan Nasrallah cited in Saad-Ghorayeb, 2012). Yet it has played a pivotal role in the IRGC's proxy strategy in Syria while sustaining its own relationship with the Syrian regime built over many years. Arguably, these assets, in addition to the popularity of its highly successful 'resistance' template, allowed Hizbullah to enjoy some autonomy toward Iran. Reportedly, IRGC commanders indicated that many of their operational

⁵⁸ Interview with IRGC colonel, adviser to the NDF, Damascus, January 2018

⁵⁹ Interview with officer of military intelligence, Damascus, January 2018.

⁶⁰ Interview with Syrian army officer, 15th division, As-Suwayda, December 2017.

⁶¹ Interview with Fatimiyun group commander in Deir az-Zur, 7 November 17; Interview with IRGC colonel in NDF. Deir az-Zur, 12 November 2017.

decisions were taken after consulting Hizbullah (Media Monitor, no date). Such latitude also showed in our interviews with Hizbullah members as the latter openly disagreed with their sponsor on sensitive issues. Next to contradicting the IRGC's fiercely sectarian perspective on managing PGMs as mentioned earlier, one Hizbullah adviser said his organization disagreed with the IRGC's insistence on PGMs staying on in Syria indefinitely: "When the war is over, there is no need for any militias to operate in Syria, they must go to their homes or continue their normal life or fight in others areas like in Israel. (..) Hizbullah intentions are clear; we will withdraw our forces and go back to our country when the war is over, and after all the opposition forces are eliminated."⁶²

As they succeeded in extracting significant concessions from the sponsors and, indirectly, the regime, and variously carved out leeway for themselves, Syria's proxies show little resemblance to proxies who, in a dyadic principal-agent relationship, can only follow their sponsor's directives or, risking to be severed from their benefactor, defect or dissolve. Their leverage in the constant bargaining that Syria's counter-insurgency campaign entailed has caused both sponsors and the regime to take their demands seriously, which, in turn, encouraged militiamen's sense of entitlement. All the same, there has been little indication that such proxies have gone out of control, or shown serious 'agency slack' vis-à-vis their sponsors.⁶³ Apparently, sponsors' remedies in addressing principal-agent dilemmas, and their constant bargaining with them and the regime, are proving efficacious. In this respect, foreign sponsors' management of their proxies echoes the

⁶² Interview with Hizbullah adviser, Damascus, February 2018.

⁶³ An exceptional case may be that of the Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Forces, a splinter group from AFAB that gradually loosened its ties with the IRGC and in 2018 became highly vocal in its criticisms of Iran. In February 2019, its leader Aws al-Khafaji was briefly detained in Iraq (Al-Tamimi, 2019; Al-Hurra, 2019).

literature on PGMs wherein states outsource violence at a domestic level by optimizing their authority by way of complex bargaining.

- *Averting a double crisis of sovereignty*

From the perspective of the Syrian regime, outsourcing state violence to PGMs may be argued to have posed some serious challenges to state sovereignty in the classical Weberian sense of strictly monopolizing the legitimate use of physical force. While foreign sponsors have intrusively manoeuvred to support, reinforce and manage PGMs, the challenge to sovereignty may be viewed as all the more acute as foreign actors infringe on state sovereignty by interfering with its internal affairs. It is this double crisis of sovereignty that prompted some observers to conclude that Syria's state sovereignty, and the regime's embrace of its attributes, have become unsustainable; a harbinger of the regime's ultimate demise (Schneider, 2016; Lister and Nelson, 2017). Yet while sponsors and proxies aggressively pursued their objectives, so has the Syrian regime been jockeying for its survival.

The regime's initial efforts to manage and control PGMs, while largely successful (Leenders and Giustozzi, 2019, 170-172), were significantly complicated when, by 2015, Iran's and Hizbullah's role in fighting the rebels had become predominant and both tightened their grip over many PGMs. However, the Russian intervention offered the regime respite. It eagerly embraced the Russian initiatives to establish the 4th and 5th Assault Corps in a barely concealed bid to dilute Iran's and Hizbullah's control. The Russian initiative also offered an opportunity for the regime to discipline PGMs. While in this sense the establishment of the 4th and the 5th Corps was only partially successful, it

placed the regime in a position of some strength vis-à-vis the IRGC and Hizbullah. As detailed above, some militias left the LDF and NDF to join the 4th and 5th Corps under the joint command of the regime and the Russians. In April 2017 the regime and the IRGC reached an agreement wherein the LDF would merge into the regime's regular armed forces (Haid, 2018). Even when the deal soon fell apart due to the IRGC's insistence on retaining its control over the militias, it suggested that the regime had started to push back. It did so even less subtly as the regime capitalized on dissent among Syrian members of IRGC- and Hizbullah-linked militias over differential payment compared to their foreign colleagues. The regime lured them away by offering higher sums, as happened in the case of the Quwat al-Ridha, a group in Homs tightly linked to Hizbullah (Hage Ali, 2019). The regime also dispatched regular forces that clashed with IRGC-sponsored militias after allowing local complaints about their looting and extortion to be aired openly (Lund, 2017; Grinstead, 2017). IRGC officers and their closely aligned militias complained as they realized that they no longer had the free rein they felt they were entitled to thanks to their heavy investment in the regime's counter-insurgency campaign.⁶⁴

While embracing the Russians to counterbalance Iran, the regime hampered Russian policies as well. Accordingly, it did not waive conscription duties for all those joining the 5th Corps, as it had for the IRGC-supported LDF. As a result, many of them did not enjoy the same privileges as their peers in the LDF, such as being able to serve near their homes and receiving higher salaries. Neither did the regime fully abide by Russia's 'reconciliation' policy as rebels who surrendered and joined the force were detained regardless (Al-Jabassini, 2019). At times, the regime reasserted itself by posing as an

⁶⁴ Interview with IRGC colonel, adviser to the NDF, Damascus, January 2018.

arbiter when tensions between foreign sponsors ran high, as for example in June 2018 when it replaced Russian forces near al-Qusayr to prevent them from clashing with Hezbollah. More generally, regime handouts to militia members of senior army appointments, land, real estate and other rewards were highly selective, causing frustration among PGMs⁶⁵ and reminding sponsors of their own reliance on the regime to keep their proxies in check. Slowing down official clearance of PGM operations may have been another way of the regime to underscore its leverage, even when this reportedly prevented them from acting on available intelligence on rebel attacks.⁶⁶

As it jockeyed among sponsors and their numerous proxies, the regime carved out some critical space to preserve its own interests and relevance. At times, this required a rapid shift in its policies when the sponsors threatened to take positions at its peril. For example, when in early 2018 Russia appeared to drop Bashar al-Assad in its proposals for a future transitional government for Syria,⁶⁷ the regime scrambled to patch up its relations with the Iranians. Suddenly, the regime showed more leniency toward the IRGC's and Hezbollah's PGMs, among other things by giving in to their long-standing demands for senior appointments in the armed forces and public administration.⁶⁸ Yet on a more general level, the regime did not shy away from contradicting Iran and its proxies when it saw them as overstepping the mark or posing unreasonable demands. For instance, President al-Assad is said to have flatly rejected the IRGC's demand to establish

⁶⁵ Interview with LDF commander in Deir az-Zur, January 2018.

⁶⁶ Interview with Fatimiun commander in Deir az-Zur, 7 November 2017.

⁶⁷ The final statement of the Russian-sponsored Syria talks in January 2018 in Sochi envisaged a "democratic state" ruled by the ballot box; it refrained from mentioning Bashar al-Assad or providing assurances for his continued stay in power (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2018).

⁶⁸ Interview with IRGC colonel, adviser to the NDF, Damascus, January 2018; Interview with officer of military intelligence, Damascus, January 2018; Interview with Hezbollah adviser, Damascus, February 2018; Interview with IRGC adviser in the LDF, Damascus, February 2018.

permanent bases for its militias.⁶⁹ The regime also reportedly refused to give in to requests by some IRGC-supported militias to after the war establish a political party representing Syria's own tiny Shiite minority.⁷⁰ Neither did the regime abandon its goal to ultimately place all militias under its command, as it continued to hint at forceful action if they failed to cooperate. As one army officer put it, "if they aren't obeying the orders of the Ministry of Defence, then we won't see any difference between these militias and the opposition groups."⁷¹

As heterarchy governed Syria's counter-insurgency, neither the Syrian state nor the regime prevailed, but they did not wither either. Sovereignty –both in terms of the state's monopoly on the use of violence and its ability to withstand unbridled foreign meddling in its internal affairs-- may have been compromised, but the Syrian state and regime survived. As noted by Heydemann (2018), the Syrian state has thus far proven itself not as a "fragile state" but much more as a "fierce state"; "one in which ruling elites elevate survival above all else and design institutions to support this aim." This outcome has not been inevitable; above all, it resulted from the successful deployment of PGMs in fighting a vicious insurgency, the proliferation of proxies and their multiple sponsors involved in this effort, and the room that their relationships left for the regime to bargain for and negotiate its interests. For the regime such certainly had significant costs, including growing rifts within the ruling elite about the regime's balancing of its foreign sponsors, and reduced autonomy in its decision-making as Iran, Russia and Hizbullah penetrated the armed forces and state institutions more generally. Iran and Russia have also cashed

⁶⁹ Interview with Syrian army officer, 15th division, As-Suwayda, December 2017; Interview with former senior Ba'ath official, Damascus, 20 October 2017.

⁷⁰ Interview with AFAB commander, Damascus countryside, 23 November 2017; Interview with IZAB commander, Deir az-Zur, January 2018.

⁷¹ Interview with Syrian army officer, 15th division, as-Suwayda, December 2017.

in on their support to the regime by obtaining lucrative business contracts and, in the case of Russia, authorization for an extended lease of the port of Tartus. They are rumoured to be stepping up their pressures on the regime for pay back concessions as Iran insists on building permanent bases for its proxies in Syria and Russia allegedly called on Assad to squeeze regime incumbents for significant amounts of cash (Haaretz, 2019; Grinstead, 2019). The future is likely to hold even steeper challenges to the regime as it will struggle to impose its control over the militias, expel or co-opt their members with dwindling resources at its disposal, and keep their sponsors at bay. Yet on balance and to date, the outsourcing of state violence and proxy warfare has paid off, and thus far has not generated the dire repercussions for state- and regime survival so often attributed to them.

The Syrian case gives reasons to question the still common view that outsourcing state violence generally causes PGMs to inevitably turn against the state, make it 'fragile' or prompt its failure (Marten, 2012; Jentzsch et al., 2015; Bates, 2008). (Staniland, 2012, 247) and others studying states' devolution of violence rightly criticized this view as unduly clinging on to the notion of state failure in terms of upholding a strict monopoly on violence while, in fact, "violence management" keeps states afloat (see also Ahram, 2011). We suggest that these insights may be usefully extended when the outsourcing of violence involves the foreign sponsorship featured by proxy wars. As the Syrian regime manoeuvred among PGMs and their foreign sponsors, it managed to leverage its interests and uphold its own relevance and that of the state it claims to represent. Interestingly, one way the Syrian regime managed to stave off PGMs' blowback and negotiate its authority was by capitalizing on the diversity of their international backing. Of course, whether it will succeed to continue doing so in the future remains to be seen.

Conclusion

The Syrian conflict has witnessed heavy foreign meddling, which, next to and in conjunction with its intra-Syrian dynamics, helped to fuel the war and gave it a heavy regional and international dimension. In this context foreign actors' support to combatants acting as proxies conforms to what scholars of proxy wars expect from sponsors as they provided a plethora of militias with weapons, financial and other material means, and training. Also the ways in which sponsors and armed groups related to one another echo some of the principal-agent dilemmas underscored by the literature on proxy wars. Yet our study on foreign-sponsored PGMs suggests that Syria's proxy war differed from common scholarly understandings of such wars, and in some ways contradicted widely shared suppositions. Firstly, proxies were relevant not just as insurgents or rebels as amply demonstrated by extant studies on proxy wars, but also as counter-insurgents or PGMs. The large number of men they mobilized in combat, the significant casualties they suffered, and the critical role they played in key battles all point up to the essential role of foreign-sponsored PGMs as they contributed considerably to the regime's survival. Secondly, the Syrian case shows that sponsors are manifold and do not necessarily have exclusive relations to their proxies. Rarely does the literature on proxy wars allow for multiple sponsors, or take into account that proxies may receive support from more than one sponsor simultaneously as in the Syrian case. Thirdly, sponsors of PGMs in Syria included state and non-state actors, which in some cases themselves acted as proxies. As the case of Hizbullah shows, proxies' involvement in their own sponsorship activities affected their relationship with Iran as its sponsor. Fourthly, foreign sponsors of PGMs in Syria were intensely involved with their proxies in ways that

greatly exceeded the 'remote control' approach commonly observed for proxy wars. By endorsing and propagating a profoundly sectarian ideology, Iran, Hizbullah and Iraqi militias actively recruited volunteers transnationally to provide PGMs with manpower. A narrower understanding of proxy wars as waged at arm's length and outsourced to armed groups on the ground also sits uneasily with the Syrian case as sponsors deployed large numbers of their own military to take part in combat. Fifthly, and related to proxies' support coming from multiple sponsors, principal-agent relations ceased to fully conform to the dyadic and hierarchical format envisaged in the literature. On the one hand, more straightforward principal-agent dilemmas, such as adverse selection and agency slack, did resonate in the Syrian case. Sponsors developed ways of dealing with these, some of which were innovative. However, relations between sponsors and proxies transcended simple dyadic and hierarchical ties. Syria's foreign-sponsored counterinsurgency came to be governed by a heterarchical order, with parallel hierarchies tying proxies to sponsors fiercely in competition with one another. This more complex constellation allowed and encouraged proxies to negotiate and bargain for resources and privileges from their sponsors, and to carve out some real leverage of their own. This state of affairs also affected the Syrian regime as it hosted both foreign sponsors and their proxies. With multiple and competing sponsors, and as heterarchy governed Syria's counterinsurgency, the Syrian regime benefitted from crucial outside military support while at the same time it manoeuvred to retain its own relevance and autonomy. In doing so, the regime proved resilient just as it averted a 'double crisis of sovereignty'; one in which PGMs would have fully seized its monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force and wherein their foreign sponsors' interference with Syria's internal affairs would have gone completely unchecked. Such constitutes a clear example of deflecting fragile statehood, seemingly against the odds of outsourcing state violence and heavy external meddling.

We this way echo and add an important international layer to alternative perspectives offered by the literature on state devolution of violence as we incorporate the role of foreign sponsors in bargained 'violence management' discounting state failure.

While underscoring five distinguishing features of Syria's counter-insurgency by proxy that are at odds with common understandings of proxy wars, one may wonder whether these are unique to the Syrian case or indeed novel. As Kalyvas (2001) noted nearly two decades ago in the debate on the "new wars" notion, the "newness" of new wars may be more attributable to a faulty conceptual horizon that fails to fully capture and grasp historical data than to the emergence of a new phenomenon. We suspect that a similar shortcoming troubles scholarly work on proxy wars as at least some of our findings on Syria individually resonate with proxy wars elsewhere and in the past. Thus, the Ottoman Empire, Nazi occupying forces, colonial powers and US forces in Vietnam and in Iraq all used indigenous, irregular units or militias to patrol frontiers, keep order, and suppress uprisings. Furthermore, PGMs held relationships with multiple and sometimes competing sponsors elsewhere too, such as in Afghanistan after 2001. Non-state actors, including proxies themselves, created and/or supported proxy counter-insurgents as in the case of Afghanistan's Arbakai forces after 2001, Iraq's Peshmerga and some of its Shi'a militias after 2003, and Somalia's Ahlu Sunna Waljama'a militias from 2009 onwards. Arm's length sponsorship of proxies was overshadowed by significant sponsor detachment of troops to them in Afghanistan from 2003 onwards, and in the case of the British SAS' engagement with Oman's local militias (Firqat) fighting the Dhofar Rebellion of 1963-76. In short, Syria's counter-insurgency by proxy unlikely points at fully new phenomena; instead, it underscores the need for scholarly work to explore the themes we underscore and incorporate them into a better conceptualization and understanding of proxy wars.

More specifically, these features point at the need to explore how in these and other cases relations between sponsors and proxy counter-insurgents also transcended dyadic and hierarchical ties, resulting in complex constellations of negotiated violence.

Scholars predict that proxy wars are likely to persist and perhaps become even more common. When trying to better understand the phenomenon, they should acknowledge that the ways in which proxy wars will be fought are bound to vary and will to a large degree depend on specific circumstances and context that cannot be easily squeezed into parsimonious models. At the same time, as we noted earlier, the Syrian case may not be novel for the ways in which proxy wars are fought. Yet the scale of foreign sponsors' involvement in Syria and the success of their counter-insurgency efforts grant pertinence to the five features we identified in this article for the proxy wars to come. Mumford echoes some of our assessment as he notes a trend wherein proxy wars are far from being unilateral affairs involving two competing superpowers, but multilateral endeavours carried by "proxy warfare coalitions" between regional and international powers (Mumford, 2013, 102). He also foresaw the possibility that non-state actors may act as sponsors. With the Syrian experience firmly in their repertoires, Iran, Hizbullah and Russia are likely to continue on their path of using proxies to project power abroad; just as states that outsourced violence at home were found to do so again in the future (Ahram, 2016). Other medium-sized powers and non-state armed groups pursuing grand foreign policy ambitions disproportionate to their modest military capabilities can be expected to pay attention.

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APPENDICES Foreign Sponsorships of Pro-Government Militias

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Appendix 1: Sources and methodology

Thorough qualitative empirical research is important when studying a ‘live’ and academically still largely unexplored armed conflict like Syria’s. Yet especially authoritarian states, in the Middle East and such as Syria’s, offer hostile environments to researchers as they aggressively present themselves as authoritarian guardians of state sovereignty and official myths (Schwedler and Clark, 2018). Vicious armed conflict poses additional obstacles to first-hand data gathering as challenging security conditions impede fieldwork and access, mostly putting

such settings off-limits for qualitative social science research (Kalyvas, 2006, 48-51; Vlassenroot, 2006, 191-98). Despite calls for the study of the Syrian war to more strongly engage with theories on civil war generally (Lynch, 2013), limited access to ‘the field’ may be a key reason why such a project is still in its infancy. Increasingly, however, scholars have found ways to circumvent, overcome and/or work with the proverbial ‘fog of war’, in the study of civil wars generally (Van den Haar et al., 2013; Barakat et al., 2002; Hoffmann, 2014) and in the specific case of Syria.⁷²

For the purpose of our research on Syria’s foreign-sponsored pro-government militias we deemed it essential to interview those involved in and engaging with these militias themselves. For this we used a methodology drawing on local researchers (former journalists) interviewing conflict participants in areas and environments where foreign researchers do not have full access, and this way conduct fieldwork among regime proponents where most other studies have focussed on rebels and civilians in rebel-held areas. We pioneered this approach for our earlier study on the National Defence Force (NDF), which allowed us to gain insights into its organisational structures and the regime’s ability to manage the unintended fallout of its reliance on such state-sponsored militias (Leenders and Giustozzi, 2019). Thanks to that previous study, we already had a small pool of three tested researchers, with access to pro-regime security forces and militias. They had been selected for the previous study on the basis of the recommendations of another media operator, with experience in Syria and links to regime officials. We asked for researchers who had good access on the regime’s side. Because of their access, we considered that it would have been safe for them to carry out interviews, other than the risk implicit of living in Syria. The media operator vouched for them when they approached his own contacts, facilitating the interviewing process.

Our local researchers were tasked with gathering information via semi-structured interviews about the organisation and functioning of the militias, about the role of external advisers and leading officers, about their relationship with the different branches of the Syrian security and military apparatus and, more generally, with the Assad regime, as well as about their international connections and the nature of support they received from foreign sources. Interviewees were selected on the basis of the researchers’ (and the media operator’s) personal

⁷² See e.g.: (drawing on interviews with Syrian refugees) (Pearlman, 2016); (drawing on interviews with Syrian army defectors) (Albrecht and Koehler, 2018), (drawing on fieldwork in rebel-held territories) (Baczko et al., 2018); (analysing satellite images) (Vignal, 2014; De Juan and Bank, 2015).

contacts with members of Syria's security forces and/or through the good offices of members of the militias with whom our local researchers had long entertained contacts. The first interviews, carried out in 2013-14, proved difficult to arrange and to carry out, but the contacts established in the process facilitated interviews at a later stage. Introductions by former interviewees turned out to be a major advantage for reaching out to more and more senior interviewees.

Because of the research topic, we did not face the risk of a hidden pro-regime bias among interviewees – it was obvious from the start that they would all be pro-regime albeit to various degrees. Other possible biases we faced included the tendency to minimise any problem faced by the regime and its allies, and a tendency to deny frictions between the regime and Iran or Russia. In order to reduce as much as possible the impact of this bias, we took a series of measures. We tasked the researchers with identifying, among the possible interviewees, those who had been more open and frank to them in the past. We also designed the questionnaires in such a way as to reveal assumed differences and rivalries between different agencies and militias (Syrian army vs intelligence departments vs NDF; officials linked to Iran and others linked to Russia; militias linked to army or intelligence and militias linked to IRGC or Hizbullah; etc.). Finally, we built into the questionnaires every piece of information we had about frictions or contrasts among different actors, and instructed the interviewers to present these as matters of fact, in order to suggest to interviewees that we already knew a fair amount about the topic and to encourage them to be accurate in their answers. By the time we started the round of interviews, which represents the bulk of the material used for this article, we had already established (on the basis of the interviews already done) that the risk of a bias against reporting any dysfunctions in the regime's security apparatus had been successfully managed.

Most of the 29 interviews were held in the winter of 2017-18 but also included interviews carried out in 2013-16. They cover senior and mid-ranking members of a number of key militias, both for their size and their involvement in combat, as well as members of the Syrian armed forces and the IRGC. The PGMs are: Hizbullah (Lebanon), the Local Defence Forces (LDF), al-Fatamiyun, Liwa' al-Abbas, Liwa Imam al-Baqr, Liwa' al-Imam Zain al-Abidin, the Tiger Force, Ba'ath Battalions, and Suqur al-Furat.

The sample size of interviewees (29) is relatively small, but we believe that we obtained important information this way from sources that are not usually consulted in studies and/or media reporting on the Syrian war. Cooperation of those contacted for interviews was surprisingly forthcoming as soon as interviewees became familiar with our project, and were keen to in detail reflect on our questions, also when these touched on highly contentious themes. Such may be partly explained by developments on the battlefield when most interviews were conducted, as a sense of military victory reinforced confidence among our interviewees and prompted a desire to assess past achievements and future prospects. All the same, most interviewees requested to remain anonymous, presumably because they were not officially authorised to talk publicly. We cross-checked, contextualized and supplemented interviews inside Syria by consulting militias' social media and media reporting on them, and by drawing on work by our peers in academia and think tanks.

This is a chronological list of our interviews:

1. Afghan militia commander, Damascus, 13 November 2013.
2. Interview with senior Palestinian PGM fighter, Damascus, 26 January 2014.
3. Interview with Iraqi militia commander, Damascus, 9 April 2014.
4. Interview with IRGC general, Damascus, 19 Jan 2016.
5. Interview with IRGC colonel, Damascus, 20 January 2016.
6. Interview with IRGC colonel, Damascus, 1 December 2016.
7. Interview with adviser to Assad, Damascus, 26 December 2016.
8. Interviews with senior Syrian official, Damascus, 7 July 2017.
9. Interview with former senior Ba'ath official, Damascus, 20 October 2017.
10. Interview with Syrian army colonel, Deir Ez-Zur, 12 November 2017.
11. Interviews with Fatimiyun commander in Deir az-Zur, Damascus, 7 November 2017.
12. Interviews with AFAB commander, Damascus countryside, 23 November 2017.
13. IRGC Interview with Syrian army colonel liaising with the NDF, Deir Ez-Zur, 12 November 2017.
14. Interview with IRGC colonel, adviser to NDF, Damascus, 12 November 2017.
15. Interview with Army colonel in NDF, Deir az-Zur, 12 November 2017.
16. Interview with Syrian army officer, 15th division, As-Suwayda, December 2017.

17. Interviews with Tiger Force commander, Deir az-Zur, January 2018.
18. Interview with IZAB commander, Deir az-Zur, January 2018.
19. Interview with Syrian army official working with the Tiger Force, Damascus, January 2018.
20. Interview with Ba'ath Battalion commander, Hama, January 2018.
21. Interview with LDF commander in Deir az-Zur, January 2018.
22. Interview with Syrian Military Intelligence officer, Damascus, January 2018.
23. Interview with IRGC colonel and adviser to the NDF, Damascus, January 2018.
24. Interviews with Imam al-Baqr commander in Aleppo, January 2018.
25. IRGC adviser in the LDF, Damascus, February 2018.
26. Interview with Hizbullah adviser, Damascus, February 2018.
27. Interview with Syrian Army intelligence officer, Homs, February 2018.
28. Interview with IRGC adviser to Shi'a militias, Damascus, February 2018.
29. Interview with adviser to Assad, Damascus, April 2018.

Appendix 2: Table: Key Foreign-sponsored PGMs in the Syrian War

	Est. fighters	Sponsors
Abu Fadl al-Abbas Brigades (AFAB)⁷³	8,996 (2017)	Iraqi, Iran, Hizbullah
Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis Brigade⁷⁴	500 (2018)	Iran, Iraqi
Akram al-Sabawi Brigades⁷⁵	700 (2018)	Iran
Al-Mukhtar al-Thiqfi Brigade (leadr Al-Hajj, cited in Al-Tamimi, 2017)	4,500 (2017)	Iran, Hizbullah
Al-Quds Brigade	1,500-5,500 (2018)	Russia
Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) (Wilson Center, 2018)	1-3,000 (2016)	Iraqi, Iran, Hizbullah
Ba'ath Battalions⁷⁶	7,500-8,000 (2017)	Russia, Iran, Hizbullah
Badr Organisation (Neriah, 2017; Al-Tamimi, 2019)	1,500 (2015)	Iraqi, Iran
Desert Hawks⁷⁷	5,000 (2016)	Russia

⁷³ Interview with AFAB commander in Damascus countryside, December 2017.

⁷⁴ Interview with IRGC adviser to LDF, Damascus, February 2018

⁷⁵ Interview with IRGC adviser to LDF, Damascus, February 2018

⁷⁶ Interview with Syrian military intelligence officer in Tiger Force, Damascus, January 2018; interview with Ba'ath Battalion commander, Hama, January 2018.

⁷⁷ Interview with Tiger Force commander, Deir az-Zur, January 2018

Fatimiyun Brigades⁷⁸	18,600 (2018)	Iran, Hizbullah
Fawq al-Imam al-Hajja⁷⁹	2,000 (2018)	Iraqi
Harakat Hizbullah al-Nujaba' (HHN) (Syrian Reporter, 2017)	7,000 (2016)	Hizbullah, Iran, Iraqi
Hizbullah (Lebanon) (Mapping Militant Organizations, 2019)	7,000 (2017)	Iran
Imam al-Baqr Brigade⁸⁰	5,342 (2017)	Iraqi
Imam Zain al-Abidain Brigade (IZAB)⁸¹	3,800 (2017)	Hizbullah, Russia, Iraqi
Kata'ib Imam 'Ali⁸²	1,100 (2017)	Iran
Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada⁸³	700 (2018)	Iran, Iraqi
Local Defence Force (LDF)⁸⁴	31,048 (2017)	Iran, Hizbullah, Russia
National Defence Force (NDF)⁸⁵	63,000 (2017)	Iran, Hizbullah, Russia

⁷⁸ Interview with Fatimiyun commander in Deir az-Zur, Damascus, 7 November 2017; interview with IRGC adviser to NDF, Damascus, January 2018.

⁷⁹ Interview with Syrian Special Forces officer, As-Suwayda, December 2017

⁸⁰ Interview with Imam al-Baqr Brigade commander in Aleppo, January 2018.

⁸¹ Interviews with IZAB commander in Deir az-Zur, January 2018 and with Syrian military intelligence officer, Damascus January 2018.

⁸² Interview with IRGC adviser to LDF, Damascus, February 2018

⁸³ Interview with IRGC adviser to LDF, Damascus, February 2018

⁸⁴ Interview with LDF commander in Deir az-Zur, January 2018

⁸⁵ Interview with IRGC adviser to NDF, Damascus, January 2018

Nusur al-Zawba'a ⁸⁶	6,000 (2016)	Lebanese, Russia, Hizbullah
Quwat al-Ridha (Alami, 2017)	3,500 (2017)	Hizbullah, Iran
Tiger Forces ⁸⁷	2,687 (2017)	Russia, Iran, Hizbullah
Zainabiyun ⁸⁸	6,790 (2017)	Iran

⁸⁶ Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, cited in (Samaha, 2016).

⁸⁷ Interview with Tiger Force commander, Deir az-Zur, January 2018; Interview with Syrian military intelligence officer in Tiger Force, Damascus, January 2018

⁸⁸ Interview with IRGC colonel, adviser to NDF, Damascus, January 2018

Appendix 3: Foreign -sponsored PGMs: Estimates of manpower and casualties

Our aggregate of estimated fighters in PGMs variably sponsored by external actors, largely based on our interviews, suggests a peak total in 2017 in excess of 160,000 militiamen, even when some relatively important PGMs remain unaccounted for (table 1). Our estimate is larger than a claim by one adviser to Assad of 147,000 for 2016, and an estimate by the International Institute for Strategic Affairs (IISS) of 150,000 for that same year (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2017, 406).⁸⁹ In comparison, Syrian government and army sources claimed the number of regular Syrian army troops in that same period to have ranged between 126-148,000 although real numbers of combat-ready troops are likely to have been much lower.⁹⁰ At their peak in 2015, rebel forces are believed to have jointly mobilized 150,000 fighters (Lister, 2016, 2).

Comprehensive and reliable estimates of combat deaths among foreign-sponsored PGMs are unavailable. Yet scattered reports on such groups' heavy losses suggest a significant role in combat. According to foreign-sponsored militia commanders, already by March 2014 foreign volunteers, all part of foreign-sponsored PGMs, suffered nearly 5,000 killed in action (KIA).⁹¹ According to another estimate, KIAs among foreign pro-regime fighters (excluding Hizbullah losses) reached 8,100 and among PGMs generally almost 50,500 by early 2019 (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 2019). An estimated yearly KIA rate, assuming that foreign volunteers started accruing to Syria in significant numbers in 2013 and that numbers were past their peak in early 2019, would be around 3 percent. Significant losses are similarly suggested by casualty figures for key militias: the Fatimiyun Brigades are said to have suffered 2,468 KIAs in Syria up to the end of 2017, out of a peak strength of some 18,600 men under arms;⁹² the mixed Iraqi-Syrian AFAB reportedly lost 1,762 men and Imam al-Baqr Brigade 558, out of a combined force in

⁸⁹ Interview with adviser to Assad, Damascus, 26 December 2016.

⁹⁰ Interviews with adviser to Assad, Damascus, 26 December 2016, senior Syrian government official, Damascus, 7 July 2017 and Syrian army colonel, Deir az-Zur, 12 November 2017. These figures are significantly larger than IISS's 2017 estimate of 90,000, only 25,000 of whom were deemed capable for combat (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2017: 404).

⁹¹ Interviews with Iraqi militia commander, Damascus, 9 April 2014, and Afghan militia commander, Damascus, 13 November 2013.

⁹² Interviews with Fatimiyun commander in Deir az-Zur, Damascus, 7 November 2017, and IRGC adviser to NDF, Damascus, January 2018.

2016-17 of 16,500.⁹³ Such casualty rates are in excess of those the US and Soviet forces suffered during their interventions in, respectively, Vietnam and Afghanistan.⁹⁴

⁹³ Interviews with AFAB commander in Damascus countryside, December 2017, and Imam al-Baqr commander in Aleppo, January 2018.

⁹⁴ US forces' casualty rate in Vietnam was 2.14 percent; that of Soviet troops in Afghanistan 2.25 percent. US and Soviet casualty rates will be higher when discounting the large number of personnel not directly involved in combat, which is typical of regular armed forces (United States War Dogs Association, no date; Office of Soviet Analysis, 1987; Grau, 1996).

Appendix 4: Foreign-sponsored PGMs' role in combat

After securing at the end of 2012 the area of Sayyida Zeinab, the site of a Shiite holy shrine southeast of Damascus, foreign-sponsored PGMs expanded their operations throughout the country. In doing so, they fought alongside Syrian armed forces, and in many cases in advance of them. In April-June 2013, Hizbullah forces for the first time openly fought alongside regular Syrian forces to capture the areas in and around al-Qusayr near the Lebanese border. Their concerted campaign demonstrated the potency of the Syrian army's cooperation with Hizbullah and other foreign-supported PGMs; a method that was emulated when they moved on to Homs and its countryside where regular regime forces struggled to maintain their positions.

In November 2013, PGMs initiated an intense campaign to control the strategic Qalamun region, both to sever rebel supplies to the Damascus suburbs and to secure access to Homs. Intense fighting in the area lasted until April 2014 when pro-regime forces managed to control it. The Qalamun campaign proved to be a highly coordinated effort involving multiple foreign-sponsored PGMs (Al-Falahi, 2019).

Yet the turnaround on the battlefield came in early 2016, and foreign-sponsored PGMs were essential to it. Directly after Russia started launching its air strikes, regime forces began a large-scale campaign to retake northwest Syria. In early 2016, they stepped up their offensive in Latakia, renewed efforts to seize key towns in Dar'a province, and made important advances into Damascus countryside choking off rebel supplies to Daraya and other Damascus suburbs. In July 2016 fighting also intensified around Aleppo. After making significant territorial gains, from September to December 2016 an array of PGMs --mobilizing some 6-8,000 troops from Hizbullah, AAH, AFAB, Kata'ib Hizbullah, the Ba'ath Battalions, and HHN-- recaptured the rebel-held eastern part of Aleppo city and most of its countryside (McDowall and Rasheed, 2016; Chulov, 2016; Al-Falahi, 2019). A year later, they and the Syrian army cleared Deir az-Zur and seized the Abu Kamal border crossing with Iraq. In April 2018, Hizbullah, the Fatimiyun Brigades, Nusur al-Zawba'a, AFAB and several other Iraqi militias forced rebel groups in besieged Ghouta and adjacent areas in Damascus countryside to surrender (Al-Falahi, 2019; Media Monitor, no date). Two months later, a major offensive in southern Syria allowed regime forces to capture

the Nassib border crossing with Jordan and most of Dar'a and Quneitra governorates. Since the regime in mid-2019 turned to the last rebel stronghold in Idlib province, the Russian-sponsored Tiger Force has been leading ground operations (Balanche, 2019).

Members of PGMs, and perhaps their foreign sponsors too, may be expected to inflate their accomplishments. Yet there are good reasons to believe that they are not exaggerating their significant contribution to the regime's counter-insurgency campaign. President Assad publicly blamed his military difficulties on manpower shortages (Al-Jazeera, 2015) as PGMs offered a way out. An IRGC colonel claimed that the militias affiliated with it, especially the NDF, the LDF and the Fatimiyun Brigades, "saved the Syrian president and his government from falling" and made "us winning the war in Syria."⁹⁵ PGMs' contribution must also be understood in a qualitative sense. As IRGC commander Qasem Soleimani reportedly worried about the low morale of the Syrian army (Uskowi, 2018, 65), foreign-sponsored PGMs clearly compensated for this. Accordingly, in our interviews PGM fighters expressed a strong sense of their contribution to the regime's military victories as they viewed Syria's regular forces to disappoint in combat. For instance, an Iraqi AFAB fighter claimed, "if it weren't for our Shiite militias, the Syrian government would have quickly collapsed."⁹⁶ Syrian army officers conceded that especially militias controlled by the IRGC proved to be crucial to their counter-insurgency efforts and were far more capable than their own forces.⁹⁷

However, the contribution of foreign-sponsored PGMs' has not been without its limitations. This became apparent during the earlier campaigns in Aleppo and Dar'a. Late 2013, PGMs led by the IRCG, Hizbullah, al-Quds Brigade and AFAB stepped up operations in Aleppo countryside, but they were unable to overcome rebel resistance for nearly three years. In 2016 Iran sent thousands of its own officers and troops to reinforce them. Apparently, its proxies were unable to confront the rebels on their own. Another major offensive, this time involving Hizbullah and the Fatimiyun Brigades, was launched in early 2015 to counter rebel gains in Dar'a province (Kozak, 2015). The campaign stalled in April 2015, as regime forces suffered steep losses and rebel forces held ground in most of the

⁹⁵ Interview with IRGC colonel and adviser to the NDF, Damascus, January 2018.

⁹⁶ Interview with AFAB fighter, Damascus countryside, 23 November 2017.

⁹⁷ Interview with Syrian army colonel liaising with the NDF, Deir Ez-Zur, 12 November 2017; Interview with Syrian Military Intelligence officer, Damascus, January 2018.

province until 2018. In both instances, PGMs appear to have struggled with insufficient and/or effective manpower themselves, especially when in 2014 and 2015 thousands of experienced Iraqi fighters returned to Iraq to fight the advancing 'Islamic State' at home (Abi-Habb, 2014; Ostovar, 2016, 223; Naame Sham, 2016). In addition, militias comprised mainly of Syrian fighters struggled with lack of discipline and low morale. For instance, in 2016 the Ba'ath Battalions cracked under the pressure of the fighting when commanding officers refused to be sent to the frontlines in Hama and Raqqa.⁹⁸ This caused them to be withdrawn from frontline duties. Growing disagreements among the sponsors and the Syrian regime about the management of PGMs also had their toll. Thus, in 2015-16, and before being restructured, most Syrian-staffed NDF units were re-tasked with duties other than frontline fighting after Iran temporarily downsized its support (Leenders and Giustozzi, 2019, 169).⁹⁹

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⁹⁸ Interview with Ba'ath Battalion commander, Hama, January 2018.

⁹⁹ Interview with IRGC colonel, Damascus, 1 December 2016.

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