Middle Actors in Proxy War

A Practice Theory of Middle Actor's Proxy War Strategy

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1 Introduction

It has become somewhat of a truism; a variety of non-state actors characterises modern conflicts. The changing character of war has spawned a series of academic concepts framing post-modern warfare as hybrid, fourth generational, and accounting for the prominence of irregular means in conflict. A result of the differentiation of war is the emergence of networks of state and non-state actors with only loosely defined boundaries, limited cohesion, and little to no control leaving individual actors in a conflict with limited oversight. These alliances incorporate state and non-state actors revolving around regional centres of gravity as is the case, for example, with the so-called Axis of Refusal.[1]

Hitherto, studies of proxy wars have primarily been applying dyadic, game theory frameworks, analysing the relationship between one principal and its agent, focussing on strategic aspects, choice, and effective control while maintaining plausible deniability at the sponsor's hands. The analytical negligence of the causal effects of relationships in proxy wars beyond the dyadic framework put policymakers at a disadvantage concerning violent non-state actors. Furthermore, tracking socio-historical developments allows one to gain a deeper understanding of non-state actors in international politics. Foreign sponsorship has enabled some non-state actors to grow powerful enough to start sponsoring proxies on their own. These sub-state actors, often operating outside of international law, have established distinct strategies allowing them to survive and to evade disarmament at the hands of the state.

However, like third-party interventions, foreign support has been conceptualised as independent variables to a hypothetical function of conflict, a solvable game played by rational actors. Dyadic analyses of sponsor-proxy relationships tend to blank out the socio-historical developments of sponsor-proxy relationships and the reciprocal influence these relationships may have on the respective actors. Recent scholarship has highlighted the political rationale guiding non-state sponsorship of proxies resulting in less military utilisation of non-state sponsor proxies, such as Hezbollah's[2] usage of the Lebanese Resistance Brigades in safe distance to enemy lines. In contrast, the Taliban[3] required the contribution of fighters from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) while harbouring their organisation; one of the very few that has maintained the pledged allegiance has been fighting for the Taliban up to today. As opposed to the Lebanese Resistance Brigades, which have been mainly tasked with reconnaissance missions, the IMU's role in the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan and Pakistan was mainly offensive despite their relatively small numbers. To understand the rationale of

[1] See Rola El Husseini, "Hezbollah and the Axis of Refusal: Hamas, Iran and Syria," *Third World Quarterly* 31, no. 5 (2010/07/01 2010), https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2010.502695, https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2010.502695.
[2] Hezbollah, Arabic: Party of God
[3] Taliban, Pashto: Students

middle actor's different use of proxies, a practice theory of middle actor's strategy in proxy wars will set out to answer why and how proxies engage in sponsorship themselves.

Thereby, this thesis contributes to the existing literature by introducing the concept middle actor's strategy to proxy war scholarship, theorized as a distinct set of practices pioneering practice theory in proxy war scholarship. Although middle actors have been mentioned before, there is no conceptualization of the phenomenon in the existing literature.

Framing strategy and proxy warfare as practices offers several advantages. Practice theory describes a set of approaches resting on the assumption of the reciprocal relationship between actor and society consciously and unconsciously constructing social reality. The thesis develops in three consecutive steps: Next, a definition of middle actors in proxy wars is derived, based on the existing literature. Then, a practice theory of the strategy of middle actors in proxy war is defined and operationalised. Finally, a structured, focused case comparison applies the given theory to the cases of Hezbollah and the Taliban as middle actors. This approach offers the comparison of cases for certain aspects and characteristics. The two case studies will be based on translated primary sources, academic literature mostly consistent with ethnographic works, and strategic analyses triangulated by journalistic accounts and think tank and NGO reports. The study of social practices requires in-depth qualitative research, and its natural methodological habitat lies mainly among ethnographic approaches. Due to its nature, proxy war, like most covert strategies in conflict, is highly secretive, making a participant observation especially hard to conduct. Moreover, fieldwork has been impeded by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, limiting this work to desk research based on academic and open sources. Furthermore, for reasons of parsimony, the present study focusses on middle actors and one respective sponsor, and proxy. Cross-influences from other relationships therefore may be underrepresented in the analysis.

2 Fishing in Murky Waters – Proxy War Scholarship

The use of third parties in conflict is no new phenomenon. In their broadest sense, proxy relationships can be defined as informal or covert collaborative arrangements between asymmetrically capable actors. Common knowledge holds that sponsors use their proxies to attain strategic goals while proxies gain advantages in exchange for power projection. This chapter will briefly outline the major trajectories of proxy war scholarship after the Second World War and situate the thesis in the wider literature; defining middle actors in proxy war based on the literature reviewed.

Three generations of proxy war scholarship have been distinguished: founders, framers, and reformers.[4] Each generation is distinct by its own research agendas and questions defined

[4] See Vladimir Rauta, "Framers, founders, and reformers: Three generations of proxy war research," *Contemporary Security Policy* 42, no. 1 (2021).

by the historical and socio-political context and broader academic developments, especially in International Relations scholarship. The Cold War heavily influenced the founders' work, as proxy wars were ultimately signifying indirect confrontations between the great powers. The framers arose under the impression of the War on Terror and the conflicts following the Arab Spring. Building on the founders' work, these scholars revitalised proxy war scholarship a decade after the Cold War ended. Finally, the most recent work on the delegation of war is coined as reformers by Rauta.[5] This generational typology also applies to proxy war scholarship's assessment of non-state actors.

Early proxy war scholarship was particularly prone to a state-centric bias. The agency of non-state actors only became gradually recognised in the academic field over time as states tended to rely on non-state proxies more often.[6] It barely acknowledged non-state actors' role in proxy war - substate proxies were characterised purely as passive tools - the second generation of proxy war scholarship framed armed groups as the predominant form of proxies. This understanding of proxy sponsor relationships has prevailed and is still widely used. Contemporary research highlights the complexity and multi-level nature of proxy war in the polyarchic world order that followed the Cold War.

Proxy War in a Bipolar World Order

The Cold War's bipolar world order, the competition of two superpowers interlocked in a nuclear game of deterrence, has greatly influenced the founders of proxy war research.[7] The primary cost-saving rationale behind the engagement in proxy warfare was the avoidance of a direct military confrontation between east and west, an idea closely linked to the concept of limited war. Limited war, i.e., war confined in scope and intensity, is limited only from the perspective of world powers and their avoidance of nuclear war.

Thomas Schelling described limited war as an agreement - an outcome of tacit coordination and bargaining - between two parties with diverging interests.[8] Proxy war was viewed as a strategic tool, a projection of power short of open military conflict. It enabled the great powers to pursue their strategic objectives and to avoid escalation. Plausible deniability allowed adversaries to operate below the threshold of open war under international law. A critical legal precedent was set by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in the Nicaragua vs United States trial of 1986, concerning the question of command control of the United States over the contras in Nicaragua:

[5] Ibid.

[6] See Vladimir Rauta, "Towards a typology of non-state actors in 'hybrid warfare': proxy, auxiliary, surrogate and affiliated forces," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 33, no. 6 (2020); Vladimir Rauta, "A structural-relational analysis of party dynamics in proxy wars," *International relations* 32, no. 4 (2018). In the following analysis, surrogate, proxy, and client are used interchangeably.

[7] Rauta, "Framers, founders, and reformers: Three generations of proxy war research."

[8] Thomas C Schelling, "Bargaining, communication, and limited war," *Conflict Resolution* 1, no. 1 (1957).

"[D]espite the heavy subsidies and other support provided to [the contras] by the United States, there is no clear evidence of the United States having actually exercised such a degree of control in all fields as to justify treating the contras as acting on its behalf."[9]

This narrow definition of responsibility has become the legal threshold. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that Ukraine has attempted to prove Russian funding of terrorism and racial discrimination in Crimea instead of command control over unmarked forces to the International Court of Justice since Russia has ratified corresponding international agreements.[10]

Additionally, local proxies significantly lowered the military expense and human cost for their sponsor. The $3 billion funnelled to the Afghan Mujaheddin between 1979-1989 was a fraction of the $300 billion spent on the Vietnam War.[11] Proxies allowed states to supplement military interventions lacking domestic support.[12] Surrogates bearing the major risk and human cost not only reduced the risk of a confrontation between the great powers but permitted their sponsors to conduct indirect military intervention despite the nuclear stalemate of mutually assured destruction.

Many studies of proxy warfare conceptualised proxies as an auxiliary force represented by a state while solely focussing on the interests of its sponsor; focussing on the strategic potential of volunteers, mercenaries and irregular forces, neglected their agency; instead, involvement was analysed as a mere projection of force by their sponsors.[13]

Proxy War in the Polyarchic World

Proxy wars occurring during the Cold War were analysed by the second generation of proxy war scholars as an indirect projection of force by the superpowers unwilling to fight directly on foreign soil.[14] During the Cold War, sponsorship of non-state actors increased, intended to harass or to drag a strategic adversary in a costly conflict; armed non-state actors like the Afghan Mujaheddin parties, the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) or Lebanon's Hezbollah gradually took the stage of proxy war scholarship.[15] As the range of actors in civil conflicts broadened, so did the field of proxy war scholarship, accounting for the increased salience of non-state actors in proxy warfare. Conceptual divides among scholars

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[9] Justice International Court of, *Case concerning military and paramilitary activities in and against Nicaragua: (Nicaragua v. United States of America): merits: judgement of 27 June 1986* (The Hague: International Court of Justice, 1986), 52.

[10] See OM Polivanova and Ya O Golodnikov, "THE SUBJECT-MATTER OF THE DISPUTE "UKRAINE V. RUSSIAN FEDERATION" REFERRED TO THE INTERNATIONAL COURT OF JUSTICE," *Humanities and Social Sciences in Europe: Achievements and Perspectives* (2020).

[11] Bruce Riedel, *What We Won: America's Secret War in Afghanistan, 1979 89* (Brookings Institution Press, 2014), xi.

[12] See Yacoov Bar-Siman-Tov, "The Strategy of War by Proxy," *Cooperation and Conflict* 19, no. 4 (1984).

[13] Philip Towle, "The strategy of war by proxy," *The RUSI Journal* 126, no. 1 (1981); Bar-Siman-Tov, "The Strategy of War by Proxy."

[14] Karl W Deutsch, "External involvement in internal war," *Internal war: problems and approaches* (1964).

[15] Geraint Hughes, *My Enemy's Enemy: Proxy Warfare in International Politics* (Apollo Books, 2012); Milos Popovic, "The Perils of Weak Organization: Explaining Loyalty and Defection of Militant Organizations Toward Pakistan," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 38, no. 11 (2015/11/02 2015).

emerged over assessing proxy war either as foreign intervention in an ongoing conflict or the delegation of warfare causally related to the outbreak of conflict.[16] In addition, state sponsorship of insurgencies introduced civil war literature to proxy war scholarship.[17] Outside support of terrorism regained attention following the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington on September 11th 2001 (9/11), Madrid on March 10th 2004 and London on July 7th 2005, shocked the western world. [18] The emergence of the Hydra of Islamist terrorism, in the form of Al Qaida, as a new antagonist to the west, spawned a string of literature on alliances and cooperation between militant and terrorist groups.[19]

With the emergence of the multipolar world order, proxy wars were often targeting rivalling regional hegemons. Pakistan's support for different jihadist and insurgent outfits in Afghanistan and Kashmir exemplifies this modus operandi. Islamabad opted for strategic depth in Afghanistan, and by supporting various groups in Kashmir, Pakistan protracted its conflict with India below the threshold of war. India's defeat of Pakistan in 1971, resulting in the independence of Bangladesh and furthering India's gains in Kashmir, sparked revanchist sentiments in Pakistan, making the option attractive of sponsoring Islamist groups that would pick up the fight Pakistan lost. Islamist groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba harassed India but have become a liability for Pakistan in their steady escalation of attacks.[20] Bangladesh's independence sparked fears in Islamabad of Balochi and Pashtun separatism. Pashtun separatism specifically was perceived as a threat since the Durant Line, the unmarked border cutting right through the Pashtun territories, was never recognised by the Afghan state. Therefore, a friendly government in Kabul has become a priority in Islamabad's foreign policy.[21] Furthermore, the utilisation of indigenous forces on behalf of American interests, the so-called Afghan Model, has been referred to as an example of successful proxy warfare.[22] The Northern Alliance spared the United States the costs of an expeditionary force on the ground taking on the government.

[16] On proxy war as indirect intervention, see for example, Ariel Ahram, *Proxy Warriors* (Stanford University Press, 2020). On delegation of war to non-state actors see for example Idean Salehyan, "The delegation of war to rebel organizations," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 54, no. 3 (2010).
[17] See Daniel Byman et al., *Trends in outside support for insurgent movements* (Rand Corporation, 2001).
[18] See Daniel Byman, *Deadly Connections: States that sponsor terrorism* (Cambridge University Press, 2005).
[19] See Ely Karmon, *Coalitions between Terrorist Organizations: Revolutionaries, Nationalists and Islamists* (Brill Nijhoff, 2005); Navin A Bapat and Kanisha D Bond, "Alliances between militant groups," *British Journal of Political Science* (2012); Fotini Christia, *Alliance formation in civil wars* (Cambridge University Press, 2012); Annette Idler, "Exploring agreements of convenience made among violent non-state actors," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 6, no. 4/5 (2012).
[20] "Lashkar-e-Taiba," Stanford University, Last modified November 2018, https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/lashkar-e-taiba
[21] Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Pakistan Paradox: Instability and Resilience* (Oxford University Press, 2015).
[22] See Richard B Andres, Craig Wills, and Thomas E Griffith Jr, "Winning with allies: the strategic value of the Afghan model," *International Security* 30, no. 3 (2006).

Juxtaposing realist approaches to violent non-state actors assessed armed groups as rational actors who form alliances following an instrumentalist rationale revolving around power balancing mechanisms and minimal winning coalitions. These studies viewed identity, i.e., ideology, religion, culture, ethnic or tribal affiliation, as endogenous characteristics having little to no influence on coalition formation. Alliances often crumbled quickly due to a lack of information and commitment guarantees just to be replaced with new alliances at a rapid pace.[23] These tactical alliances are located on the spectrum of relationships between armed groups, ranging from violent combat to strategic alliances.[24]

Building on the game-theoretic approaches of their predecessors, the second generation of proxy war scholarship introduced principal-agent theory to the study of proxy war. Controlling an auxiliary force vis-à-vis its autonomy came into the research focus, mainly utilising principal-agent problems developed within economics and institutional studies. Principal-agent theory offered a heuristic framework to analyse sponsor-proxy relationships, furthering the analysis while research broadened. Principal-agent theory's insights on control and independence in sponsor-proxy relationships are today's dominant tool to analyse terrorism and proxy war sponsorship, assessing sponsor and proxy as players with partially overlapping interests, imperfect information, and indirect control by the sponsor.[25] Control over the agent can be exerted by choice of the proxy, deprivation of supply and support, while on the other hand, the sponsor's cost-saving results from the autonomy of the proxy. Furthermore, the interest alignment between principal and agent determines trust easing the sponsor's need to exert direct control.[26] It took over from earlier game-theoretic reasoning on proxy sponsorship. According to the principal-agent paradigm, costs and benefits and the underlying mechanisms in sponsor-proxy relationships were conceptualised. With increasing appreciation of non-state actors' relevance in international relations, the principal-agent framework has been applied to the delegation of political violence and warfare to rebel organisations and terrorist groups.[27] However, game theory approaches bear the risk of ahistorical analysis isolating decisions and practices from the wider socio-historical context. Actors do not exist in a vacuum, and decisions are often based on lessons from the past; trust, the key to successful alliance formation, gradually develops over time. Moreover, these approaches assessed culture, identity, and ideology as essentially endogenous characteristics. Multiple, sometimes overlapping group

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[23] See Christia, *Alliance formation in civil wars*; Bapat and Bond, "Alliances between militant groups."
[24] Idler, "Exploring agreements of convenience made among violent non-state actors."
[25] Daniel Byman and Sarah E Kreps, "Agents of destruction? Applying principal-agent analysis to state-sponsored terrorism," *International Studies Perspectives* 11, no. 1 (2010).
[26] Eli Berman and David A Lake, *Proxy wars: Suppressing violence through local agents* (Cornell University Press, 2019).
[27] Salehyan, "The delegation of war to rebel organizations."; Byman and Kreps, "Agents of destruction."; Jeremy M Berkowitz, "Delegating terror: Principal‐agent based decision making in state sponsorship of terrorism," *International interactions* 44, no. 4 (2018).

allegiances and changes in the social fabric can influence priorities and change loyalty to a group or a cause but remain largely unrecognised under the rational actor paradigm.

Recent Perspectives on Proxy War

In recent years proxy war scholarship has slowly grown out of its academic silo. New approaches and research agendas began to include works on external support and interventions in non-state conflicts, which can have different effects on the duration, lethality, and outcome of civil wars and insurgencies.[28] Certain aspects of these recent approaches are especially relevant for the following analysis of middle actors in proxy wars. Rondeaux and Sterman argue that proxy wars in the Middle East are often fought between chains of sponsor-proxy spanning from great and regional state powers to regional sub-state actors and armed groups. In these constellations, middle actors can serve as pure intermediaries for their sponsors or skilfully manoeuvre international politics to further their sponsor's but especially their own agendas.[29]

Some studies focused on the cases of proxy war in the aftermath of the Arab Spring; others looked for new approaches to grasp the phenomenon. Phillips and Valbjørn described how various forms of identity are relevant to different sponsors in a study on identity in the proxy wars in Syria.[30] They concluded that some identities are more relevant to outside support than others, finding diverging priorities between state and non-state supporters. Short-term cooperation can result from relationships between ideologically unlikely actors; lasting alliances, however, partially depend on some ideological and or identity overlap.[31] Reassessments of the relevance of identity and ideology for alliance formation have challenged instrumentalist findings on alliance-building, concluding that identity and ideology can facilitate trust, where the lack of institutionalised commitment would otherwise prohibit long term, i.e., strategic alliances.[32]

Moghadam and Wyss argued that, in contrast to states' tendency to utilise proxies for strategic reasons in offensive operations, non-state actors sponsor other groups for their

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[28] Ibrahim A Elbadawi and Nicholas Sambanis, "External interventions and the duration of civil wars," (2000); Stina Högbladh, Therése Pettersson, and Lotta Themnér, "External support in armed conflict 1975‑2009: Presenting new data" (paper presented at the 52nd Annual International Studies Association Convention, Montreal, Canada, 2011); Dylan Balch-Lindsay and Andrew J. Enterline, "Killing Time: The World Politics of Civil War Duration, 1820‑1992," *International Studies Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (2002), https://doi.org/10.1111/0020-8833.00174; Milos Popovic, "Inter-Rebel alliances in the shadow of foreign sponsors," *International Interactions* 44, no. 4 (2018).
[29] Christopher Phillips and Morten Valbjørn, "'What is in a Name?': The Role of (Different) Identities in the Multiple Proxy Wars in Syria," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 29, no. 3 (2018).
[30] Ibid.
[31] See, for example, Barak Mendelsohn, "The Limits of Ideologically-Unlikely Partnerships: Syria's Support for Jihadi Terrorist Groups," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2020).
[32] Emily Kalah Gade, Mohammed M Hafez, and Michael Gabbay, "Fratricide in rebel movements: A network analysis of Syrian militant infighting," *Journal of peace research* 56, no. 3 (2019).

political and social value rather than their fighting capabilities.[33] This is due to differences between states and non-state actors framed by the authors as “endogenous traits and exogenous constraints”.[34] Additionally, the differences in resources and capabilities between non-state sponsors and proxy have been found to be less salient. The strategic value and political utility of proxy war for state sponsors has been widely elaborated on. Moghadam and Wyss have shown that there is more to the phenomenon than military strategy but also a socio-political component that is especially apparent in the strategizing of non-state sponsors. Because non-state actors are confronted with a very different set of endogenous and exogenous constraints, military cost-saving calculations, plausible deniability, and a risk-averse public do not represent the primary drivers of non-state sponsorship. Instead, the non-state sponsorship aims to achieve socio-political objectives and to project influence beyond their core constituencies.[35]

Moghadam and Wyss’s findings provide the basis for a compelling case for a more holistic approach to analysing proxy wars that recognises the social and political dimensions of conflict that go beyond military-strategic aspects. The variety of non-state actors engaging in proxy war offers a glimpse of the complexities of alliance politics in (post-) modern conflict scenarios. Moghadam and Wyss have pointed out that the reasoning behind sponsorship can vary greatly, adding political considerations to the equation.[36] The importance of political power correlates with findings on the relevance of identity in proxy warfare in the Syrian conflict by Valbjørn.[37]

Middle Actors in Proxy Wars

Recently, the agency of non-state actors has been more widely recognised in proxy war scholarship as civil war literature has gained more attention in the field. Interestingly, different authors have described cases of proxies taking the role of a sponsor. For example, the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) has been described before as an actor playing the role of sponsor and proxy simultaneously.[38] The People’s Protection Units (YPG) as well as Hezbollah, two out of the three non-state sponsors analysed by Moghadam and Wyss, have enjoyed vital state support themselves before becoming a sponsoring party.[39] The emphasis on the political dimension of proxy war resonates with Krieg and Rickli’s findings: Referring to Clausewitz trilogy of government, military and the public, they assert that non-state actors in

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[33] Assaf Moghadam and Michel Wyss, “The political power of proxies: why nonstate actors use local surrogates,” *International Security* 44, no. 4 (2020).
[34] Ibid., 122.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Phillips and Valbjørn, “What Is in a Name.”
[38] See, for example, Hughes, *My Enemy’s Enemy*, 92.
[39] Moghadam and Wyss, “The political power of proxies.”

proxy war display state-like characteristics and constrains they coin as neo-trinitarian.[40] Sponsors may use their proxies as intermediaries, providing an additional layer of secrecy. Exemplary in this regard was the use of Pakistan or Syria as intermediaries, facilitating supply routes to the Afghan Mujaheddin or Hezbollah in Lebanon. This is not to say that these intermediaries do not profit from these arrangements, as Pakistan and Syria have successfully improved their position vis-à-vis the respective sponsor and proxy in becoming indispensable to their operations. I define middle actors in proxy wars as social actors pursuing political goals by violent and nonviolent means. Thus, middle actors are proxies that have begun to sponsor a third party to further their own political objectives.

3 Middle actors' practice of proxy war in the field of conflict

Middle actor denominates an actor's position in relation to these networks, characterised as a non-state proxy that was a proxy actor themselves and subsequently began to support their own surrogates, unifying the role of benefactors and client. Armed groups active in conflict aim for political goals and rely on their constituency to fill their ranks. Their fighters must be motivated, and a strategy - even a rudimentary one – needs to be defined and justified by their leadership. Although the socio-political nature of war has been part of well-established knowledge for some time, theories of strategy and conflict have long neglected the human and social influence on warfare. Different attempts to adjust and refine established paradigms have gained momentum: anthropologists have been sent into warzones, and even in the field of strategic studies, the cultural turn was felt.[41] This section outlines the analytical concepts of habitus, capital, and field of conflict, their application to proxy war strategy as a set of practices distinctive to middle actors.[42]

Strategic habitus: embodied knowledge

Practices, or "competent performances", are patterned corporal activities conducted in a material world shaped by actors' social and economic dispositions relative to their social field.[43] An audience situates an activity by assigning social meaning judging the competence of a performance. Practices ultimately are projections of past knowledge gained in experiences, framed as expectations for the future, that is, the anticipation of possible outcomes through

[40] Cf Andreas Krieg and Jean-Marc Rickli, *Surrogate warfare: The transformation of war in the twenty-first century* (Georgetown University Press, 2019). Edward J Villacres and Christopher Bassford, *Reclaiming the Clausewitzian trinity*, Military History Academy Dept of History (West Point New York, 1995).
[41] See Jacob Kipp et al., *The Human Terrain System: A CORDS for the 21st Century*, Foreign Military Studies Office (Army) (Fort Leavenworth 2006). Edward D Last, *Strategic Culture and Violent Non-state Actors: A Comparative Study of Salafi-jihadist Groups* (Routledge, 2020).
[42] Pierre Bourdieu, "Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste," (1984): 101.
[43] Emanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot, *International practices* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 7.See Pierre Bourdieu, *The logic of practice* (Stanford university press, 1990), 50.

activity or performance according to the actor's position in the field. Here, knowledge refers to practical skills as well as an understanding of the rules applying in a specific social field. Changes in patterned actions over time indicate innovation, appropriation, or transfer of knowledge. Armed groups engaging in collective practice do so based on knowledge shared by the group members. Therefore, organisational learning describes knowledge diffusion among leadership circles, specialised units, or the whole group from a practice theory perspective. The groups analysed in this study are actors that developed their own embodied habitus, that is, the knowledge, skills, and internalised social disposition, forming the collective action of their members.

Habitus, i.e., incorporated knowledge or competencies, defines the modus operandi of a social actor.[44] Habitus links the conscious behaviour of actors to their social and often unconscious dispositions. Habitus shapes practice as a habitual behaviour that is salient in patterns and changes of praxis over time. Since habitus is a relational concept developed over time, the present study will focus on the incorporated knowledge and the social disposition of the group in relation to the patrons and clients involved in the practice of proxy warfare. The focus will lie on salient strategic and tactical preferences as well as changes within the middle actor's organisation as they develop during the collaboration. This would mean that the middle actor's strategic habitus, salient in handling and utilizing its proxy, was influenced by the prior relationship to the middle actor's sponsor resulting in traceable patterns of continuity or development.

Power and Capital

The asymmetric capabilities of the parties to a sponsor-proxy relationship goes beyond the military or economic realm. As Pakistan did when rallying the United Nations to recognise the Taliban government, sponsors deliver intelligence and provide sanctuary and ideological or political support. In the following, support is framed as different forms of power or capital to account for the tangible and intangible assets that a sponsor supplies its surrogate with. Bourdieu stated that capital is both a weapon and a "stake of struggle", anything "which allows its possessors to wield a power, an influence, and thus to exist, in the field under consideration, instead of being considered a negligible quantity."[45] In the same way knowledge about Hellenistic culture may be perceived as less prestigious among engineers, honouring the Pashtunwali[46] by the Taliban may have little value among Shi'a Hazaras. With fields being constantly constituted by the involved actors, sudden changes may also impact the value of

[44] See Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a theory of practice*, ed. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 81.

[45] Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc JD Wacquant, *An invitation to reflexive sociology* (University of Chicago press, 1992), 98.

[46] "Way of the Pashtuns" – A traditional, informal code of conduct based on honour. See. Lutz Rzehak, "Doing Pashto," (2011).

the capital held by a group.[47] The relational character of the different forms of power accumulated by a group defines their position in the field vis-à-vis other actors.

Romain Malejacq has shown how Afghan warlords convert their capital to adapt to changing political and social environments.[48] As the different forms of capital are defined by the respective field, a variety of types can be identified.[49] Analogous to Clausewitz' trinity, three different forms of capital are essential to "compel the enemy to do [another's] will":[50] *Military capital,* defined as the "capital of physical force or instruments of coercion";[51] *social capital*, i.e., the resources at hand of an actor in the form of durable networks that manifest in legitimacy;[52] *political capital* marked by political representation refers to the ability of an actor to gain access to political processes, ceremonies, and negotiations.

As the value of power and capital is socially defined, middle actors may gain certain types of power and capital; nevertheless, accepting sponsorship can devalue social or political capital. Therefore, the middle actor strategy would seek to balance the effects of the relationship to the respective sponsor with the proxy supported.

Field of Conflict

The field defines the limitations of a social actor as a part of the larger social space. Bourdieu defined field as "a network, or configuration of objective relations between positions".[53] Analogous to a magnetic field, the boundary of a social field is "situated at the point where the effects of the field cease". However, fields are also battlefields or "*fields of struggle* aimed at preserving or transforming" the distribution of power or capital.[54] A Field functions according to field-specific rules and regularities, reproduced as they are legitimized by the participants themselves that agree on participating in a "game […] worth playing".[55] While Bourdieu's concept presumes a state, defined in Weberian tradition, that acts as a guarantor for the value of the different forms of capital; violent actors operate at least in competition if not in opposition to the state and its monopoly on legitimate or symbolic violence. Bourdieu's concepts presumed the unification of the different fields present in society by the modern state; therefore, influence over the state itself represents the stake of the field of power,

[47] Romain Malejacq, *Warlord survival: The delusion of state building in Afghanistan* (Cornell University Press, 2020).
[48] Ibid.
[49] See for example Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in *The sociology of economic life*, ed. Mark S. Granovetter and Richard Swedberg (Boulder, CO [etc]: Westview Press, 2001).
[50] Carl Von Clausewitz, Michael Eliot Howard, and Peter Paret, "On War: Indexed Edition," (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984). 75
[51] Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical reason: On the theory of action* (Stanford University Press, 1998). 41
[52] See Bourdieu and Wacquant, *An invitation to reflexive sociology*.
[53] Ibid. 97
[54] Ibid. 100-101
[55] Ibid. 98

while the actors are comprised of leading elements from other social fields.[56] Armed groups engaging in governance practices, as is the case with the roaming judges of the Taliban, or Hezbollah's provision of health care, compete directly with the state for legitimacy, while the political violence of these groups directly contests the state's monopoly of force. These actors represent rivalling social orders competing for control over the state, describing a civil war or a protracted internal conflict mitigated in a more or less stable political process. This defies a state-controlled field of power to regulate and structure other fields within the social space. However, the restoration of the field of power may be an objective of the actors involved. The *field of conflict* describes the network of relations of actors participating in the struggle for political power and control having 'stakes in the game' in a state of contested state monopoly on violence or competing social orders. This field is neither limited to the territory of the respective state nor institutional actors. Depending on the scale and scope of a conflict, other social fields are affected by the field of conflict. Conversely, social fields may impact the field of conflict. This can mean that pockets of territory or certain minorities become a conflict theatre or that the conflict is fought in other fields like, e.g., the field of education or culture.

The constitution of the field of conflict relational to the actors involved implies that with increased influence of the middle actor on the field of conflict, its rules and mechanisms may be altered. This may become salient in changing protocols or interactions and limitations for some, or all actors involved.

Strategy as practice

Strategic theory views strategy as the thread connecting an actor to an adversary, their political goals, and the available means to achieve them.[57] The Afghan Model, for example, represents a distinct proxy war strategy aimed to oust the Taliban and kill or capture Bin Laden by means of local surrogates with American air support.[58] Although special forces on the ground were tasked to lead, i.e., to control, the Northern Alliance, this goal was only partially fulfilled. Bin Laden's escape from Tora Bora shortly after the fall of Kabul highlights the limitation of proxy war strategy to the goals shared by sponsor and proxy.[59] A practice of strategy, in turn, aiming to improve one's position in a political struggle, is defined by the relation between an actor's disposition and power relative to the adversary and the strategic environment of the conflict.

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[56] Pierre Bourdieu and Samar Farage, "Rethinking the state: Genesis and structure of the bureaucratic field," *Sociological theory* 12, no. 1 (1994).

[57] Thomas G Mahnken, "Strategic theory," in *Strategy in the Contemporary World: An Introduction to Strategic Studies*, ed. John Baylis, James J. Wirtz, and Colin S. Gray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[58] Andres, Wills, and Griffith Jr, "Winning with allies."

[59] John Kerry, *Tora Bora Revisited: How We Failed to Get Bin Laden and why it Matters Today: a Report to Members of the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, John Kerry, Chairman: One Hundred Eleventh Congress, First Session, November 30th, 2009*, vol. 111 (US Government Printing Office, 2009).

Here, the conceptualisation of strategy differentiates from models like Thomas Schelling's seminal work, asserting an objective optimum for any situation or game. Thus, instead of the instrumental rationality of strategic studies, strategy may be understood as a distinct reasonable practice that aims to maintain or improve the position of an actor in a field.[60] Bourdieu described strategy as "the product of the practical sense as the feel for the game, for a particular, historically determined game".[61] Practice theory is a promising tool to analyse the strategic practice of non-state actors: In contrast to the hunt for Bin Laden, ousting the Taliban significantly improved the position of the Northern Alliance's warlords vis-à-vis their Taliban competition in Afghanistan. Romain Malejacq has shown how Afghan warlords convert their capital to adapt to changing political and social environments.[62] Practising proxy war, similarly, is not only a practice of projecting power or delegating organised violence in exchange for support. It is a function of capital conversion, presenting a strategy to actors to diversify their portfolio of different species of capital.

A theory of proxy war as a practised strategy

Proxy warfare is a set of practices and resembles the conjunction of interest, defined by the habitus in relation to the power disposition of the respective parties involved within the field of conflict and its distinct set of rules. Therefore, proxy war describes the collaborative practices of and the relationship between sponsor and proxy embodying asymmetric dispositions of power. Following Bourdieu, proxy war as a practice can be captured as follows:

$$Proxy\ War := \{[Strategic\ Habitus^{Sponsor}\ Capital^{Sponsor}]\ [Strategic\ Habitus^{Proxy}\ Capital^{Proxy}]\} + Field\ of\ Conflict$$

Proxy war practices are characterized by the variety of actors engaged in relationship chains spanning from local to international. The internationalization of internal conflicts, the transnational traits of many sub-state actors, and external interventions create a social space with various players that tend to elude traditional units and levels of analysis. The practice of proxy war is characterized by imperfect intelligence and a climate of ambiguity. Although secrecy is a common feature of patron-proxy relationships, a message is conveyed as well, which may materialise as tacit strategic bargaining between conflict parties or else as a socio-political struggle for legitimacy and representation. Informal relationships are more fluid than institutionalised affiliations, allowing actors to be more flexible in their alliance politics.

For the middle actor, these practices present a way to convert their different forms of power within the field of conflict or to transfer them between different social fields, producing and

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[60] Frédéric Mérand and Amélie Forget, "Strategizing about strategy," *Bourdieu in International Relations: Rethinking Key Concept in IR* (2012).

[61] Pierre Bourdieu, *In other words: Essays towards a reflexive sociology* (Stanford University Press, 1990), 62-63.

reproducing the rules of the field of conflict as they engage in multiple sponsor-proxy relationships taking on both roles over time. Therefore, a formula of the middle actor proxy war practice (MAPWP) must include the shared practice of the middle actor with the respective sponsor and proxy as subsets of the middle actor's strategic practice. This practice and the relationships develop over time. As the middle actors studied here have received foreign support before being able to sponsor other non-state actors themselves, the middle actor - proxy relationship builds on the conditions created influenced by the sponsor - middle actor relationship:

$$MAPWP := \bigcap_{Strategic\ Habitus_{Proxy}^{Middle\ Actor}\ Capital_{Proxy}^{Middle\ Actor}}^{Strategic\ Habitus_{Middle\ Actor}^{Sponsor}\ Capital_{Middle\ Actor}^{Sponsor}} + Field\ of\ Conflict$$

Practices performed by or with the middle actor connect the middle actor, its sponsor, and its proxy in one social space - the field of conflict. Likewise, the middle actor's practice represents the product of the developments over time, the social history of the middle actor that encompasses changes of the actor and the surrounding field over the course of history. Time is also essential to the middle actor practice, as the sponsor middle actor relationship has predated the middle actor sponsor relationship.

Time represents the first analytical dimension of practice. Patterns, repetition and disruption, development and change, are defined by their occurrence over time; that is, history engrained in an actor's habitus has a social dimension. Accordingly, the analysis of proxy war practice will assess the cases as social history of the protagonists under scrutiny. The second analytical dimension of practice is space, defined as the socio-material environment agents operate in. Social fields and the field of conflict represent the unit of analysis to locate practices in relation to the rules or mode of operation of the respective social space.

The power and capital invested into proxy war and the maintenance of relationships to the middle actor's proxy and sponsor represents the second analytical component to the middle actor's proxy war practice. Capital is both a source of power and a stake in the field, and many battles have been fought to expand military capabilities by capturing strategic locations, supplies or military equipment.

The field of conflict, i.e., the different actors involved in the conflict, is not a hermetically closed environment: Actors, ranging from NGOs, state-sponsors to the UN and its Security Council, may insert themselves into a conflict. This may change the underlying rules of a conflict as powerful allies may provide air support or retaliation going beyond the capabilities of the middle actor. Furthermore, foreign sponsorship, may enhance the credibility of an actor's thread but at the same time put a target on the proxy's back. Collaboration with a sponsor or a proxy may alter these rules as ethnic or religious-sectarian frictions can be mitigated or re-enforced.

Methodology

Analysing the practice of middle actors in proxy war, needs to follow the socio-historical developments of the relationships between the involved actors. Applying a structured, focused case comparison allows assessing middle actors utilising the three analytical concepts of habitus, power, and field of conflict.[63]

The socio-historical comparison of the middle actor's relationships allows identifying the causal effects of the middle actor-sponsor relationship on the strategy guiding the sponsorship of the middle actor's proxy. To this end, the case studies examine the sponsor - middle actor relationship and the middle actor - proxy relationship as part of the middle actor's strategy, which is developing relationally to the field of conflict over time, allowing to identify the sponsor's influence on the middle actor's practices. This influence may become salient in the imitation, emulation, innovation and further development of practices by the middle actor. Due to the secretive nature of proxy relationships and military strategy, the practices of the actors under scrutiny have been assessed indirectly, examining the literature for salient patterns in the strategy and tactics among the middle actors. Therefore, an educated guess is grounded on a triangulation of translated ego-documents, academic sources, think tank reports, and journalistic accounts.

The cases analysed in this study were chosen for their comparability, variation, relevance, and the purpose of academic parsimony. Both groups represent potent actors in ongoing conflicts with only very few links between the two cases. Both actors have relied on longstanding support from their benefactors and have engaged in lasting support of surrogates. Moreover, both actors have provided sanctuary and training to several other groups, often in the direct interest of their sponsors. The middle actor's proxies selected for the case study, in contrast, have not directly served the respective state sponsor of the middle actor while being utilized in different ways.

4 Case Study

The previous section has outlined the theory and the analytical framework the case studies conducted are based on. Next, a brief introduction, outlining crucial similarities and differences between Hezbollah and the Taliban, prepares the ground for the following case studies. Then, the proxy war practice of Hezbollah and the Taliban is put under scrutiny, using the above defined analytical tools. Hezbollah and the Taliban are among the oldest and most resilient armed groups still operating and have undergone several changes over time, adapting to the changes in the field of conflict and oscillating between political Islam and pragmatism. While Hezbollah was among the first batch of groups designated as Foreign Terrorist Organisations

[63] See Alexander L George and Andrew Bennett, *Case studies and theory development in the social sciences* (MIT Press, 2005).

by the United States Department of State in 1997, the Taliban, to the contrary, never made it on this list even after sheltering Usama Bin Laden. Nevertheless, the War on Terror brought an end to the Taliban's reign in Afghanistan while Hezbollah has managed to evade military defeat or disarmament to this day. Hezbollah has invested substantially in a counter-narrative, framing itself as 'resistance' to Israel.[64] Similarly, the Taliban have gone to great lengths to convey that their revolutionary Islamism follows a national agenda.[65]

Both groups engage in state-like behaviour following a political agenda that exceeds strategic terrorism, constraining their activities and engaging in the tacit bargaining of a conflict.[66] This is apparent in the relative stability along the border of Israel and Lebanon as well as in Afghanistan, where the Taliban have not attacked foreign troops since the Doha Agreement in 2019.[67] While Hezbollah has abandoned its plan to implement a Shi'ite Islamic State in Lebanon and settled on its position as a key political player, the Taliban view themselves as the legitimate government of the so-called Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and refuse to enter parliamentary politics.[68] The political ambitions of both groups are also evident in their provision of public goods.

Both groups have complemented the external funding and domestic revenues with large scale drug production and smuggling operations. At its height, the Taliban banned planting poppy crops in an attempt to appeal to the international community. A welcomed secondary consequence was the substantial price rise of raw opium when the world's major producer capped the supply.[69]

The founders of Hezbollah were heavily influenced by the Iranian revolution of 1979 and the waliyy al-faqih doctrine uniting its political and religious leadership under clerical guidance.[70] Similarly, the Taliban were led by a cleric headed Shura.[71] However, in contrast to

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[64] Marco Nilsson, "Hezbollah and the framing of resistance," *Third World Quarterly* 41, no. 9 (2020); Mona Harb and Reinoud Leenders, "Know thy enemy: Hizbullah,'terrorism'and the politics of perception," *Third World Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (2005).

[65] "Ideology in the Afghan Taliban," Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2017, accessed 11.10.2020, https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/201705-AGopal-ASvLinschoten-TB-Ideology.pdf.

[66] See Isabelle Duyvesteyn, "Paradoxes of the strategy of terrorism," in *Understanding victory and defeat in contemporary war* (Routledge, 2006).

[67] Daniel Sobelman, "Learning to Deter: Deterrence Failure and Success in the Israel-Hezbollah Conflict, 2006‑16," *International Security* 41, no. 3 (2017), https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00259; Thomas Ruttig, "A Deal in the Mist: How much of the US-Taleban Doha agreement has been implemented?," (2021).

[68] Khalilullah Safi and Thomas Ruttig, "Understanding Hurdles to Afghan Peace Talks: Are the Taleban a Political Party?," *Afghanistan Analyst Network, June* 27 (2018).

[69] Graham Farrell and John Thorne, "Where have all the flowers gone?: evaluation of the Taliban crackdown against opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan," *International Journal of Drug Policy* 16, no. 2 (2005).

[70] The "guardianship of the Islamic Jurist", a revolutionary form of political Shi'a Islam. See As' ad AbuKhalil, "Ideology and practice of Hizballah in Lebanon: Islamization of Leninist organizational principles," *Middle Eastern Studies* 27, no. 3 (1991).

[71] Shura - "consultation" or council

the Afghan Taliban, Hezbollah's leadership is recruited out of highly institutionalised ulema.[72] While most of the clerics and ideologues of Hezbollah have studied in Qom (Iran) and Najaf (Iraq), only few of the Taliban Mullahs, let alone Amirs[73] and commanders, have completed their studies; consequently, their Islamic knowledge is often imperfect.[74]

Though local circumstances have caused the formation of both groups, Hezbollah and the Taliban have maintained longstanding relationships with their sponsors, Iran and Pakistan, respectively. Their support was elementary for the maintenance of the actions and the structures developed in the respective organisations. Iran attempted to export the Islamic Revolution and to create a buffer against Israel. The cooperation of Hezbollah and Iran has effectively pushed the front in the direction of Israel, while the creation of several militias in the so-called Shi'ite crescent so far has failed to reproduce Hezbollah's successes.[75] Pakistan has focussed less on the ideology but rather on the strategic capabilities of possible proxies to gain the upper hand in Afghanistan. By sponsoring a variety of actors, Pakistan managed to maximize its leverage over said groups and ensured its influence over the Afghan state regardless of the conflict's outcome.

In comparison to these longstanding relationships, both groups' relationships to other sponsors have been on changing terms. Hezbollah's competition with Amal strained its relationship with the latter' sponsor Syria, the groups sponsor, in the past. However, a new alliance between the Assad government of Syria, Hezbollah, Iran, and Russia has been created over the course of the Syrian civil war. Conversely, the Taliban have lost support from their former Saudi backers due to Mullah Omar's decision to host Bin Laden and his refusal to extradite the leader of Al Qaida.[76] Saudi Arabia's government severed its ties to the Taliban after 9/11, leaving Pakistan and especially the ISI and the Jamiat-e Ulema-I Islam (JUI) as the major sponsors of the Taliban.[77]

In contrast to Hezbollah's Iranian inspired ideology, making the Iran-Hezbollah alliance one of convenience, the Taliban-Pakistan relationship has been more complex and sometimes

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[72] Zackery M. Heern, "One Thousand Years of Islamic Education in Najaf: Myth and History of the Shiʿi Ḥawza," *Iranian Studies* 50, no. 3 (2017/05/04 2017), https://doi.org/10.1080/00210862.2017.1285486.
[73] Amir - leader, commander- the head of the Taliban is referred to as Amir al-Mu'minin - the leader of the faithful
[74] See Michael Semple, *Rhetoric, ideology, and organizational structure of the Taliban movement* (United States Institute of Peace Washington, DC, 2014).
[75] Marc R DeVore and Armin B Stähli, "Explaining Hezbollah's effectiveness: Internal and external determinants of the rise of violent non-state actors," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 27, no. 2 (2015).
[76] See Ahmed Rashid, "Pakistan And The Taliban " in *Fundamentalism Reborn*, ed. William Maley (London: Hurst & Co, 1998).
[77] Ibid. Tricia Bacon, "Slipping the Leash? Pakistan's Relationship with the Afghan Taliban," *Survival* 60, no. 5 (2018); Rashid, "Pakistan And The Taliban."; Vikash Yadav, "The Myth of the Moderate Taliban," *Asian Affairs: An American Review* 37, no. 3 (2010/08/31 2010), https://doi.org/10.1080/00927678.2010.503924.

contradicting. The Taliban maintain several strong backers within the Pakistani state, securing a level of independence and liberty from one major patron.

5 Hezbollah

When Hezbollah made its first public appearance in an open letter published in 1985, the organisation had already been active for a few years. Although supported by Iran from early on, Hezbollah has been rooted in the local environment of a historically marginalised Shi'a community. When the Palestinian-Israeli conflict spilt over into Lebanon as the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) moved their operations from Jordan, Shi'ites living in Southern Lebanon fled to Beirut, laying the foundation for the political organisation out of a hitherto factionalised community. In 1975 Musa Sadr formed Afwaj al-Mouqawama Al-Lubnaniyya (AaI), the Islamic Resistance movement, aiming to integrate the Shi'a community into the Lebanese society.[78]

Hezbollah is a fission product of discontent AaI cadres after Nabih Berri decided to enter negotiations with Israel in 1982. Hezbollah's cadres moreover adapted the revolutionary ideology of Ruhollah Khomeini and stated in 1985 in its first published open letter:

> "We […] abide by the orders of a single wise and just command represented by the guardianship of the jurisprudent (waliyy al-faqih), currently embodied in the supreme Ayatullah Ruhallah al-Musawi al-Khumayni"[79]

The ideological overlap and longstanding relations between Hezbollah cadres and the Iranian regime made Hezbollah a natural choice for Iran to sponsor. Apart from its military activities, the Party of God provides public goods and social welfare in the areas under its control. With Iranian funding, Hezbollah has become the major operator for health facilities, electricity, and water in Dahiya, the Beqaa Valley, and other districts inhabited mainly by Shi'ites, further strengthening their legitimacy in said areas.[80]

Hezbollah integrated terrorist tactics into their insurgency fought against the IDF; in the Lebanese civil war, the group kept a low profile and only engaged in a brief conflict with their rival Amal. Iran's financial support allowed Hezbollah not to rely on predatory behaviour for funding, adding to their perceived legitimacy. Hezbollah's growing capabilities permitted the organisation to apply elements of conventional warfare, building fortified positions and a strategic layout of rocket launchers. Furthermore, Hezbollah engaged in a game of deterrence with Israel developing practices of tacit bargaining, engaging in patterned retaliation to Israeli actions signalling red lines and measured responses.

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[78] Oliver Moos, "Lebanon: Hizbullah, a progressive Islamic Party?‑Interview with Joseph Alagha," (Religioscope, 2007).
[79] Joseph Alagha, *The shifts in Hizbullah's ideology: religious ideology, political ideology, and political program* (Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 224.
[80] Ibid., 165.

In 2011 Hezbollah forces were fighting on behalf of the Assad regime in Syria in co-operation with Iranian IRGC troops and Russian military advisors and air support. Although this has been paid for dearly, Hezbollah has gained vital experience and refined its tactic and strategic capabilities. As a result, it is among the most potent military forces in the region, far superior to the Lebanese national forces.

Hezbollah's strategic habitus

Iranian involvement in the formation of Hezbollah has resulted in institutionalised stable cooperation, especially with the IRGC Quds Force, on many levels. Training in Iran was an integral part of many Hezbollah cadres' curriculum. Specifically, in the early years, Lebanese fighters have been trained by IRGC members in the Shi'ite stronghold, the Beqaa Valley close to the Syrian border. [81] Hezbollah's strategic habitus mixed elements of revolutionary doctrine and jihadist martyrdom based on the waliyy al-faqih.[82] Iranian support allowed Hezbollah to provide a thorough ideological and tactical indoctrination; cadres underwent progressively specialised training. Skills and equipment inherited from Iran have been integrated into Hezbollah's strategy, salient in the combination of ballistic warfare elements with an organisational cell structure, separating command from operational structures.[83]

Hezbollah's debut was a series of suicide attacks starting on November 11th, 1982, targeting the Israeli headquarters in Tyre, killing 76 officers, and introducing suicide bombings to the arsenal of Islamist terrorism. The use of insurgency tactics such as suicide bombings and improvised explosive devices (IED), some vehicle-borne, have yielded impressive results at the hands of Hezbollah. The efficiency of their strategy and tactics also proved to be superior to the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) tasked to train them. Deriving from their experiences in the Iran-Iraq war, the Iranian advisors trained and directed human wave attacks, resulting in high casualties and little gains for Hezbollah and human waves were quickly abandoned.[84] Additionally, Iran assisted Hezbollah to set up a sophisticated external and internal intelligence apparatus that has hardened the group from Israeli penetration and has been incorporated into the vetting process of prospective recruits.[85]

Analogously, Hezbollah fighters have been trained by Iran to operate more advanced weapon systems as Iranian ballistic capabilities increased. It is assumed that IRGC cadres were involved in the operation of these more sophisticated weapon systems, while Hezbollah

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[81] See Blanford Nicholas, *Warriors of God: Inside Hezbollah's Thirty-Year Struggle Against Israel*, vol. 1st ed (New York: Random House, 2011), eBook, position 54.

[82] AbuKhalil, "Ideology and practice of Hizballah in Lebanon: Islamization of Leninist organizational principles."

[83] Iver Gabrielsen, "The evolution of Hezbollah's strategy and military performance, 1982-2006," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 25, no. 2 (2014).

[84] DeVore and Stähli, "Explaining Hezbollah's effectiveness."

[85] Carl Anthony Wege, "Hizballah's Counterintelligence Apparatus," *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence* 25, no. 4 (2012).

has perfected its ballistic capabilities with Katyusha-type weapons.[86] Nevertheless, the Party of God has further developed the denial of access strategy inherited from Iran, dismantling the multi-rocket launchers and putting single rockets fired at Israel to maximal propaganda use. Up until the commissioning of Iron Dome, Katyushas were almost impossible to intercept, but a single unguided missile had only limited chances to inflict significant damage.[87] With the evolving arsenal of Hezbollah, the tactical preferences changed accordingly to the political ambitions of Hezbollah. Hence, kidnappings and spectacular suicide attacks on Jewish and Israeli targets as means of retaliation and deterrence were replaced by the ballistic means inherited from Iran.[88]

First founded in 1997, the Saraya Muqawama al-Lynaniyya – the Lebanese Resistance Brigades, are best described as the military adaption of the infitah - openness – principle, which Hezbollah introduced in the 1980s when entering the parliamentary politics of Lebanon combined with efforts to rebrand Hezbollah's jihad as Lebanese resistance and a broadening of the target audience.[89] The creation of the Saraya was justified by public demand for a chance to join the resistance for non-Shi'as who otherwise would not have been able to enter the Party of God due to ideological or sectarian reasons.[90] In contrast to Hezbollah cadres, the Saraya employ no full-time or specialised fighters, were neither paid a salary nor can Saraya members rely on the wide-ranging benefits provided by the Party of God like healthcare or inexpensive loans. Saraya members received their basic training in the same facilities as Hezbollah fighters, while their ideological training differs significantly.[91] There are no reports of further specialized training provided to the Resistance Brigades, and their organisational structures and operations were kept separated from Hezbollah's. Beyond basic training, the Saraya fighters were provided with an assault rifle and ammunition, received basic military training before being sent on missions, lasting several weeks. They were mainly deployed to reconnaissance operations in and mortar attacks conducted from Lebanese territory, but the alleged military performance has been questioned.[92] Reactivated in the light of the surge of Salafi jihadist groups in Syria, the Saraya have reportedly engaged Al Qaida and Al Nusra

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[86] Jean-Loup Samaan, "Missile warfare and violent non-state actors: the case of Hezbollah," *Defence studies* 17, no. 2 (2017).

[87] See Ron Schleifer, "Psychological Operations: A New Variation on an Age Old Art: Hezbollah versus Israel," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29, no. 1 (2006), https://doi.org/10.1080/10576100500351185.

[88] Cf Eitan Azani, "Hezbollah's Strategy Of "Walking On The Edge": Between Political Game And Political Violence," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 35, no. 11 (2012). Sobelman, "Learning to Deter." Samaan, "Missile warfare and violent non-state actors: the case of Hezbollah." Gabrielsen, "The evolution of Hezbollah's strategy and military performance, 1982-2006."

[89] Nilsson, "Hezbollah and the framing of resistance."

[90] Nicholas, *Warriors of God*, 1st ed, e Book position 152 ff.

[91] Alexandra Masi, "Christian, Sunni, and Shia: Meet Hezbollah's Non-Denominational Military Branch Defending Lebanon, Fighting in Syria," *International Business Times* (2015).

[92] Nicholas, *Warriors of God*, 1st ed, e Book position 279.

along the Lebanese Syrian border.[93] The influence of the collaboration with the Saraya on Hezbollah's strategic habitus was limited, as was the militia's integration in Hezbollah's infrastructure and logistics.[94] A secondary effect of this delegation of services and the diversification of Hezbollah's clients makes it more challenging to disrupt Hezbollah infrastructure and support network, allowing Hezbollah to decrease the number of active full-time fighters needed to maintain the party's operations.

Analogously to Iran's relationship with Hezbollah, the Saraya were handled by the Party of God in an institutionalised manner.[95] Crewed with volunteers motivated by an ideological cause Hezbollah and their proxy, the Lebanese Resistance Brigades display similarities in the organisational structure of the relationship to the respective sponsor. Hezbollah members were tied to Iran's leadership by the religious obligation of the waliyy al-faqih, while the Saraya committed to the resistance narrative. At the same time, Hezbollah has maintained a level of distance to the Saraya operating separately from their sponsor. The Lebanese Resistance Brigades have been organised in local cells, similar to Hezbollah's layout of small independent units spread out over the villages of Southern Lebanon.

Hezbollah's disposition of power

Support from Iran has helped Hezbollah to become one of the strongest armed forces in the Middle East.[96] This support comprised ideological and military training, the provision of arms and ammunition, and financial support Hezbollah could allocate autonomously. Iran's, and later Syria's backing of Hezbollah in the Lebanese power broker, resulting in the Ta'if agreement. Likewise, the participation of the Party of God in Lebanese elections was actively supported, if not initiated by Iran.[97] This step allowed Hezbollah to broaden its support base substantially as well as to maintain its armament. "Iranian asphalt" is the product of the transformation of economic capital received from Iran into political recognition and legitimacy beyond the Shi'a constituency that could be utilised in the Lebanese field of conflict that had just returned from the civil war to parliamentary elections, while Israel and Syria occupied parts of Lebanon.

Hezbollah's legitimacy was tied to its performance as a guerrilla force against Israel. However, equally important might have been the party's restraint from predatory practices as

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[93] See Masi, "Christian, Sunni, and Shia: Meet Hezbollah's Non-Denominational Military Branch Defending Lebanon, Fighting in Syria."
[94] Amal Khalil, "Lebanese Resistance Leader: The Saraya Is Here to Stay," *Al Akhbar English* (Beirut), 19.10. 2013, https://web.archive.org/web/20170210033249/http://english.al-akhbar.com:80/node/17358.
[95] Anthony H Cordesman, *Iran's Support of the Hezbollah in Lebanon* (Center for Strategic and International Studies Washington, DC, 2006).
[96] Nicholas Blanford, "Israel: Hezbollah is now stronger than any Arab army," *Christian Science Monitor* (2014/06/09/ 2014), https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2014/0609/Israel-Hezbollah-is-now-stronger-than-any-Arab-army.
[97] Nicholas, *Warriors of God*, 1st ed, e Book position 158.

it received enough funding from Iran, and amidst short infighting with Amal in 1988, Hezbollah's involvement in the Lebanese civil war was negligible.[98] The increase of political capital at the hands of Hezbollah is best exemplified in the institutionalised veto power the party achieved in 2008 in the government of national unity, brokered and backed by the Arab League. However, this was not the result of a public formation of political will. In contrast, the Party of God had demonstrated that it would be willing to use force in the Lebanese conflict.[99] Combined with Hezbollah's position as the sole provider of public goods in large parts of Lebanon, the Party of God has made itself an indispensable actor in Lebanon. Here Hezbollah's ability to maintain their arsenal, defeating several UNSC Resolutions and the party's legitimacy in the wider Lebanese society go hand in hand.

The Lebanese Resistance Brigades were open to all Lebanese who identified with the concept of Lebanese resistance against Israel, which Hezbollah significantly framed. The formation of the Saraya, the provision of training and weaponry for its part-time members, have yielded Hezbollah a return in social capital, i.e., stable networks among non-Shi'ites of Lebanon. As the formation of the Saraya followed Hezbollah's participation in the parliamentary politics of Lebanon, this indicates that the formation of the Resistance Brigades aimed to generate political capital. Political capital facilitated the parliamentary recognition of Hezbollah as legitimate resistance organisation and allowed Hezbollah to hold on to their weaponry after the Ta'if accord.[100]

Hezbollah's social welfare provision has been substantially funded by its foreign sponsors and has been enshrined in its ideology, the waliyy al-faqih. The social services set up are a major source of legitimacy and integrated into the group's strategy, facilitating and institutionalising the civil militia cooperation in areas under Hezbollah control in a 'hearts and minds' fashion.[101] The continued supply of large parts of Lebanon by Hezbollah, the maintenance of basic infrastructure and the provision of public goods has entrenched Hezbollah into the fabric of the Lebanese state, further immunising the group's military apparatus. By addressing Lebanon's grievances and social injustices, Hezbollah's public stance integrated political and social narratives beyond the party's core constituency and the wider Lebanese population.[102] Sponsoring the Saraya, therefore, represents the integration of Hezbollah's proxy in a strategy opting for improved positioning in the field by circumventing disarmament, securing legitimacy, and political influence.

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[98] Eitan Azani, "Hezbollah as a Regional Player," in *Hezbollah: The Story of the Party of God* (Springer, 2009); Judith Palmer Harik, *Hezbollah: The changing face of terrorism* (Ib Tauris, 2005), 82.
[99] Azani, "Hezbollah's Strategy ".
[100] Cf. Azani, "Expansion and Institutionalization of the Movement–Constraints and Adaptation."
[101] James B Love, *Hezbollah: Social services as a source of power*, Join Special Operations Univ (Hurlburt Field FL, 2010).
[102] cf. Joseph Alagha, *Hizbullah's Documents* (Amsterdam University Press, 2011), 39. https://doi.org/10.1515/9789048513376.

The effect on the Lebanese field of conflict

The relationship between Hezbollah and its sponsors followed substantial changes in the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East. While the Arab states experienced fissures over the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Iranian revolution had shifted the power balance in the region. Hezbollah's creation directly followed Israel's military occupation of Southern Lebanon providing, Iran with a possibility to further its influence and tap into the conflict. After the PLO was largely defeated, Hezbollah proved as one of Israel's most determined adversaries. Iran's and later Syria's support of Hezbollah facilitated Hezbollah's rise and fortified Assad's influence in Lebanon after the withdrawal of Syrian troops in 2005. Hezbollah has engrained itself into the Lebanese society and state to an extent putting the party in a position capable of effectively bringing large parts of the country to a stand-still, even without the veto power in parliament.

The sponsorship of the Lebanese Resistance Brigades by the party of god has solidified Hezbollah's legitimacy as a Lebanese resistance against Israel even after Israel's withdrawal. This has also further immunised Hezbollah against social or strategic isolation in a prospect war with Israel or resurgence of intra-Lebanese conflict. The Saraya illustrate the effect of Hezbollah's rebranding as an organisation of national resistance. Although the party's image has been tainted in the past as Hezbollah fought against other Lebanese factions and engaged in the Syrian conflict. Hezbollah not only has portrayed itself as the sole capable protector from Sunni Islamists of Al Qaida and ISIS, but also has managed to rally support for the protection of holy Shi'a sites in Syria, and to securitize Syrian jihadist in the Lebanese discourse.[103] This has strengthened Hezbollah's legitimacy and solidified the party's consolidation of Lebanese security infrastructure as the state itself is not perceived competent.[104]

6 Taliban

When the Taliban captured Kabul in 1996, the world watched in dread as the Taliban stormed the UN premises and hanged President Najibullah, seeking protection from the international community, from a tank cannon. After their first appearance on the battlefield, some saw the Taliban as a chance for stability due to their military successes and pious posture, leading even to brief Washington backed contacts between a pipeline company and the Taliban.[105] After 9/11, Islamabad's support turned more covert and tacit, but the government under Pervez Musharraf was not willing to give up the leverage left over their

[103] Helle Malmvig, "Allow me this one time to speak as a Shi'i: The sectarian taboo, music videos and the securitization of sectarian identity politics in Hezbollah's legitimation of its military involvement in Syria," *Mediterranean Politics* 26, no. 1 (2021/01/01 2021), https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2019.1666230.

[104] Chris Zambelis, *Hizb Allah's Lebanese Resistance Brigades*, Military Academy West Point NY Combating Terrorism Center (2014).

[105] Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Islam, oil and the new great game in Central Asia* (IB Tauris London, 2002), 126.

Afghan client and cut their ties with the Taliban; however, the Taliban had managed to acquire several sponsors in Pakistan, strengthening their position vis-à-vis the Pakistani state. These included Deobandi parties like the JUI, a major operator of madrassas in Pakistan and source of young recruits for the Taliban; organised crime and trafficking cartels involved in Afghan Pakistani border smuggling operations; and government officials and ministers on federal and district levels.[106]

The Robin Hood-like founding narrative of the Taliban pictures Mullah Omar and his followers as honourable religious students countering predatory warlords and the lawlessness of the civil war. Apart from this narrative, the Taliban's ideology resembles an Amalgam of a traditionalist Islam rooted in Pashtun villages and Deobandi purism as it has been established in madrasas in Pakistan.[107] The Taliban's fundamentalism is constrained mainly by the pragmatic balancing of customary and sharia law, but Afghanistan's ulema has been fragmented and weakened due to the decades of fighting. Simultaneously affiliations to Islamist parties operating their madrassas have fractioned the Pakistani ulema, deepening sectarian divides.[108]

Public goods provided by the Taliban, even during their reign, were rudimentary at best. There were no trained administrative personnel, posts within the government were appointed as a reward for Taliban commanders. Furthermore, the Taliban focused on military gains rather than governance or rebuilding the war-torn country. Taliban ministers regularly went to the northern front to fight the last remnants of what would later become the Northern Alliance led by Dostum and Massoud.[109] Tensions characterized the Taliban's relationship with Pakistan, and the Taliban have gone to great lengths to gain more independence from their sponsors. Pakistan had developed a strategy of channelling foreign aid to insurgents in Afghanistan, making many of the Mujaheddin parties dependent, a strategy Pakistan attempted to apply to the Taliban as well; harbouring the command structures as well as the diplomatic institutions of the Taliban, Pakistan tried to become indispensable for any militant group attempting to gain control over Afghanistan.

The Taliban's strategic habitus

Pakistan's support has helped the Taliban become one of the most influential forces in the Afghanistan conflict. The Mujaheddin fighting the Red Army, among them Mullah Omar, a member of the Hizb-e Islami before the Soviet withdrawal, relied on traditional guerrilla tactics,

[106] Rashid, "Pakistan And The Taliban."
[107] Gopal and Strick van Linschoten, "Ideology in the Afghan Taliban."
[108] Kate Clark, "The Layha," *AAN Thematic Report* (2011); Rzehak, "Doing Pashto."; Ashok K. Behuria, "Sects Within Sect: The Case of Deobandi‐Barelvi Encounter in Pakistan," *Strategic Analysis* 32, no. 1 (2008/02/27 2008), https://doi.org/10.1080/09700160801886330.
[109] Barnett R Rubin, "Afghanistan under the Taliban," *Current History* 98 (1999): 81.

using the geography to their advantage, laying ambushes avoiding decisive battles.[110] In contrast, the Taliban displayed a taste for rapid advances with pickup trucks inherited from their sponsors.[111] These advances were covered by suppressive artillery fire and air support conducted by Pakistani forces, who also helped to rotate and move fighters to different Afghan battlefields.[112] Apart from the Pakistani recruits of the Taliban, reports indicate that members of the Pakistani armed forces were present during these operations.[113] Pakistan's Inter-Service Intelligence Service (ISI) has established liaison to the Taliban via retired agents taking on double functions within the Taliban and front organisations such as the Afghan Trade Development Cell, located in the Interior Ministry under Naseerullah Babar, a key figure and junction point between Pakistan and the Taliban.[114] By placing unofficial ISI operatives spread out among the Taliban shuras, Islamabad's tapping in was hard to recognise even for senior commanders.[115] Pakistan's proxy emulated the handling by its sponsor when becoming a middle actor. Taliban members have taken on double roles, reportedly functioning as commanders in the IMU.[116] Like Pakistan, the Taliban have had only limited control over their proxies which eventually led to partial defection of the IMU from its sponsor resulting in a split of the Uzbek group.[117] Furthermore, contacts were maintained via operatives functioning as junction points emulating Pakistan's handling of the Taliban.

Pakistan had opened official relations to the Taliban government from 1996, providing financial and development aid. Earlier, Pakistan provided the Taliban with a communication network for their military operations while linking large parts of the country to the Pakistani telephone grid, allowing the Taliban to wage better-coordinated offensives and maintain close contact with the group's social networks in Pakistan.[118] The Taliban incorporated this aspect into their strategic habitus; nevertheless, sanctuary represents the most important strategic support received from Pakistan. Fighters went through circles of training in Pakistan's FATA region, fighting in Afghanistan, and rest periods back in Pakistan, where clinics and guest houses provided for Taliban fighters.[119] Apart from the emulation of mobile warfare by the

[110] See Rashid, *Taliban*, 19. Cf. Ali Ahmad Jalali and Lester W Grau, *The Other Side of the Mountain: Mujahideen Tactics in the Soviet-Afghan War* (US Marine Corps, Studies and Analysis Division, 1999).
[111] Anthony Davis, *How the Taliban became a military force* (1998).
[112] Roger Possner, "Afghanistan, crisis of impunity: the role of Pakistan, Russia, and Iran in fueling the Civil War," *Counterpoise* 5, no. 3/4 (2001).
[113] Ibid.
[114] Cf. Rashid, *Taliban*, 184; Matt Waldman, "The sun in the sky: The relationship between Pakistan's ISI and Afghan insurgents," (2010).
[115] Cf Abdul Salam Zaeef, *My Life with the Taliban* (Oxford University Press, 2010).
[116] Patrick Megahan, *ISAF launches multiple raids against IMU as fighting season heats up*, FDD's Long War Journal (08.05. 2013), https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/05/isaf_launches_multip.php.
[117] See Merhat Sharipzhan, "IMU Spells Out Grievances With Afghan Taliban," *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty* (04.08. 2015), https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-imu-calls-out-taliban-on-mullah-omar/27170682.html; Hekmatullah Azamy, "Will the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) Trade the Taliban for ISIS?," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 7, no. 6 (2015), http://www.jstor.org/stable/26351364.
[118] Rashid, *Taliban*, 185.
[119] Waldman, "The sun in the sky: The relationship between Pakistan's ISI and Afghan insurgents."

Taliban, Pakistani technicians aided the Taliban in running a small air force, crewed by former Afghan armed forces under Najibullah's socialist regime. The flight squadron allowed the Taliban to rotate troops more effectively; furthermore, Taliban piloted MiG fighter jets intercepted two supply flights destined for the Northern Alliance, capturing large amounts of ammunition.[120]

Beyond Pakistan's strategic interest in the outcome of the Afghan conflict, the Taliban provided Islamabad with an intermediate to host jihadist groups fighting in Kashmir and Jammu.[121] The Taliban offered plausible deniability in a legal sense for Pakistan's proxy war against India. This strategy was copied by the Taliban using the IMU to maintain plausible deniability when China exerted pressure via Pakistan to coerce the Taliban to cease the training of Uighurs; the Taliban transferred them from a camp close to Kabul to the IMU fighting in the north.[122] The Taliban deployed the IMU as shock troops on the battlefield since they had a reputation as especially ruthless and disciplined fighters compared to the Taliban who sometimes fled when "bullets started flying".[123] Both groups were required to devote fixed contingents of fighters to the Taliban in return for the sanctuary provided by their ascending principals. Furthermore, prior to 9/11, foreign fighters, especially members of the IMU and Al Qaida, were separated from and guarded by Taliban fighters.[124] The post-2001 insurgency of the Taliban saw an adaption in tactics, like suicide bombings and IEDs introduced by Al Qaida and the IMU emulated and further elaborated by the Taliban as their mobile warfare strategy provided easy targets under US air supremacy.

The IMU utilisation has further changed over time as IMU, and ethnic Uzbek Taliban members have been reported to spearhead Taliban penetration in certain areas with an Uzbek majority.[125] Furthermore, the IMU has become a catch-all like identity marker of non-Pashtun militants killed by NATO troops in Afghanistan, contributing to the obfuscation of organisational structures and relationships between the Taliban, the IMU, and other groups.[126] Like Hezbollah, the Taliban have been eager to frame their struggle as the national resistance of all Sunni Afghans, even including an ethnic Tajik and an Uzbek representative in the Kabul shura.[127] Despite the Taliban's hostile stand towards Hazara and other Afghan Shi'a minorities, the Taliban have enlisted a few Hazara commanders who were often motivated by local

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[120] Davis, *How the Taliban became a military force*.
[121] Rashid, "Pakistan And The Taliban."
[122] Ahmed Rashid and Butch Hoover, *Jihad: the rise of militant Islam in Central Asia* (Yale University Press New Haven, CT, 2002), 176.
[123] Michael Rubin, "Who is responsible for the Taliban," *Middle East review of international affairs* 6, no. 1 (2002).
[124] Alex Strick Van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn, *An enemy we created: The myth of the Taliban-al Qaeda merger in Afghanistan* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2012), 186ff.
[125] Antonio Giustozzi, "The Taliban Beyond the Pashtuns," (2010).
[126] *Talebs in Tajikistan? Part 2 on the alleged IMU-Taleban nexus* Afghanistan Analysts Network (11.10. 2013), https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/regional-relations/talebs-in-tajikistan-part-2-on-the-alleged-imu-taleban-nexus.
[127] Rashid, *Taliban*, 223-224.

infighting and competition, which in turn was exploited by the Taliban.[128] In 2020 the Taliban appointed Mawlawi Mehdi Mujahed, a Shi'a Hazara, as a district governor of their shadow state.[129]

The Taliban's strategic habitus has been heavily influenced by its Pakistani sponsors, introducing mobile warfare and rapid sweeping offensives to the Afghan field of conflicts. The Taliban integrated their Uzbek clients into this strategic habitus adapting to the Afghan field of conflict. Experienced fighters from the civil war in Tajikistan but also former Soviet soldiers formed the IMU core; while operating integrated into Taliban offenses, the IMU was simultaneously engaged in terrorist attacks in Uzbekistan and several kidnappings, using Afghanistan as an operational base and refuge. In the negotiations for the hostages' release, the Uzbek kidnappers managed to attain safe passage back to Afghanistan, guarded by Russian border patrol forces.[130] The handling of the IMU resembles many characteristics of the Pakistan Taliban relationship. By placing Taliban cadres among the command structures of the IMU, providing them mainly with sanctuary in the territories under Taliban control and maintaining their denial of supporting the IMU despite recurring allegiance pledges from the latter, the Taliban were imitating practices of their Pakistani sponsors.

The Taliban's disposition of power

The Taliban's meteoric rise would not have been possible without the support the group received from Pakistan. This support encompassed all forms of power, although Pakistan's performance of this support was crowned with only partial success as Islamabad's control over their client dwindled despite the Taliban's increased strategic dependency on Pakistani territory, not only in the early years of the movement but especially after 9/11.

The political capital the Taliban gained from their relationship with Pakistan was somewhat limited. Islamabad's premature diplomatic recognition of the Taliban and the subsequent lobbying for recognition of the Taliban by the UN, after the seizure of Mazar-e Sharif failed as the Northern Alliance drove out the Taliban shortly after, resulting in hundreds of casualties, that would further isolate the Taliban and their Pakistani patrons.[131] The victory was only short-lived, and the Taliban did not help their international reputation in the following years; being accused of ethnic cleansing and other war crimes, including the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas, made the rudimentary state of the Taliban a pariah from the onset.[132] However,

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[128] See Giustozzi, "The Taliban Beyond the Pashtuns."
[129] Thomas Ruttig, *The case of Mawlawi Mehdi and Balkhab District: Are the Taleban attracting Hazaras?,* Afghanistan Analysts Network (23.05.2020 2020), https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/the-case-of-mawlawi-mehdi-and-balkhab-district-are-the-taleban-attracting-hazaras.
[130] See Rashid and Hoover, *Jihad*, 172.
[131] William Maley, *The Foreign Policy of the Taliban* (JSTOR, 1999); Rashid, "Pakistan And The Taliban." Ahady Anwar-ul-Haq, "Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the Conflict in Afghanistan," in *Fundamentalism Reborn*, ed. Maley William (London: Hurst & Co, 1998).
[132] Possner, "Crisis of Impunity."

Pakistan's support facilitated the acquisition of supplemental funding, for example, from Saudi Arabia, and ensured the Taliban a seat in many negotiation rounds between the Afghan warlords and opened up the possibility for limited diplomatic relations. Eager to convey an image of statehood, the Taliban failed to come across as a competent government. The initial cautious benevolence faltered after the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas, and the Taliban became a rogue state.[133]

Essential for the Taliban was Pakistani territory for two reasons. First, Pakistan provided the Taliban with an operational base and sanctuary for command structures. Second, the Taliban social networks span deep into Pakistan's social space. This social capital was not only relevant for the trafficking the Taliban taxed, but also represented a haven for retired or wounded fighters and their families, and a huge recruiting base. In 1994 and 1995, at least 30.000 fighters crossed the border from Pakistan to join the Taliban's fight.[134] In contrast to the state-run schools, the madrassas operated by Islamist parties in Pakistan housed and fed their students, making them especially attractive to the poverty-stricken rural communities, especially in the North-West Frontier Province and Federally Administered Tribal Areas bordering Afghanistan. The clerics of these madrassas indoctrinate many of the Taliban recruits and contribute to the Taliban's religious legitimisation.[135] Pakistani sanctuary benefitted high-level consultations and meetings, mainly held in Peshawar and Quetta required fighters crossing borders regularly. Taliban forces have been commuting to Pakistan, openly bearing insignias and flags, mostly undisturbed apart from some exceptions.[136]

Military aid, nevertheless, was the most efficacious received from and via Pakistan. In 1997 alone, Pakistan provided funding of US$30 million after their diplomatic recognition by Islamabad, adding to the supplies and salaries that already had been paid.[137]. However, Pakistan found ways to maintain plausible deniability, providing intel to their proxy enabling the Taliban to capture weaponry and equipment in Afghanistan. For example, the Taliban's first battle for Spin Baldak yielded a large weapon cache, while seizing control over an important border crossing town serving their backers interests. This cache had belonged to

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[133] Cf. Maley, *The Foreign Policy of the Taliban*. Paul Sharp, "Rogue state diplomacy," in *Diplomatic Theory of International Relations*, Cambridge Studies in International Relations (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
[134] Rashid and Hoover, *Jihad*.
[135] Bernt Glatzer, "Zum politischen Islam der afghanischen Taliban," *Sendungsbewußtsein oder Eigennutz. Zu Motivation und Selbstverständnis islamischer Mobilisierung. Zentrum Moderner Orient Studien* 15 (2001).
[136] Cf Rashid, *Taliban*, 183-185; Borhan Osman, *Jihadi Commuters: How the Taleban cross the Durand Line*, Afghanistan Analysts Network (17.10.2017), https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/regional-relations/jihadi-commuters-how-the-taleban-cross-the-durand-line; Borhan Osman, *Rallying Around the White Flag: Taleban embrace an assertive identity*, Afghanistan (01.02.2017). https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/rallying-around-the-white-flag-taleban-embrace-an-assertive-identity.
[137] Davis, *How the Taliban became a military force*. William Maley, *The Afghanistan Wars* (Macmillan International Higher Education, 2009), 235.

Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, Pakistan's former favourite proxy in Afghanistan.[138] It is likely that the supplies stored in Spin Baldak were known to the ISI and the Pakistani military, indicating the shift of preference to the Taliban as Hekmatyar's troops were taken by surprise.

For the Taliban, the IMU was an inexpensive client. The IMU opened new trafficking routes for opium and heroin from Afghanistan via Central Asia, strengthening their sponsor's independence from Pakistan. The economic collaboration even allowed IMU leader Namangani to pay his fighters a salary between 100-500 US$.[139] Afghanistan had become the major supplier of illicit opium during the civil war, and Pakistani trafficking networks were among the first benefactors of the Taliban.[140] The IMU fighters were experienced and had a reputation as fierce and disciplined fighters augmenting the military capacity of the Taliban's forces. Like Al Qaida, the IMU pledged allegiance to the Taliban and Mullah Omar and deployed contingents of fighters to the Taliban fronts. Additionally, the IMU had become the catch basin for foreign volunteers in Afghanistan.

From early on, the Taliban have attempted to adapt to Afghan society's multi-ethnic and multi-religious character. The IMU aided these efforts in majority Uzbek provinces, often facilitating initial contacts acting as spearhead and facade for their sponsors.[141] Furthermore, the discipline of the IMU fighters added to the positive reputation of the Taliban, who have been eager to portray themselves as providers for the public. Apart from roaming judges and the provision of rudimentary public order, the Taliban have put only little effort in social goods or welfare; instead, foreign aid and state-provided goods were hijacked.[142] Like Al Qaida, the IMU represented a part of the wider Muslim world to the Mullah Omar. Although the Taliban pursued national goals, Omar considered themselves part of the larger Ummah, whom they felt more obliged to justify before than the international community of the UN.[143]

As the IMU was perceived as a growing threat, Uzbekistan entered a spiral of repressions against Muslims after a series of high-profile attacks in Tashkent were attributed to the group. The leverage the Taliban could exert via the IMU became salient after the IMU conducted several kidnapping operations, capturing several international hostages. Negotiations were conducted via Pakistan and the Taliban, strengthening the Taliban's position vis-à-vis the

[138] Cf Rashid, *Taliban*, 28.
[139] Rashid and Hoover, *Jihad*, 165-166.
[140] Gretchen S Peters, "The Taliban and the Opium Trade," in *Decoding the new Taliban: insights from the Afghan field*, ed. Antonio Giustozzi (Hurst, 2009).
[141] Giustozzi, "The Taliban Beyond the Pashtuns."
[142] Antonio Giustozzi, "The Taliban's 'military courts'," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 25, no. 2 (2014/03/04 2014), https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2014.903638; Tom Coghlan, "The Taliban in Helmand: an oral history," in *Decoding the new Taliban: insights from the Afghan field*, ed. Antonio Giustozzi (Hurst, 2009); Ashley Jackson, *Life under the Taliban shadow government* (Overseas Development Institute, 2018).
[143] "Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States of America," updated 29.02.2020, https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf; Zaeef, *My Life with the Taliban*.

Central Asian states, especially Uzbekistan, anxiously trying to pursue the Taliban to sever their ties to the Uzbek fighters.[144]

The effect on the Afghan field of conflict

Pakistan's strategy of supporting several actors in the Afghan conflict combined with the channelling of support from third parties has made Pakistan a centre of gravity in the Afghan conflict. Not only did Pakistan function as the diplomatic hub for the Taliban and facilitated negotiations on multiple occasions, but Pakistan was also involved in the Bonn Conference in 2001. Although Pakistan's control over the Taliban had decreased, Islamabad was unwilling to drop its remaining leverage over the Taliban, providing them with sanctuary.[145] Furthermore, Pakistan's support has substantially contributed to the Taliban's survival and the protraction of the conflict. Pakistan's influence on Afghanistan is substantial: more than one million Afghan refugees to Pakistan were under UNHCR mandate, and Afghanistan's economy is deeply intertwined with Pakistan's.[146] Nevertheless, the sponsorship of the Taliban heavily impacted Islamabad's reputation and has made Pakistan an actor that is indispensable in any future peace agreement. At the same time, Pakistan maintained the bare legal plausible deniability of command control over the Taliban and other jihadist groups in Afghanistan.

The Taliban's support and alleged control over the IMU have had several noticeable impacts on the functioning of the Afghan conflict. The perceived threat posed by the IMU secured attention from Central Asian states, especially Uzbekistan. Among the most notable effects of the collaboration on the field of conflict revolved around the negotiations to release of several hostages kidnapped by the IMU. In exchange for the hostages, the perpetrators were airlifted by the Russian border patrol to Afghanistan.[147] Vice versa, the IMU has been made responsible for almost every Islamist attack in Central Asia. Sponsoring the IMU was used by the Taliban to deny the presence of foreign fighters among their ranks vis-à-vis its sponsor Pakistan put under pressure by China.

7 Conclusion

Middle actors, i.e., non-state proxies turned sponsors, have been described but not conceptualised in previous scholarship on proxy war. The present thesis has introduced an actor-centric concept that acknowledges the agency of said actors. Furthermore, a practice theory of middle actor's proxy war strategy has proven its analytical utility for a more holistic

[144] Rashid and Hoover, *Jihad*, 152.
[145] Reza Rumi, *What came out of the Peace Talks in Islamabad? An Afghan and a Pakistani take*, Afghanistan Analysts Network (28.08.2013), https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/what-came-out-of-the-peace-talks-in-islamabad-an-afghan-and-a-pakistani-take.
[146] "Refugee Data Finder," accessed 20.06.2021, 2021, https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/download/?url=YevrV1; Shoaib Ahmad Rahim, "Afghanistan's dependence on Pakistan: Trade, transit and the cost of being landlocked," *Management* 1, no. 4 (2018).
[147] Rashid and Hoover, *Jihad*, 172.

understanding of conflict as a socio-political endeavour that accounts for the reciprocal constitution of agent and structure that not only changes the social and strategic environment middle actors operate in, but also the social and material disposition of said actors itself. The strategy of proxy war resembles a set of evolved practices situated in the field of conflict, which are mutually producing and reproducing. Analysing middle actor's practice defined as a function of knowledge, power, and the relationship between the actor and the field of conflict yielded insights into the various factors involved in strategy beyond hypothetical optimums and game theory models. Applying a practice theory approach has shown how material and social causal effects interlink in the strategy of middle actors in proxy war.

While the dispositions of power embodied by the middle actor and the form of support have shown to be significantly influenced by the middle actors received sponsorship. The choice of proxy by Hezbollah and the Taliban hints at a rationale aiming to balance the different forms of support received; integrating the sponsor's influence on the middle actor's strategic habitus. The Taliban augmented inexperienced fighters from Pakistani madrassas, a dividend of their social capital, with the IMU's military capabilities, which were composed of the social network of fighters and their strategic habitus, constituted of the competencies, the experience of the IMU fighters. In comparison, the extravert strategic habitus has been less influenced by the initial sponsor-middle actor relationship than the salient emulation of the sponsor's handling of the middle actor in the latter's handling of the respective proxy point to path dependencies developing along chains of sponsor-proxy relationships. The two actors' engagement in sponsorship has highlighted the different strategic rationales guiding the respective middle actor. Hezbollah's rebranding, targeting a wider Lebanese audience, laid the ground for the sponsoring of the Saraya; the Taliban relied on the ruthlessness and experience of their Uzbek client in the wake of fierce counterforce applied by the Northern Alliance and NATO troops. Although the Taliban have attempted to gain local legitimacy by deploying IMU forces to major Uzbek provinces, in contrast to Hezbollah, admission requirements are less strict, and the Taliban have even allowed Shi'a Hazaras next to Uzbeks and Tajiks to join their ranks. Hence, the IMU's ethnic identity had less relevance to the Taliban than the non-denominational character of the Saraya to Hezbollah. Both proxies have offered their sponsors gains in different forms of power their benefactors lacked previously. The IMU's experienced fighters compensated for some of the young Taliban recruits while the Saraya enhanced Hezbollah's social capital and legitimacy beyond its core constituency. In both cases, the middle actor had a significant influence on the rules of the field of conflict over time. The political backing of Hezbollah strengthened the parties standing in the Lebanese parliament, which in turn helped to maintain the military apparatus. In turn, Hezbollah's military capabilities constantly grew to a scope that Israel perceived the Party of God as a threat on par with a state actor. This reinforced Hezbollah's legitimacy, aiding in the recruitment efforts of the Saraya. The Taliban's

survival, on the other hand, largely depended on their Pakistani sanctuary. Although confronted with far advanced adversaries, the Taliban have proven resilient, and their Pakistani sanctuary ensured their survival. In their constant effort to undermine the Afghan administration's legitimacy, form parallel structures, and claim responsibility for provided goods, the Taliban were deeply engrained in Afghan society and economy.

Nevertheless, this thesis has only scratched the surface and further research is necessary to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the non-state actors' strategizing in proxy wars and the influence of multiple sponsors on middle actor's practices. However, assessing non-state actor's strategy in proxy war as a socio-political endeavour that goes beyond military rationale accounts ultimately accounts better for the political nature of war in general.

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