Decrypting the Role of Regime Type in Proxy Warfare: A Cross-Case Comparison

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A Cross-Case Comparison

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Abstract

The Syrian Civil War attracted multiple regional and international actors' attention and became the theatre of parallel proxy operations. From a theoretical perspective, proxy relationships are commonly understood and analysed using Principal-Agent models, and are generally conceptualised as forms of delegation. This thesis builds on Abbott et al.'s Competence-Control framework and its conceptualisation of the control mode choices available to the governor (delegation, co-optation, orchestration, and trusteeship) by putting forward an alternative explanation for how states choose their control mode to govern their proxy relationship: that is regime type, as characterised by its values, institutions, and checks and balances. In order to highlight the impact of these variables, this thesis conducts a controlled comparison of the US-SDF, Russia-Wagner Group, and Iran-Hezbollah cases during the Syrian Civil War following a most similar case design. The analysis demonstrates that regime type plays a key role in shaping *ex ante* control mode choices across all three cases, while bearing a mixed impact on *ex post* control mode choices. Overall, this thesis' findings highlight the importance of regime values and institutions, primarily characterised by accountability mechanisms, in shaping democracies' proxy relations. This thesis contributes to scholarship on proxy warfare and covert operations by demonstrating the role regime type can play in shaping states' proxy operations and relations.

Keywords: proxy warfare, counterterrorism, regime type, Syria, Iran, Hezbollah, United States, Syrian Democratic Forces, Russia, Wagner Group, controlled case comparison

List of Abbreviations

CC	Competence-Control
CENTCOM	Central Command (US Military)
DOD	Department of Defence (US)
DOS	Department of State
DPT	Democratic Peace Theory
FSA	Free Syrian Army
GRU	Russian Military Intelligence
IRGC-QF	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps – Quds Force
JAN	Al-Nusra Front
MOD	Ministry of Defence (Russia)
NDF	National Defence Forces
NSAG	Non-State Armed Group
PA	Principal-Agent
PIA	Principal-Intermediary-Agent (Complex Conflict Delegation)
PKK	Kurdish Workers' Party
PMSC	Private Military Security Contractor
PYD	Democratic Union Party
RIT	Regulator-Intermediary-Target
SAA	Syrian Arab Army
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
SST	State Sponsor of Terrorism (US DOS Designation)
UN	United Nations
US	United States
YPG	People Protection Units

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1. Introduction

Proxies have been used by states for centuries for reasons ranging from cost and efficiency calculi to plausible deniability.[1] During the Cold War, proxy operations undertaken by the United States (US) and Soviet Union were conducted covertly throughout the globe but started gaining more and more visibility for international audiences. The Iran-Contra Affair constitutes a prime example of a complex covert proxy operation seeing the light of day, as it led to both congressional hearings and trials domestically in the US but also to legal proceedings at the International Court of Justice at an international level. In that instance, the Reagan administration faced a political tempest due to its financial, armament, and training assistance to the Contras in Nicaragua who aimed to overthrow the socialist Sandinist government, which was performed covertly and circumvented congressional oversight and approval. This incident highlighted the tension between covert operations, and by extension proxy warfare, and democratic checks and balances, institutions, and accountability.

More recently, the employment of proxies by states for various military and counterterrorism objectives has become increasingly visible and important since the beginning of the Global War on Terror, which started with the invasion of Afghanistan by the US and its allies in 2001. Indeed, states came to increasingly rely on private military security contractors (PMSCs) as well as stakeholders in the theatres of operation, such as non-state armed groups (NSAGs). The Syrian Civil War showcased the popularity of this practice across many different states with a stake in Syria, ranging from authoritarian regimes like Iran and Russia to major democratic states such as the US, France, or the Netherlands. These states all exhibited a willingness to commit to supporting a proxy through means of training, financing, and provision of equipment and armament. Given the prevalence of proxy support across different regime types, characterised by vastly different institutions and values, this poses the question of how a state's own regime shapes and structures its relationship with its proxies. In other words, how can the US, which brands itself as the leader of the democratic world, elect to pursue a similar strategy to Iran, which is labelled as a State Sponsor of Terrorism by the US Department of State

[1] Sergey Sukhankin, "12. 'Continuing War by Other Means': The Case of Wagner, Russia's Premier Private Military Company in the Middle East," *Russia in the Middle East,* eds. Theodore Karasik and Stephen Blank, 290-318 (United States: The Jamestown Foundation, 2018).

(DOS), or Russia, which challenges the US-led international order? This question opens up more interrogations: do the proxy support practices of these regimes differ, and if so, in what ways and what leads them to differ?

This thesis aims to make several academic, policy, and societal contributions. From an academic perspective, this paper builds on Abbott et al.'s Competence-Control framework to suggest an alternative explanation to the factors shaping a state's relationship with its proxy, viewing regime type and its associated institutional framework and values as a determining factor rather than power relations and efficiency considerations. From a policy perspective, it is essential to learn about potential patterns in the hierarchical structure between states and proxies, as well as the degree of authority given to the proxies, in order to predict and better comprehend how different regimes deal with their proxies. At a societal level, this analysis of proxy relationships through the lens of regime type highlights whether, how, and the extent to which regime values and institutions translate into practical policy decisions.

In light of the use of proxies by both authoritarian and democratic regimes despite their differences, this paper therefore aims to investigate the following research question: *How do states choose their mode of control to govern their proxy relationships?* In order to answer this question, this thesis adopts Abbott et al.'s Competence-Control framework as a means of defining the different types of state-proxy relations and conducts a controlled case comparison of three distinct cases of state support to non-state actors in a same conflict, namely the US – Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), Russia – Wagner Group, and Iran – Hezbollah dyads, to highlight the importance of regime type in their choice of control mode. This thesis begins with a review of academic perspectives on proxy warfare and regime type, especially in relation to democracy and the democratic peace theory, but also draws on literature on counterterrorism by proxy, and finally reviews existing principal-agent models and their benefits in analysing proxy relationships. It then sets up the theoretical framework based on the Competence-Control model and key regime type characteristics, and delves in-depth into the paper's controlled case comparison methodology. Section five contains the three case studies which follow a chronological order and analyse the evolution of the relationship within each dyad while highlighting the impact of case-specific regime characteristics in shaping the relationships. Finally, section six compares the data and conclusions drawn from the three case studies to

identify broader patterns in impact of regime types in shaping these relationships, but also acknowledges additional the factors that influenced them.

2. Literature Review

There are two main strands of literature that address and theorise proxy relationships in a conflict or counterterrorism context, namely literature on proxy warfare and scholarship on counterterrorism. This paper uses both these strands to identify a lack of focus on the relationship between a state's regime type and its chosen mode of control over its proxies. Then, this section addresses the benefits and shortcomings of using a principal-agent model and its variants to analyse proxy relations.

2.1. Proxy Relationships in Proxy Warfare Literature

The main theoretical debate in the study of proxy warfare is the question of delegation, which refers to the more commonly known principal-agent problem. Various authors employ and contribute to the theorisation of this model and its application to proxy warfare, however this issue is addressed in the theoretical section of this literature review.[2] Literature on proxy warfare acknowledges regime type as an important variable in explaining the presence and target of proxy operations. Indeed, this body of literature mostly focuses on regime type as a determinant for a state's likelihood to engage in war by proxy against democracies. This problematic is intrinsically connected to the democratic peace theory (DPT), which posits that democracies will not engage in war against each other.[3] In addressing the importance of regime type in proxy warfare, the democratic peace theory sheds light on the warring behaviour of democracies.

Goldman's analysis on whether a state's regime type is correlated with the probability to support violent non-governmental organisations (VNGOs) – which correspond to NSAGs – demonstrates that "democracies are less warlike by proxy than non-democratic states."[4] He finds

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[2] Niklas Karlén et al., "Forum: Conflict Delegation in Civil Wars," *International Studies Review* 23, no. 4 (2021): 2048–78; Assaf Moghadam et al., eds., *Routledge Handbook of Proxy Wars* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2023), 47-58.
[3] Ogen Goldman, "Do Democracies Support Violent Non-Governmental Organizations Less Than Autocracies Do?" *Civil Wars* 18, no. 4 (2016): 439–66.
[4] Goldman, "Do Democracies Support Violent Non-Governmental Organizations," 439.

that democracies are less likely than autocracies to support VNGOs, and especially unlikely to support them to fight other democracies, thereby supporting the DPT.[5] This is explained by both normative factors such as the respect for international law and the seeking of non-violent modes of conflict resolution, as well as structural factors including the institutional constraints placed on democratic leaders concerning covert action and accountability to their (inter)national institutions and audiences.[6] Similarly, Grauer and Tierney look at whether democracies wage wars against each other by using rebels and more broadly proxies, a phenomenon which they coin as the "democratic embargo."[7] They claim that strong democratic values and institutions, as well as checks and balances, prevent elected leaders from engaging in proxy warfare, and that violations of the democratic embargo are often a result of weak institutions.[8] The reference to the importance of institutional frameworks in shaping the decision to engage in proxy warfare points to a potential explanation for the difference between the control mode choices of democracies and authoritarian regimes in governing their proxy relations.

This academic debate therefore refers to a difference in warring behaviour between democracies and authoritarian regimes, which is investigated in this paper in the case of proxy warfare. It also identifies democratic values and institutions as core characteristics that shape democracies' recourse to covert action. Nevertheless, these articles which directly investigate the independent variable of this paper – regime type – in relation to proxy warfare fall short of analysing the nature of these relationships. Literature on counterterrorism and state sponsorship of terrorism, which concerns both state use of NSAGs and PMSCs, provides a deeper outlook on both the relevance and complexity of state-proxy relations.

2.2. Proxy Relationships in Counterterrorism Literature

Given the context of the rising popularity of counterterrorism by proxy since the beginning of the Global War on Terror (GWOT), it is also essential to look at perspectives on proxy relationships in the counterterrorism literature. Wechsler uses the concept of counterterrorism by proxy to refer to the use of non-state actors in state's counterterrorism policies, and argues it is a strategy with

[5] Goldman, "Do Democracies Support Violent Non-Governmental Organizations," 439-66.
[6] Goldman, "Do Democracies Support Violent Non-Governmental Organizations," 443-445.
[7] Ryan Grauer, and Dominic Tierney, "The Democratic Embargo: Regime Type and Proxy War," *European Journal of International Relations* 28, no. 2 (2022): 444–70.
[8] Grauer and Tierney, "The Democratic Embargo," 445.

great merit and benefits in the US context.[9] A key characteristic of the US operations in Afghanistan and Iraq at the dawn of the 21st century is the widespread use and reliance on Private Military and Security Companies (PMSC). Both Mumford and Perry highlight the increasing reliance of the US military on PMSCs in its operations, which is reflected in the increasing number of tasks, responsibilities, and contractors used by the Department of Defence (DOD) and the Department of Homeland Security.[10] Counterterrorism literature therefore highlights the inevitable role of PMSCs in states' military strategies and structures.

When shifting away from cases in which non-state actors are used by state for counterterrorism and looking at broader state support to NSAGs, the concept of States Sponsors of Terrorism (SST) becomes central to understanding this phenomenon. While the SST label is issued by the DOS and bears some inherent bias, it refers to states which possess a direct relationship with NSAGs labelled as terrorists. This label can nonetheless be useful in identifying states with strong relationships with NSAGs which they can use to combat terrorism, such as Iran. Ostovar draws on Kapur's work on the use of "militant clients" by Pakistan as part of its grand strategy to apply it to the Iranian case, shedding the light on SST-proxy relationships.[11] More specifically, Ostovar addresses patron-client relations between states and terrorist organisations which serve as actual militaries that can fight wars while being proxies, but also having their own agenda.[12] This claim encompasses part of this paper's problematic, which concerns the principal-agent problem arising from the potential discord between the state's and NSAG's priorities when conducting an operation of vital interest for the state. Despite providing an in-depth analysis of the advantages and disadvantages provided by the employment of militant clients for these states' grand strategies.

Nevertheless, the case of the Syrian Civil War and the global efforts against the IS have shown that democratic states also support non-state proxies. Esfandiary and Tabatabai point out that as part of its operations in Syria, the US cooperated with Syrian rebel groups and Kurdish

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[9] William F. Wechsler, "Counterterrorism by Proxy," *The National Interest*, no. 148 (2017): 24–33.
[10] Andrew Mumford, "Proxy Warfare and the Future of Conflict," *The RUSI Journal* 158, no. 2 (2013): 40–46; David Perry, "Blackwater vs. Bin Laden: The Private Sector's Role in American Counterterrorism," *Comparative Strategy* 31, no. 1 (2012): 41–55.
[11] Afshon Ostovar, "The Grand Strategy of Militant Clients: Iran's Way of War," *Security Studies* 28, no. 1 (2019): 163-68.
[12] Ostovar, "The Grand Strategy," 167.

fighters.[13] Anwar also addresses the Netherlands' policy of providing non-lethal assistance to allegedly "moderate" rebel groups during the Syrian Civil War, and highlights the great domestic costs associated with support to such groups.[14] These empirical instances of states supporting NSAGs ranging from Iran to the Netherlands, reveal that both democratic and authoritarian regimes resort to using the same type of proxy in order to reach specific policy objectives, including combatting terrorism and advancing their regional strategies.

2.3. Theoretical Approaches to State – Non-State Actor Relations: From a Principal-Agent to a Competence-Control Model

The most broadly employed theoretical framework to address state use of non-state actors for policy purposes is the Principal-Agent (PA) model, which provides a framework for understanding why and how a principal (an entity with authority) tasks an agent (a subordinate) to carry out his policy in his stead by accounting for the conflicting interests and information asymmetry between the two.[15] Byman and Kreps define delegation as the "conditional grant of authority" from a principal to an agent, in order to gain technical expertise it would otherwise not be able to gain, increase the credibility of its commitments, and/or ensure its preferences are acted upon.[16] These authors point out that motivation in the PA model is derived from the rational assumption that "actors are interested in reducing transaction costs and thereby turn to delegation as a way to yield economic utility."[17] Moreover, Karlén and Rauta point out that this model has been used to explain external support in civil wars, state sponsorship of terrorism, proxy warfare dynamics, as well as covert action.[18] This theoretical model therefore has a proven record in explaining cases of state use of non-state actors for policy purposes, but does not provide for a detailed framework to analyse the very nature of the control exerted by the state on its proxy.

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[13] Dina Esfandiary and Ariane M. Tabatabai, "A Comparative Study of U.S. and Iranian Counter-ISIS Strategies," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 40, no. 6 (2017): 459.
[14] Tasniem Anwar, "The Law and Politics of Funding Armed Groups in Syria: How States (Fail to) Counter Terrorism," *European Journal of International Relations* 30, no. 1 (2024): 104-25.
[15] Daniel Byman and Sarah E. Kreps, "Agents of Destruction? Applying Principal-Agent Analysis to State-Sponsored Terrorism," *International Studies Perspectives* 11, no. 1 (2010): 1–18.
[16] Byman and Kreps, "Agents of Destruction?," 3.
[17] Byman and Kreps, "Agents of Destruction?," 5.
[18] Niklas Karlén and Vladimir Rauta, "Dealers and Brokers in Civil Wars: Why States Delegate Rebel Support to Conduit Countries," *International Security* 47, no. 4 (2023): 114.

Furthermore, various alternative models have built on the PA model to be tailored to issues of state support to non-state actors thanks to their enhanced complexity and explanatory power. In fact, Abbott et al. complexify the PA equation by introducing an intermediary, who serves as a "go-between" for a regulator (principal) to affect the behaviour of a target (agent), forming the Regulator-Intermediary-Target (RIT) model.[19] They outline four categories of capacities that push a regulator to delegate its policies, namely operational capacity, expertise, independence, and legitimacy.[20] A key pitfall of this model in analysing state use of non-state actors is the focus of this theory on the implementation of regulatory policies, which renders it more appropriate for a licit and public environment instead of the greatly illicit and covert environment in which states supporting NSAGs evolve. Similar to the RIT model, Karlén and Rauta coin their own Complex Conflict Delegation model (PIA) which consists of a "dual delegation" process between the principal and the intermediary, and between the intermediary and the agent, which they employ to analyse the role of intermediaries in civil wars.[21] A key shortcoming of both the RIT and PIA models is the introduction of an intermediary third actor in the equation, which is not tailored to the state-proxy dyad on which this paper focuses.

Indeed, both the PA and RIT frameworks lack the depth the Competence-Control (CC) model has in explaining the different dynamics in the governor (principal) – intermediary (agent) relationship. The CC model was introduced by Abbott et al. and explains governor-intermediary relations following a competence-control gradient, with increased competence coming with increased agent autonomy and higher risks of inefficiency, and increased control entailing a tight control over the agent which may inhibit its ability to exercise its competencies and therefore engender inefficiencies.[22] This model demarcates itself from the PA model in various ways by focusing on power dynamics rather than information asymmetry in the governor's dilemma and advancing a comprehensive framework based on the intermediary's competencies and the modes of governance available to the governor.[23] In contrast with the aforementioned theories, the CC model comes with a detailed structure which allows for a differentiation, mapping out, and

[19] Kenneth W. Abbott, David Levi-Faur, and Duncan Snidal, "Theorizing Regulatory Intermediaries: The RIT Model," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 670, no. 1 (2017): 19.
[20] Abbott et al., "Theorizing Regulatory Intermediaries," 20-21.
[21] Karlén and Rauta, "Dealers and Brokers," 114.
[22] Kenneth W. Abbott, Bernhard Zangl, Duncan Snidal, and Philipp Genschel, *The Governor's Dilemma: Indirect Governance Beyond Principals and Agents*, 1st ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 3-6.
[23] Abbott et al., *The Governor's Dilemma*, 5.

explanation of different types of indirect governance modes chosen by states to guide their relationships with non-state actors. This framework's suitability for this paper is reflected by its use in explaining phenomena such as state sponsorship of terrorism, state use of PMSCs, as well as support to rebel groups.[24]

Salehyan, Tamm, and Kruck use and apply the CC model to three themes related to the subject of this thesis, namely the relationship between a state and domestic militias, between states and paramilitary proxies in a third state, and between a state and PMSCs respectively.[25] Salehyan assesses and explains the control mode chosen by the Iraqi state to govern its relationships with Iraqi militias based on the competence-control trade-off, and concludes that this case study supports the theory's dilemma's implication that states can either "enlist competent intermediaries or retain strong hierarchical control, but not both" simultaneously.[26] Nevertheless, this article focuses on proxy employment solely within a domestic context and therefore does not allow for a broader understanding of patterns of behaviour between and across different regimes. Tamm's analysis of the "invader's dilemma," which mirrors the governor's dilemma but instead suggests a legitimacy-control trade-off for states aiming to conduct military occupation in another state through proxies.[27] Finally, Kruck's analysis of US PMSC governance highlights the essential role of American PMSCs in enabling the governor to avoid audience costs and protect its own legitimacy, and warns about the negative correlation between hard controls and the concealment and plausible deniability of PMSC activities by the state.[28] This last article perhaps comes closest to addressing the issues at the core of this paper, namely the state's accountability to an audience or the international community and the importance of blame deflection (or even shifting) when using proxies.[29] This thesis' ambition goes beyond just looking at one proxy type and one state, and aims to observe whether these preoccupations do indeed play a key role in shaping different regimes' control mode choice.

The three authors successfully apply the CC model to cases of state-proxy relationships similar to those addressed in this paper and support the role of a competence-control trade-off in

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[24] Abbott et al., *The Governor's Dilemma*, 100-155.
[25] Abbott et al., *The Governor's Dilemma*, 100-155.
[26] Abbott et al., *The Governor's Dilemma*, 115.
[27] Abbott et al., *The Governor's Dilemma*, 119-136.
[28] Abbott et al., *The Governor's Dilemma*, 137-155.
[29] Abbott et al., *The Governor's Dilemma*, 137-155.

a state's control mode selection. However, while the framework's conceptualisation of control modes exhibits proven success in describing different forms of proxy relationships in military or counterterrorism operations, this thesis demarcates itself from the CC model in an attempt to explain control mode choice not based on the competence-control trade-off, but rather with regime type. The following sections provides the layout of Abbott et al.'s control modes and expands on this thesis' hypothesis drawing on proxy warfare literature to identify and operationalise core regime characteristics that can affect a state's control mode choice.

3. Theoretical Framework: Beyond Competence and Control

This paper draws on Abbott et al.'s Competence-Control (CC) model, which is derived from the more general principal-agent model, but provides a deeper insight on power dynamics in the governor-intermediary relationship.[30] This model advances a comprehensive framework based on the intermediary's competencies and the modes of governance available to the governor.[31] Indeed, Abbott et al. identify three key features of indirect governance that shape the CC model and this paper's theoretical framework. These features are the intermediary's competence, the different forms of governance available to the governor, and the explanations for a governor's choice of mode of governance given its competence and control requirements.[32]

This model's main advantage for this paper is the categorisation of four modes of indirect governance, which are defined by the governor's relationship with the intermediary depending on its choice to exert hard or soft *ex ante* and *ex post* control.[33] On the one hand, the *ex ante* control choices are defined by whether a governor wants to have a hard *ex ante* control over the intermediary in which case it grants authority, or chooses to exert a soft *ex ante* control by enlisting authority instead. The granting of authority is defined as the devolution by the governor of "some of its own authority to the intermediary," which allows the governor to delimit the intermediary's authority and effectively shape its goals and identity to a greater extent.[34]

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[30] Abbott et al., *The Governor's Dilemma*.
[31] Abbott, *The Governor's Dilemma*, 5.
[32] Abbott et al., *The Governor's Dilemma*, 5-6.
[33] Abbott et al., *The Governor's Dilemma,* 12-13.
[34] Abbott et al., *The Governor's Dilemma,* 12.

Conversely, the enlistment of authority is characterised by the persuasion by the governor of the intermediary to use its own, "preexisting authority to perform desired tasks."[35] On the other hand, the *ex post* control choices are defined by whether the governor chooses to exert a hierarchical control over the intermediary or not. Abbott et al. claim hierarchical controls are defined by the governor's ability to remove the intermediary's authority if it does not perform as required. These can range from replacing the intermediary's leadership to withdrawing its official recognition.[36] Non-hierarchical controls are themselves characterised by soft inducements to the intermediary, which can consist of persuasion or negotiation, but does not grant the governor the ability to rescind the intermediary's authority.[37]

The different combinations of *ex ante* and *ex post* controls are reflected in the matrix depicted in figure 1 below, and characterise the four different modes of indirect governance identified by Abbott et al., namely delegation, trusteeship, co-optation, and orchestration.[38] To begin with, delegation, which consists of the traditional definition of indirect governance in proxy literature, is defined as a combination of hard *ex ante* and *ex post* controls, in which the governor grants authority to the intermediary but is able to rescind it at any given moment if need be. Furthermore, trusteeship is characterised by hard *ex ante* controls but soft *ex post* controls, which enables the intermediary to possess "substantial authority over its own exercise of discretion" while the governor lacks the ability to exert hierarchical oversight.[39] Moreover, co-optation, which is defined by Hicken as a "clientelist exchange,"[40] in which the governor enlists an intermediary by supporting it but can still threaten to "remove]it] by force."[41] Finally, orchestration, which Hicken defines as an "instrumental friendship,"[42] consists of a combination of soft *ex ante* and *ex post* controls and effectively translates into soft inducements by the governor to steer the intermediary in achieving mutually desirable objectives.[43]

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[35] Abbott et al., *The Governor's Dilemma,* 12.
[36] Abbott et al., *The Governor's Dilemma,* 13.
[37] Abbott et al., *The Governor's Dilemma,* 13.
[38] Abbott et al., *The Governor's Dilemma,* 14-15.
[39] Abbott et al., *The Governor's Dilemma,* 14.
[40] Allen Hicken, "Clientelism," *Annual Review of Political Science* 14, no. 1 (2011): 289-310.
[41] Abbott et al., *The Governor's Dilemma,* 15.
[42] Hicken, "Clientelism," 290.
[43] Abbott et al., *The Governor's Dilemma,* 15.

MOBILIZATION (EX ANTE CONTROL)	MANAGEMENT (EX POST CONTROL)	
	Hierarchical	Non-hierarchical
Granting authority	*Delegation*	*Trusteeship*
Enlisting authority	*Cooptation*	*Orchestration*

Figure 1: Abbott et al.'s Four Modes of Indirect Governance[44]

This paper employs Abbott et al.'s four control mode categorisations but rather than using them to explain a state's control mode choice based on a competence-control calculus, we propose an alternative explanation of these choices by the governor based on regime type. Indeed, literature on the relationship between proxy warfare and regime type, and more specifically democracy, has indicated that a government's willingness and capability to engage in proxy operations is determined by several components. These components are both normative and structural, consisting of concerns about international law and humanitarian regulations as well as domestic and international institutions and mechanisms that guarantee a regime's accountability in both the domestic and international spheres. Through the application of this framework, this paper investigates whether regime values and institutions, characterised by the regime type, play a part in governing state-proxy relationships beyond competence and control requirements. This paper therefore tests the following hypothesis: *regime type is a determining factor in a state's choice of control mode over its proxy.* The methodology for testing this hypothesis, which consists of a within-case analysis of three cases followed by a comparative analysis, and is aimed at revealing both case-specific processes tying regime type to control mode choice but also highlighting cross-cutting patterns between these two variables, is laid out in the following section.

[44] Abbott et al., *The Governor's Dilemma*, 14.

4. Methodological Approach

State use of proxies relies on a state's ability and ambition to outsource its foreign policy as a result of broader regional and even global security interests. Great powers and regional powers combine both these attributes, as they are characterised by both important power projection and influence in economic, military, and cultural terms, at a global and regional scale respectively. Great and regional powers are therefore included in this research due to their categorisation as broadly able and willing to engage in proxy operations. Within this total population of cases, we make the distinction between democratic and authoritarian regimes, as defined by their values, checks and balances for power, and institutions. This distinction is relevant in order to separate between cases along the independent variable of this research, namely regime type.

From these two groups of states, we select three most similar cases allowing us to contrast regime type while controlling for as many variables as possible. Therefore, we select three cases from the Syrian Civil War, during which multiple states engaged in proxy operations in the same geographic area simultaneously. These cases are the US supporting the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), Iran supporting Hezbollah, and Russia supporting the Wagner Group. These cases are especially relevant due to the abundance of information available about them in secondary sources. These cases are nevertheless distinguished by different broad characteristics: in the US-SDF dyad, the US is a democratic regime which supports an NSAG: in the Russia-Wagner Group dyad, Russia is an authoritarian state that supports a PMSC (even though it does not adhere to the traditional Western definition of a PMSC); and in the Iran-Hezbollah dyad, Iran is an authoritarian regime that supports an NSAG. Such a selection of cases therefore allows for the acknowledgment and inclusion of potential additional confounding variables beyond regime type, such as proxy type, pre-existing relationship to proxy, or even regime specificities that go further than the dyadic authoritarian-democratic division chosen to contrast the cases. Figure 2 below shows the similarities shared across the three selected case.

This most similar model is therefore structured around controlling the conflict the three states supported a proxy in, characterised by the timeframe and location of their intervention. The shared value (or overlap) of these three variables across three cases allow this thesis to show how different regimes responded to a similar conflict, and therefore enable for a scrutinization of

the different concerns and objectives that led these states to pursue a proxy strategy in the conflict.

Variable	US-SDF	Russia-Wagner Group	Iran-Hezbollah
Timeframe	2015-2019	2015-2019	2011-2019
Location	Syria	Syria	Syria
Conflict	Syrian Civil War	Syrian Civil War	Syrian Civil War
Regime type	Democratic regime	Authoritarian regime	Authoritarian regime

Figure 2: Most similar design table exhibiting similarities across the three cases and the independent variable

Nevertheless, several other variables are not controlled for and do not share similar values across these three cases as depicted in figure 3 below. Each state's overt and covert ambitions may have shaped its relations with its proxy due to concerns about preserving plausible deniability or safeguarding the proxy's legitimacy, which fall under the competence-control calculus. The type of power each of these states are can also impact their control mode choice as it determines the scrutiny they are exposed to at an international level, which may induce them to dissociate as much as possible from the proxies they support, while the regional power will be more involved in the conflict due to its direct importance and relevance of the issue to its interests. Finally, each proxy's origin and type may also constitute alternative explanations for the states' control mode choices due to ties in varying depth and history as well as different legal frameworks for cooperation.

Variable	US-SDF	Russia-Wagner Group	Iran-Hezbollah
Overt objectives	Defeat the Islamic State	Help defend the Assad regime	Help defend the Assad regime, defeat the Islamic State
Covert objectives	-	Exploit and profit from oil and gas resources	Establish long-term foothold in Syria
Type of power	Great power	Great power	Regional power
Proxy type	NSAG	PMSC	NSAG
Proxy origin	Alliance between several NSAGs	Brainchild of Russian military intelligence	Created by Iranian agents in Lebanon

Figure 3: Variables exhibiting differences across the three selected cases

In order to determine the control mode used by a state to govern its relationship with its proxy, the four modes of control need to be broken down into measurable empirical phenomena. Therefore, we observe the extent to which primary and secondary documents point to a hierarchical (or not) relation between the two entities and whether they enlist or grant authority. To assess the degree of hierarchy in the relationship, this paper looks at documents indicating legal oversight or hierarchical discipline, but also includes evidence of power relations between the two entities or their leadership. To assess whether a state has granted or enlisted authority, we expect to find evidence that pertains to direct command, contracts, or military integration, while also analysing the state's publicization and characterisation of its relationship with the proxy. In addition, public manifestations of the relationship between the state and proxy are also taken into account as a way of providing further implicit and contextual information about the nature of the relationship.

To that effect, this paper conducts a controlled case comparison focusing on the control mode choice in each of the three aforementioned dyads with within-case analysis conducted in a chronological order, which allows for the recognition of patterns across and within these three cases and allow us to establish causality between regime type and control mode choice. In order to verify the validity of the causality of the relationship between regime type and control mode choice, this paper compares the data extracted from the three cases and contrasts the influence of values, institutions, and checks and balances between the US-SDF and the other two cases.

Finally, the cross-case comparison puts the results of each case study in perspective, and looks at patterns across the three cases, thereby enabling the production of sound generalisable conclusions on how a state chooses the control mode to govern its proxy relationships. This comparison also follows Abbott et al.'s framework's structure and contrasts the US-SDF's case *ex ante* and *ex post* control choices with the Russia-Wagner and Iran-Hezbollah cases. Indeed, this comparison sets up standards of falsifiability of the hypothesis, as if both a democratic and an authoritarian state choose the same control mode (combining both *ex ante* and *ex post* control choices) to govern their proxy relationship, then regime type would not appear as a determining factor in control mode choice and the hypothesis would be falsified.

Due to the lack of sufficient relevant and publicly available primary symmetrical data, as the use of proxies in conflict generally pertains to covert operations which are not publicly

revealed, this thesis primarily relies on secondary documents such as academic publications and think tank reports, as well as primary sources including newspaper and cable articles in order to paint the full picture of each case by combining qualitative textual data extracted from these sources. More specifically, we extract primary data from newspaper and cable articles about the three cases, which provide information on the operational landscape of each proxy relationship. Secondary sources, which mainly consist of think tank reports and publications as well as academic articles, hold precious data about each of these cases thanks to their incorporation of information directly provided to the authors by individuals or groups directly linked to the proxy operations, such as military staff or individuals associated with the proxy in question, or which is the result of very detailed and extensive investigations. The bulk of these documents is retrieved through basic searches on the Google and Google Scholar online search engines. The combination of data about the facts on the ground and about the inner workings of each case therefore enables this thesis to conduct a comprehensive comparative analysis.

Moreover, by employing a most similar case design highlighting the importance of regime type, this paper allows for the clear and informed analysis of the causal relationship between regime type and proxy control mode choice within each case, which reinforces this paper's internal validity. In addition, this paper's findings enjoy a certain degree of external validity within the population of great and regional powers as it studies three different cases, which are nonetheless limited to a specific geographical and temporal frame. It is however important to acknowledge that the validity of the results of this thesis may only be limited to these three cases or the Syrian Civil War, and may not be reflected in studies about other states with similar regime types or the same states in other contexts. In terms of reliability, this project benefits from a framework operating along two axes (hierarchy and authority type) which is applied in a consistent manner to all three cases. Concerning the paper's replicability, this paper advances a replicable framework based on the competence-control model while also proposing a structured three-case selection strategy that follows . Nevertheless, the paper does not rely on a pre-existing standardised dataset and relies on an inherently subjective collection of data imparted in primary and secondary sources, which may harm its replicability.

The main methodological shortcoming of this paper is related to its employment of a qualitative comparative case study methodology. Indeed, while it allows for the control of

important variables, it can only allow for the confirmation or falsification of the hypothesis within the four specified cases, but inherently lacks a quantitative study's generalisation capability. A quantitative study would paint a broader picture of the correlation between regime type and control mode choice, but would amplify the impact of the primary data deficit on the subject. In terms of case selection, the study the use of proxies solely by regional powers would exclude potential cases of proxy operations performed by smaller states, which may have incentives to outsource their foreign policy or counterterrorism policy to other actors due to a capability deficit or cost-related concerns. In addition, the exclusive focus of this paper on NSAGs and PMSCs as proxies may exclude other, less prevalent, types of proxies. Moreover, a key challenge to the feasibility of this paper is the lack of primary and symmetrical data across cases due to proxy operations' inherent covert nature. Nevertheless, this paper overcomes this challenge by combining different types of sources in order to paint a full picture of the phenomenon at play.

5. Case Studies

At the dawn of 2011, the Arab Spring revolts in Egypt and Tunisia had reached their paroxysm, and authoritarian regimes throughout the Middle East saw their bases shaken by the looming popular contestation. In January 2011, Bashar al-Assad, who succeeded his father Hafez al-Assad in 2000 as President of Syria, publicly voiced his doubts about a potential uprising in his country while highlighting that so far the only regimes to fall were aligned with the US and Israel.[45] However, by mid-March, Assad's regime lit a spark that would set the entirety of the Levant ablaze after the local security services, commanded by none other than Assad's cousin, arrested and tortured three young boys, while killing one among them. These boys had sprayed anti-regime graffiti on the walls of a local school, drawing inspiration from the other revolts in the Arab world.

This incident led to widespread protests, which were met with a double movement of violent crackdown on the protesters by the authorities as well as some mostly symbolic and modest reforms aimed at tending to the protesters' demands. These actions nevertheless proved

[45] Owen L. Sirrs, *Iran's Qods Force : Proxy Wars, Terrorism, and the War on America* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2022), 214; INTERVIEW

futile, as protests grew and authorities started employing live fire against crowds, while Assad blamed the US and Israel as the instigators of these movements. Throughout the rest of 2011 and until the end of 2012, what was a situation of widespread unrest transitioned into a full-fledged civil war, with the United Nations (UN) declaring that Syria is in a state of civil conflict and reflecting the looming fall of the Ba'athist regime.[46] From then on, Syria became the battleground of a great number of different local factions. One of them was the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which consisted of the Syrian opposition's first and main military arm and was primarily composed of officers defecting from Assad's Syrian Arab Army (SAA), primarily aimed to overthrow the regime. Another major actor in the Syrian battlefield which led to the mobilisation of many Western democracies in the conflict is the rise of the IS in the Levant and later Syria as the brainchild of Al-Qaeda in Iraq's leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, which consisted of a radical Islamist quasi-army which rapidly advanced in in the early stages of the war in Syria. However, the IS was not the only radical Islamist group operating in Syria as the Al-Nusra Front (JAN – later transformed into Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham) also operated in Syria but refused to cooperate with the IS and even engaged in active combat against it. However, as the war unfolded and other states took interest in the conflict, either as an opportunity to extend their strategic depth, secure resources, oust Assad, or defeat the IS, more parties rose as worthy challengers to these groups and the Assad regimes on the battlefield

Indeed, multiple regional and great powers came to take great interest in the conflict that was unfolding in Syria, and while none formally sent large military contingents in the country, none shied away from employing proxies to pursue its own objectives in the Levant. From late 2012 to early 2013, various local as well as international proxies had started forming and taking part in the civil conflict. The best documented cases of proxy use in this war are the US-SDF partnership against the IS, the Iran-Hezbollah alliance which sought to save Assad's regime and defend the Axis of Resistance in the long term and at any cost by establishing a Hezbollah copycat in Syria, and Russia's ambiguous use of the Wagner Group to rescue the Assad regime and extract oil and gas resources. This section focuses on each of these three cases by first presenting the background of the proxy and its relationships with the state that supported it

[46] Itamar Rabinovich and Carmit Valensi, eds, *Syrian Requiem : The Civil War and Its Aftermath* (Princeton, New Jersey; Princeton University Press, 2021), 52.

during the Syrian conflict. Then, it takes a chronological approach to each state's relationship with its proxy during the conflict in order to determine how that relationship developed, and most importantly, what has determined the state's choice of *ex ante* and *ex post* controls.

5.1. The Fortuitous Partnership Between the United States and Syrian Democratic Forces Against the Islamic State

5.1.1. Before the Syrian Democratic Forces: The Kurds in Northeast Syria and the United States' Train and Equip Program

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) were officially formed on October 10th, 2015, however the People Protection Units (YPG) that formed an essential part of it, as well as its sponsor, the US, were both involved in Syria in different capacities before joining forces.[47] This subsection provides a backgrounder on the origins of the SDF and the US operations in Syria before October 2015, and highlights the underlying motivations and expectations of both actors.

The YPG draws its origins from Kurdish Communist Party (PKK) leader Abdullah Öcalan's exile to Syria in the 1980s. Indeed, Hafez al-Assad's regime had been supporting the PKK, namely by providing training to its troops. Schmidinger explains that this "alliance enabled the PKK to gain a political foothold in Syria," especially in the Afrin and Kobane regions which are located in the Northeast of the country.[48] In turn, local Kurds gained military experience and knowledge within the framework of the PKK's "guerilla units," and eventually formed the core of the YPG.[49] The arrival of the PKK in Turkey also sparked the creation of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) in 2003 in Syria, which in effect constituted a PKK "sister party."[50] However, the honey moon between Assad and the PKK had ended in 1998, with the two rupturing their relations and Assad's regime expelling Öcalan from the country. When the wave

[47] Michael Knights and Wladimir van Wilgenburg, *Accidental Allies : The US-SDF Partnership against the Islamic State* (First edition, London, England: Zed Books, 2021), 84.
[48] Thomas Schmidinger, "Kurdish Armed Liberation Movement or Ground Forces of the Global Coalition against ISIS? The YPG/YPJ and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)," *Agents of Violence*, edited by Katharina Ivanyi and Rüdiger Lohlker, 173-203 (United States: BRILL, 2024), 176.
[49] Schmidinger, "Kurdish Armed Liberation Movement," 176.
[50] Schmidinger, "Kurdish Armed Liberation Movement," 176.

of Arab Spring revolts eventually shook Syria in early 2011, the Kurds in Northeast Syria remained hesitant and did not seek to militarise, unlike the FSA or Islamist groups.[51]

However, as the general mobilisation spiralled down into a bloody civil war opposing the Syrian regime to a plethora of opposition groups, the PYD was compelled to step up to protect Kurdish areas from radical Islamist groups which progressed in the country. As a result, the YPG and YPJ were organised by the PYD as an independent Kurdish military structure to protect the Kurdish areas, which effectively consisted of highly centralised military units with a "clear hierarchy and consistent accountability."[52] These were initially volunteer units gathering individuals from diverse ethnic groups that knew the Kurdish language, but rapidly grew into an extremely skilled and effective force in Syria, which enabled it to benefit from US support throughout the war.

Before the beginning of the Syrian Civil War, US administrations had held two main lines of policy towards the State of Syria. From Nixon to Clinton's presidencies, the US had attempted to transform Assad's regime from an adversary to a partner, especially with the objective of removing the Levantine State from the Soviet sphere of influence. However, this approach changed with George W. Bush's presidency. Indeed, Bush considered the Assad regime as a "brutal dictatorship" and a sworn enemy of the US, labelling it as a State Sponsor of Terrorism.[53] In turn, this led to the formulation of a US policy seeking to "punish and isolate" the Assad regime, in line with the policy of spreading democracy to the Middle East.[54] By the start of the civil conflict, Barack Obama stood at the helm of the US and was faced with what his Foreign Secretary Hillary Clinton labelled as a "wicked problem."[55] This expression referred to the dilemma of the US not wanting to intervene in the conflict but having to accept the "human tragedy" and dramatic strategic implications of the war.[56]

By May 2011, President Obama started denouncing the brutality of the Assad regime, and by June, the US President called upon Assad to step down. In the meanwhile, international efforts

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[51] Schmidinger, "Kurdish Armed Liberation Movement," 177.
[52] Schmidinger, "Kurdish Armed Liberation Movement," 178.
[53] Rabinovich and Valensi, *Syrian Requiem*, 159.
[54] Rabinovich and Valensi, *Syrian Requiem*, 159.
[55] Rabinovich and Valensi, *Syrian Requiem*, 162.
[56] Rabinovich and Valensi, *Syrian Requiem*, 162.

to find a negotiated solution to the conflict led by the Arab League and the UN Security Council had failed, and the prospect of a US intervention in Syria started becoming increasingly real. As President Obama had campaigned to end the two lengthy and costly wars involving the US in the Middle East – in Iraq and Afghanistan – his administration had to refrain from involving US troops in the conflict. The option of employing a proxy force therefore appeared as a means of influencing the conflict and not missing out on the strategic opportunities it provided for the US while not suffering the political costs of sending large US military contingents to another Middle Eastern battleground.[57]

Nevertheless, despite receiving evidence Assad crossed the "red line" set by Obama on the utilisation of chemical weapons on the battlefield in 2013, the US President did not begin funding proxies to fight the regime.[58] This incident nevertheless sparked a diplomatic reaction from the Obama administration, which successfully negotiated the destruction of Syrian chemical weapons with Russia, a process which was completed by June 2014.[59] Instead, it is the rise of the IS and its staggering advance throughout Iraq and Syria, as well as the international threat it posed, that prompted Obama to take action on the ground.[60] US engagement in Syria started in late 2014 with the "Train and Equip" program, which was a covert and limited program aimed at training, equipping, and deploying opposition groups to fight against the IS, and cost the US government 500 million US dollars.[61] In parallel, the US also started conducting airstrikes against IS targets. Despite its benefit of not requiring any US boots on the ground, the Train and Equip program resulted in a resounding failure for the DOD. Indeed, troops recruited under that program needed extensive vetting in order to prevent cases of training and arming radical Islamist fighters and groups. In addition, and especially in the early stages of the conflict, the cause that amassed most support was the opposition to Assad and not the fight against the IS. Therefore, the disconnect between the US' counterterrorism objectives and the recruits' anti-

[57] Rabinovich and Valensi, *Syrian Requiem*, 162-179.
[58] Jonah Schulhofer-Wohl, "The Obama Administration and Civil War in Syria, 2011–2016: US Presidential Foreign Policy Making as Political Risk Management," *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* 19, no. 4 (2021): 535.
[59] Jonah Schulhofer-Wohl, "The Obama Administration," 528.
[60] Rabinovich and Valensi, *Syrian Requiem*, 177-179.
[61] Jeremy T. Gwinn, "By, with, and through: Explaining Effectiveness in U.S. Unconventional Warfare," (PhD Diss., Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy (Tufts University), 2021), 164, ProQuest (28414977); Federico Manfredi Firiman, "Strengthening the US Partnership with the Syrian Democratic Forces," *Survival (London)* 63, no. 6 (2021): 162; Assaf Moghadam et al., *Routledge Handbook of Proxy Wars*, 229.

Assad sentiment generated an irreconcilable goal divergence, eventually leading to the program's failure. In operational terms, the recruits suffered from low cohesion and lacked any form of legitimacy or territorial control, which was highlighted in the group being disbanded after its first military engagement against the ANF in July 2015, inevitably causing the program to be completely scrapped by late 2015.[62] Therefore, the US found itself in a dire need of a new proxy which would be competent on the ground and willing to commit itself in the fight against the IS: the SDF.

5.1.2. Creating the SDF and Obtaining US Support

By autumn 2014, the YPG had started rising as a legitimate force to counter the advance of the IS since the fall of Mosul, but the Kurdish-held city of Kobane was facing the danger of being overrun by the IS, as Kurds in 350 out of 354 villages surrounding the city had been forced out.[63] The defence of Kobane was therefore rising as a critical challenge for the YPG. As a consequence, the YPG chose to cooperate with the USAF and Kurds from Iraq, as well as a plethora of Arab militias to fend of the IS offensive.

In parallel, the US had begun conducting airstrikes against IS positions as early as August 8th, 2011, in order to defend Yazidi populations in Sinjar, which were under the protection of the YPG, highlighting the potential goal convergence between the two actors. At first, the US was extremely wary of providing any form of support to the YPG due to its ties to the PKK, which is labelled as a terrorist organisation by the DOS and constituted one of Turkey's – a key US and NATO ally in the Middle East – main counterterrorism target. Support to the YPG could therefore come at the cost of alienating a potentially crucial ally in the Syrian battleground. However, the US was not willing to let Kobane fall to the hands of IS, and President Obama personally called with President Erdogan to assure him that US support to the YPG would be a "temporary and tactical step."[64] This led to the US policy of approving airstrikes without requiring US forces on the ground in support to the YPG, which consisted of providing YPG operatives with tablets to pinpoint IS locations and resulted in a near perfect close air support campaign against the

[62] Gwinn, "By, with, and through," 164-179.
[63] Knights and van Wilgenburg, *Accidental Allies*, 63.
[64] Knights and van Wilgenburg, *Accidental Allies*, 40.

IS. This cooperation effort between the US, the YPG, and other rebel groups was formalised in the Joint Operations Coalition Euphrates Volcano on September 10th, 2014.[65]

The success of this operation in defending Kobane paved the way to the creation of the SDF, but also laid the groundwork for the US-YPG (and by extension SDF) relationship. From late 2014 until mid-2015, the US provided the YPG-led forces with indirect support while maintaining the fragile balance between supporting the Kurdish militia and not outraging Turkey. The battles that took place in Northeast Syria in the summer of 2015 validated the "remote model of directing US airstrikes" from bases in Sulaymaniyah, in Iraqi Kurdistan.[66] In contrast with the success of US-backed YPG operations, the simultaneous Train and Equip program proved completely fruitless by late 2015. It is the combination of these two factors that led the US to formalise its support to the YPG-led group. As a result, on October 10th, 2015, the SDF was announced and would act as a "vehicle through which US assistance would be channelled."[67] The US promptly acted upon its engagement with the SDF by airdropping 50 tons of ammunition to its ally. By the time of the formalisation of the SDF, the relationship between the US and the Kurdish-led militia primarily appeared as a marriage of convenience motivated by the rational calculus of military success and low political cost resulting from not having to rely on US troops in Syria. With the origins of the US-SDF relationship clarified, the following subsection delves into the operational history of the two actors' partnership and analyses the control mode chosen by the US to govern its proxy relationship.

5.1.3. The US-SDF Partnership at Full Force, 2015-2018

After successfully defending Kobane, the US-SDF relationship only deepened, with a first overt visit on SDF territory by a US civilian policymaker, Brett McGurk, taking place in January 2016, just a month after US military advisers arrived in Northeast Syria. His words to the SDF command effectively encapsulated the entire nature of the relationship the US expected to hold with the SDF: "if you stop fighting [the IS], we will not be able to justify continuing to support you."[68] This statement clearly highlighted a component of accountability to US institutions, which would determine the feasibility of this partnership of military tactical cooperation based

[65] Schmidinger, "Kurdish Armed Liberation Movement," 182.
[66] Knights and van Wilgenburg, *Accidental Allies*, 79.
[67] Knights and van Wilgenburg, *Accidental Allies*, 84.
[68] Knights and van Wilgenburg, *Accidental Allies*, 102.

on preference alignment. The first test for this newly formalised military partnership was the Manbij offensive. The Manbij gap, which lays at the border between Syria and Turkey, constituted a major point of transit for foreign terrorist fighters into Syria. However, despite being urged by the US to do so, Turkey refused to close the border, which in turn compelled the SDF to launch an offensive against Manbij. This operation effectively constituted a test for the US-SDF relationship, as the US had to negotiate with its NATO ally the passage of SDF forces (including YPG personnel) across the Euphrates, which would effectively violate previous US assurances to Turkey.[69] The prioritised its relationship with the SDF by promising Turkey all SDF fighters would cross back to the East of the Euphrates after liberating Manbij. According to the US head of Central Command (CENTCOM), the SDF had troops "lived up to their commitment" and had all crossed back into Syria at the end of the operation in the summer of 2016.[70] While the operation was once again a resounding success, it also generated "strategic stress" for the US, which had to balance between its relationships with the SDF and Turkey.[71] On the ground, this translated into a careful monitoring and tracing of all weapons and ammunition provided to the SDF and sharing the data with Turkey.[72] The apparent transparency on both the US and SDF's objectives to both Turkey and US institutions throughout 2016 demonstrates the importance of accountability mechanisms in this partnership.

After the success in Manbij, the partnership turned its sights to the IS stronghold of Raqqa for a ground operation to liberate the city. It is essential to note that until 2017, the DOD had not yet directly armed the SDF, as the group was ineligible for arming by the US under section 1209 of the US National Defence Authorisation Act, which precluded the provision of armament to non-vetted and trained outside forces.[73] Armament of the SDF with US weapons occurred through intermediaries such as the Counterterrorism Group in Sulaymaniyah, Iraq, and all weapon shipments to the SDF were subjected to controls by Turkey, which possessed a veto right on any item shipped. Paramount to the Raqqa operation, the US had also taken several measures to ensure the success of the operation while upkeeping several standards. Indeed, US

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[69] Knights and van Wilgenburg, *Accidental Allies*, 104.
[70] Kilic Bugra Kanat and Jackson Hannon, "The Manbij Roadmap and the Future of U.S.-Turkish Relations," *Middle East Policy* 25, no. 3 (2018): 113.
[71] Dylan Maguire, *A Perfect Proxy?: The United States–Syrian Democratic Forces Partnership* (Blacksburg: Virginia Tech Publishing, 2020), 11.
[72] Knights and van Wilgenburg, *Accidental Allies*, 67.
[73] Knights and van Wilgenburg, *Accidental Allies*, 132.

troops in Syria provided 30 days of basic soldier training to recruits, who had their identification and biometric data gathered for vetting. They were also tasked with identifying and removing potential underage recruits from fighting groups, although this was a mostly performative step.[74] The measures taken by the US in preparation to the Raqqa campaign therefore exhibited strong evidence of US democratic processes influencing the US' policy in Syria. More specifically, the continued transparency towards Turkey and the extensive vetting and weeding out of underage recruits come to show the US' prioritisation of accountability mechanisms towards its domestic audience and institutions as well as its ally. During the Raqqa campaign in 2017, French and US personnel (under the coalition umbrella), dispatched command groups manned by 5 to 10 operatives as forward advisory groups to assist SDF troops. Similar to Kobane, the US set up a delegation system for target approval for airstrikes to US observers, which combined with the "war-weariness" of SDF troops, resulted in a destructive but successful and accountable air strike campaign, as hospitals, schools, clinics, water treatment plants and other critical infrastructure for civilians were (almost entirely) not targeted.[75] This targeting delegation system set up by the US and SDF enabled an efficient campaign while upholding humanitarian standards and accountability.

Throughout 2018, the US-SDF partnership continued operating together and worked towards the total physical defeat of the IS by early 2019. Nevertheless, Turkey's launch of Operation Olive Branch in Afrin in June 2018 strained the US-SDF relationship by directly putting the two US allies in a position of confrontation. By November 2018, the US began focusing on urban stabilisation which involved non-SDF forces. This marked a progressive US divestment from the SDF, which was expedited after the election of US President Donal Trump, and eventually culminated in the withdrawal of US troops from Syria in October 2019.[76] Overall, the SDF effectively constituted the "perfect proxy"[77] for the US to achieve its goal of defeating the IS. Its high degree of cohesion, high legitimacy, and clearly defined command structure rendered it as a capable and accountable force that was willing to work alongside the US in defeating ISIS. The short-term goal convergence between the two actors ensured a smooth

[74] Knights and van Wilgenburg, *Accidental Allies*, 139.
[75] Knights and van Wilgenburg, *Accidental Allies*, 148-49.
[76] Knights and van Wilgenburg, *Accidental Allies*, 185-201.
[77] Maguire, *A Perfect Proxy?*

relationship in which the US did not have to resort to any threatening mechanisms to force the SDF to cooperate, but instead operated on the basis of mutual benefit. In exchange for training, equipment, and armament, the SDF operated in tandem with a small US contingent to defeat ISIS while remaining highly accountable to international and domestic audiences through vetting and target verification processes. Moreover, the US' sharing of weapon shipment data to Turkey allowed for transparency about the material provided to the SDF while mitigating certain negative impacts on the two states' relationship. These mechanisms were effectively shaped by US democratic concerns, values, and institutions, and functioned as conditions for US support to the SDF.

5.1.4. The US-SDF Partnership: A Case of Orchestration?

Ever since the US began its quest to defend its interests in the Syrian battleground, the Obama administration has been extremely wary of sending US boots on the ground, especially in large numbers, to achieve its strategic objectives. Instead, the US initially opted to create, train, equip, and deploy its own local militia, however that operation resulted in a resounding failure, with around "four or five" active troops left on the ground.[78] The Obama administration therefore opted to provide conditional support to the battle-proven YPG-led alliance, which eventually fused to become the SDF. The US' choice of the SDF can therefore be understood as a rational calculus, consisting of picking a competent proxy that enjoys legitimacy in its area of operations. Another key benefit presented by the SDF was the Kurds' history with the Syrian regime, which did not translate into a YPG campaign to overthrow the Syrian regime. Instead, the SDF was the perfect choice for the US to counter its primary target in Syria, the IS, as the YPG-led group constituted a prized target for the radical Islamists and was therefore compelled to mount an effective counterterror campaign against it.

Moreover, the SDF's structure appears as one of the main factors why the US could overtly support a non-state actor in the Middle East. Indeed, by being structured as a quasi-army composed of units and multiple sub-units, the SDF's structure allowed for efficiency and accountability. These two traits appear as essential benefits for a democratic patron. On the one hand, the SDF's efficiency allowed the Obama administration to avoid spending massive

[78] Assaf Moghadam et al., *Routledge Handbook of Proxy Wars*, 229.

resources with little visible return. On the other hand, the SDF's structure ensuring accountability meant that no humanitarian disasters or resources misuses would go unnoticed and unpunished by the SDF's command and the US contingent in Syria. As a consequence, the US could boast supporting an operationally successful ally which was disincentivised of breaching humanitarian standards by the conditional nature of the support the US provided.

Fundamentally, the US had formed a relationship based on support conditional upon fighting the IS. In that relationship, the SDF was enlisted by the US as it operated as an independent force which nevertheless achieved the US' strategic objectives in the Levant. This soft *ex ante* control mode was therefore greatly motivated by President Obama's domestic political calculus of staying true to his commitments and at the very least not starting a new war in the Middle East and sending more US troops to fight that war, thereby minimising political costs. This is consistent with Schulhofer-Wohl's analysis of the Obama administration's policy in Syria, who pointed to the prioritisation by the US President of a solution that would preclude a political fallout while maintaining domestic support, effectively encapsulated in a strategy of political risk management.[79] The US contingent in Syria that reached up to 500 men therefore allowed for the US to ensure its resources were used exclusively against the IS and did not enable any humanitarian or diplomatic disasters. The need for an accountable and reliable force that could operate without large troop deployments therefore resulted from a political calculus that was characteristic of an electoral democracy, in which the government is held accountable for its decisions by its constituency. Regime type therefore greatly affected *ex ante* control mode choice in the US-SDF case.

Furthermore, while the US was the SDF's patron and had the ability to define the SDF's strategic objectives due to the conditional nature of the support it provided, the two appear to have held a very horizontal relationship. Indeed, the US contingent in Syria (in coordination with CENTCOM) worked in tandem with the SDF following a "trust but verify" policy under which the SDF pinpointed a target for the US to conduct an airstrike on, while the US officers in Sulaymaniyah having the final say on the airstrike. This non-hierarchical relationship, which corresponds to a soft *ex post* control mode choice, was more driven by efficiency and competence considerations rather than the influence of the US' democratic institutions. Indeed,

[79] Jonah Schulhofer-Wohl, "The Obama Administration," 517-47.

the YPG-composed command of the SDF had both great combat experience, military training, legitimacy, and knowledge of the area of operations, which would have been hampered had the US decided to send officers to command the SDF.

It can therefore be concluded that the US opted for soft *ex ante* and soft *ex post* controls, as the Obama administration elected to enlist the SDF's authority and held a non-hierarchical relationship with it. Such a choice corresponds to Abbott et al.'s concept of orchestration, which is presented as a case of proxy control in which "neither party has authority over the other" and the proxy is steered "only through inducements."[80] This theoretical conceptualisation aligns with the actual operationalisation of the relationship between the US and the SDF, in which conditional support was offered in return for preference alignment and shared strategic objectives. However, to what extent was the US' choice to orchestrate the SDF influenced by regime type? While the impact of US' democratic institutions and considerations on the *ex post* control mode employed to control the SDF is inconclusive, their imprint on the *ex ante* control mode choice is considerable, as the decision to conditionally support an independent NSAG was a direct result of US preoccupations about supporting an accountable actor that would efficiently achieve the US' objectives.

5.2. Exploitation and Betrayal: The Ambiguous Relationship Between Russia and the Wagner Group in Syria

5.2.1. Mercenaries in Russia and the Wagner Group: Resurrecting the Slavonic Corpse

In light of the Wagner Group's current international fame as a ruthless mercenary group, it may come as a surprise mercenaries are outlawed in Russian law. It therefore comes as a surprise that one of Russia's major tools of power projection since the 2010s has been a PMSC. Indeed, as early as 2012, troops associated with the Wagner Group, a shadowy Russian PMSC, were found to be active alongside Bashar Al-Assad's SAA in Syria. This subsection provides a backgrounder on the status of PMSCs in Russia and the birth of what became the Wagner Group.

In the Russian criminal code, the recruitment, training, financing, and employment of mercenaries, as well as the engagement of oneself in mercenary activities all constitute

[80] Abbott et al., *The Governor's Dilemma*, 15.

punishable offenses with mandatory reclusion for up to fifteen years.[81] However, Russia is home to between 10 and 20 PMSCs, which are all registered as "private security firms" and operate in a grey area of Russian law, unlike Western PMSCs which are heavily regulated by the states they are registered in.[82] While such a law could be perceived at hampering the ability of PMSCs to operate in the ecosystem of the Russian State, the lack of clear regulation of PMSCs effectively created a grey space for the setup of plausibly deniable mercenary groups by the Kremlin. This ambiguity is perfectly reflected in the origins of the Wagner Group.

As early as 2013, as the Syrian Civil War was raging and the Assad regime was losing territory at the expense of the FSA and radical Islamist groups, the Syrian government requested assistance from the Moran Security Group, a Russian PMSC, in retaking oil and gas fields and facilities from the IS. Moran therefore set up a subsidiary in Hong Kong under the name of "Slavonic Corps," which was hired by the Syrian government for the assignment. As a result, around 250 fighters were sent by the company to Deir ez-Zor, Syria. However, the operation resulted in a resounding failure, and upon return in Moscow, its leaders Vadim Gusev and Yevgeniy Sidorov were arrested upon arrival on charges of mercenaryism. Subsequently, Moran denied any relation to Slavonic Corps to avoid being punished, while the latter was disbanded.[83]

The Wagner Group rose from the ashes of the Slavonic Corps and first appeared as a covert paramilitary group instigating and supporting Russian separatism through means of training, military involvement, and disinformation in the Ukrainian regions of Donbas and Luhansk at the beginning of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine in 2014. The group's headquarters were located at Molkino, in Southern Russia, next door to the 10th GRU (Russian Military Intelligence) *spetsnaz* brigade's base. This proximity to Russian military intelligence was also reflected in the company's alleged founder's identity, Dimitriy Utkin, a 2nd GRU *spetsnaz* brigade operative who used the callsign "Wagner" in reference to his admiration of Nazi Germany. While Utkin was also part of the failed Slavonic Corps operation, he was not arrested

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[81] Kiebel, Florian, eds, "3. The Relations of the Wagner Group," *The Accountability and Legitimacy of the Wagner Group* (1st ed., Tectum – ein Verlag in der Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 2024), 95.
[82] Åse Gilje Østensen and Tor Bukkvoll, "Russian Use of Private Military and Security Companies-the implications for European and Norwegian Security," *FFI-rapport* (2018), 22.
[83] Østensen and Bukkvoll, "Russian Use of Private Military and Security Companies," 25; Abdullah Al-Jabassini and Emadeddin Badi, "The Making of Rivals and Strange Bedfellows: Patterns of Turkish and Russian Security Assistance in the Syrian and Libyan Civil Wars," *Mediterranean Politics (Frank Cass & Co.)* 29, no. 4 (2024): 510-12.

upon returning to Russia, and instead formed an essential leader of the group who was killed during the fatal plane crash that decimated Wagner's leadership in 2023.[84] In 2015, the Wagner Group picked up the Slavonic Corps' mantle and initiated operations to protect Assad's oil and gas fields and facilities, while also engaging in active combat against the IS and representing Russia's only "boots on the ground" in Syria.[85]

5.2.2. ISIS Hunters or Business Partners?

2015 was the year when Putin's Russia finally made its grand entrance in the Syrian Civil War, launching an extensive air campaign against the IS in September in order to help the Assad regime survive. The Wagner Group arrived in Syria in late December 2015, however its presence in Syria was kept secret. Despite being treated in this analysis as a Russian proxy, Wagner was actually contracted by the Assad regime to capture and protect oil fields under the identity of the Al-Sayyad Company for Guarding and Protection Services Ltd.[86] The deal between the two entities entailed that Wagner would be paid in resources by claiming 25% of the profits generated by the facilities they took control of and protected, and effectively led the group to pursue capturing oil and gas facilities rather than chasing after the IS.[87] This operation was performed under the cover of four shell companies which each earned contracts for different oil blocks and shelves, namely Euro Polis LLC, Velada LLC, Mercury LLC, and Kapital LLC.[88] The common element to these four companies is the owner they can be traced back to, Evgeniy Prigozhin, who was nicknamed "Putin's Chef" and had a long history of being contracted by the Kremlin.[89]

Evgeniy Prigozhin, who was later revealed to be the leader of the Wagner Group, effectively embodied the link between the Kremlin and the PMSC. After operating as an armed robber for several years and subsequently spending time in jail, Prigozhin set up his own restaurant chain. He started from a hot dog stand, and over the years grew to own multiple restaurants, which many high-profile guests attended, including Putin. After becoming part of

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[84] Østensen and Bukkvoll, "Russian Use of Private Military and Security Companies," 25.
[85] Al-Jabassini and Badi, "The Making of Rivals," 511.
[86] Olivia Allison et al., *Wagner's Business Model in Syria and Africa: Profit and Patronage*, Occasional Paper (London: Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies, February 2025), 12, https://static.rusi.org/wagners-business-model-in-syria-and-africa_0.pdf.
[87] Olivia Allison et al., *Wagner's Business Model*, 25.
[88] Olivia Allison et al., *Wagner's Business Model*, 25.
[89] Østensen and Bukkvoll, "Russian Use of Private Military and Security Companies," 34.

Putin's inner circle, Prigozhin's catering business, Concord, started being awarded multiple major catering contracts with the Russian Armed Forces. This laid the basis for the close relationship between Putin and Prigozhin, while completely transforming Concord into a fully operational shell corporation through which Prigozhin could be paid for his mercenary services.[90] Despite playing such an instrumental role in articulating Russia's unconventional warfare strategy through the use of the Wagner Group and the Internet Research Agency, the relationship between Wagner and the Russian Ministry of Defence (MOD) was very tense throughout the Syria campaign.[91]

While Wagner was contracted by the Assad regime in Syria, it remained in close contact with the MOD throughout its operations in Syria, which most notably consisted of the liberation of the city of Palmyra in 2016 and 2017 as well as the offensive towards Deir ez-Zor throughout 2018. This is reflected by the joint observation and command of operations on the battlefield by Russian General Alexander Dvornikov, the commander of Russian forces in Syria at the time, and Prigozhin during the capture of Palmyra around late 2016 to early 2017. As both men were monitoring the battle and the Wagner Group fighters were suffering losses, Prigozhin "vehemently" exhorted Dvornikov to provide the fighters with artillery shells, marking the beginning of a long and increasingly intense feud between the Wagner leader and the MOD.[92] The infighting was further invigorated by the MOD's awarding of medals to Russian operatives and local Syrian militiamen, but not to Wagner Group members.[93] It should nevertheless be acknowledged that Utkin in fact received a Medal for Heroism at the Kremlin on December 9th, 2016, which due to his leadership position in the Wagner Group would imply a certain degree of involvement in the Syrian battleground.

The Russian State's apparent unwillingness to provide in-depth or overt support to the Wagner Group can be traced back to its original intent in orchestrating the creation of the

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[90] Olivia Allison et al., *Wagner's Business Model*, 8-10; Kimberly Marten, "Russia's use of semi-state security forces: the case of the Wagner Group," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 35, no. 2 (2019): 196.
[91] Nathaniel Reynolds, *Putin's Not-So-Secret Mercenaries: Patronage, Geopolitics, and the Wagner Group*, Working Paper (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 2019), 4-7, https://carnegie-production-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/static/files/GlobalRussia_NateReynolds_Vagner.pdf.
[92] Samer al-Ahmed and Mohammed Hassan, "Syria Is Where the Conflict Between Wagner and the Russian Government Began," *Middle East Institute*, July 14, 2023, https://mei.edu/publications/syria-where-conflict-between-wagner-and-russian-government-began.
[93] Al-Ahmed and Hassan, "Syria Is Where the Conflict Between Wagner and the Russian Government Began."

mercenary group: plausible deniability. The prioritisation of plausible deniability over operational effectiveness in Syria is reflected in the Kremlin's declaration that 131 Russian "civilians" were killed in Syria in the first nine months of 2017, referring to Wagner operatives killed in action whose membership as part of the group had to imperatively remain covert.[94] Russia also benefitted from a dissociation from Wagner as there exists video evidence of Wagner operatives torturing and executing Syrian pro-regime fighters, which if associated with the Kremlin could bear repercussions on its standing at an international level while potentially creating tension in the relationship with Assad.[95] The tensions between the Russian MOD and Prigozhin eventually culminated, and are effectively encapsulated in the Battle of Conoco Fields on February 7th, 2018, during which Wagner's forces marched towards an SDF position where US Delta Force and Green Beret operatives were posted, resulting in the obliteration of the PMSC's forces and causing the incident to be remembered as the "Red February Massacre" by Wagner troops.[96]

5.2.3. The Battle of Conoco Fields: An Insight into the Russia-Wagner Relationship?

In February 2018, the Wagner Group in Syria set its sights on the Conoco Fields natural gas plant near the city of Khasham, in the Deir ez-Zor province in Eastern Syria. However, the area was then controlled by SDF forces, and US special operations troops were posted on the ground at the plant. Prigozhin had allegedly received assurances from the MOD that his ground forces would benefit from air support from two Russian Air Force SU-35 Flanker planes as well as coverage from air defence systems located in Western Syria, including S-300 surface-to-air missile batteries. Wagner operatives and the accompanying Syrian militiamen proceeded to advance towards the gas facility on February 7th, 2018, counting on Russian support. Alarmed by the advance of Russian-speaking troops towards their position, US operatives at the plant contacted the DOD, which in turn communicated with the MOD about the potential confrontation between Russian and US troops in Syria. However, the MOD denied any knowledge or link to the Wagner forces on the ground, leaving the US and SDF forces on the

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[94] Emad Bouzo, "The Wagner Group in Syria: Profiting Off Failed States," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, July 21, 2023, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/wagner-group-syria-profiting-failed-states.
[95] The Wall Street Journal, "Inside Prigozhin's Wagner, Russia's Secret War Company | WSJ Documentary," YouTube, June 9, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EMXnJMCoFYI.
[96] Al-Ahmed and Hassan, "Syria Is Where the Conflict Between Wagner and the Russian Government Began."

ground no other choice but to respond with overwhelming force, with US Air Force fighters jets and bombers taking turns bombing the Wagner forces.[97]

The outcome of the battle was appalling and constituted a resounding failure for Prigozhin, with between 200 and 300 dead on Wagner's side out of the 500 troops deployed, with many more injured. The Russian MOD maintained its official narrative that no Russian soldiers had been present on the ground, thereby sustaining its official dissociation from Wagner.[98] Nevertheless, military doctors in Moscow claimed that Russian military planes had transported injured fighters back to Russia, highlighting the cooperation between the two entities.[99] Despite carrying out missions "assigned to them by the Russian military," the Wagner operatives had been abandoned by the Kremlin.[100] This raises the question of why Russian military command did not contact Wagner to warn them of the presence of a US contingent in Conoco Fields. Marten points to several hypotheses, ranging from the need to maintain plausible deniability, to the will to test US resolve in Syria, to a potential result of infighting between the MOD and Wagner.[101] Indeed, the MOD was wary of Prigozhin's group due to the fear of the rise of the PMSC's influence in Russian policymaking and potential disputes about benefits from oil and gas resource exploitation in Syria.[102] The "betrayal" itself most probably constituted a form of signalling from the MOD to Wagner about the hierarchy in the relationship. Indeed, Wagner's ambition to control and exploit natural resources in Syria for its own profit rather than purely following MOD-approved objectives may have ignited the need for the MOD to impose its hierarchical superiority.

The incidents in Khasham demonstrated the Kremlin's and MOD's priorities when using Wagner. With plausible deniability being prioritised above all else, the Kremlin chose to enlist Wagner troops to pursue its own objectives in order to avoid any direct association with their

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[97] Al-Ahmed and Hassan, "Syria Is Where the Conflict Between Wagner and the Russian Government Began"; Maria Tsvetkova, "Insight: Russian Toll in Syria Battle Was 300 Killed and Wounded: Sources," Reuters, February 16, 2018, https://www.reuters.com/article/world/insight-russian-toll-in-syria-battle-was-300-killed-and-wounded-sources-idUSKCN1FZ2DO/.

[98] Al-Ahmed and Hassan, "Syria Is Where the Conflict Between Wagner and the Russian Government Began"; Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "How a 4-Hour Battle Between Russian Mercenaries and U.S. Commandos Unfolded in Syria," *The New York Times*, May 24, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/24/world/middleeast/american-commandos-russian-mercenaries-syria.html.

[99] Tsvetkova, "Insight: Russian Toll."

[100] Tsvetkova, "Insight: Russian Toll."

[101] Marten, "Russia's use of semi-state security forces," 194-96.

[102] Marten, "Russia's use of semi-state security forces," 194-96.

activities in Syria. In terms of hierarchy, the battle of Conoco Fields showed that the MOD employed extremely hard modes of *ex post* control by abandoning its proxy once it became a potential liability and reached beyond the MOD's interests. Most importantly, this incident proved that Russia's backing was vital for the Wagner Group's success, as opposed to the SDF which had been operating without concrete outside support until 2015.

5.2.4. The Ambiguous Russia-Wagner Relationship: Beyond Co-optation?

As reflected by the Battle of Conoco Fields, the Russia-Wagner relationship is far from straightforward and clearly structured, unlike the US-SDF partnership. Scholars have pointed out that the Wagner Group constitutes a tool for the Kremlin to expand its reach while benefitting from plausible deniability.[103] In Syria, this effectively meant having Russian boots on the ground that would promote Russia's interests in the Levant, namely rescue the Bashar regime and secure its foothold by benefitting from the exploitation of Syria's oil and gas resources. However, the conflict between the Russian MOD and the Wagner Group highlighted potential discord in the two entities' relationship. Indeed, this conflict does not seem to have risen as a result of goal divergence, but rather as a continuous betrayal of Wagner by the MOD, which was enabled to do so by Wagner's secretive participation in the Syrian conflict.

The Russian MOD's negative answer to the US troops in Syria when asked whether the Wagner operatives constituted troops of theirs during the "Red February Massacre" points to Russia's choice to exert soft *ex ante* controls.[104] That is, by enlisting Wagner's authority, Russia could benefit from plausible deniability, which was effectively enacted in that very incident. This aspect of the relationship is reinforced by evidence of Wagner being the "brainchild" of the GRU and its purpose as an unconventional warfare tool at the Kremlin's disposition.[105] However, the challenge here lies in identifying the impact of the Russian regime's authoritarian nature on its choice of soft *ex ante* controls to govern its relationship with Wagner. As a matter of fact, Wagner (at least in the state it was in Syria) could largely be considered a large-scale covert operation to

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[103] Ladd Serwat et al., *Moving Out of the Shadows: Shifts in Wagner Group Operations Around the World*, Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), August 2, 2023, https://acleddata.com/2023/08/02/moving-out-of-the-shadows-shifts-in-wagner-group-operations-around-the-world/; Al-Jabassini and Badi, "The Making of Rivals," 513; Kiebel, "3. The Relations of the Wagner Group," 90.
[104] Al-Ahmed and Hassan, "Syria Is Where the Conflict Between Wagner and the Russian Government Began."
[105] Ladd Serwat et al., *Moving Out of the Shadows.*

bear influence on the Syrian conflict while allowing the Kremlin to deny any ground involvement and substantiate its narrative of a non-costly air campaign.

The picture is at first blurrier when it comes to the hierarchy of the Russia Wagner-relationship, as reports suggest that Wagner is "not just an extension of the Russian military" but nevertheless is "mostly an agent of the [Russian] State" that is "mostly commercially motivated."[106] These qualifications indicate a double identity of the PMSC as both a profit-driven venture and an organ of the Russian state. If Wagner were to merely be an organ of the Russian state, then it would follow a certain hierarchy within the Kremlin's chain of command, and would therefore be subject to hard *ex post* controls. Nevertheless, as demonstrated by its signing of a contract with the Syrian state to re-capture and protect its own oil and gas fields, Wagner also benefitted from a certain degree of independence from the Kremlin's hierarchy. The shadowy Russian PMSC therefore appears to operate in a grey area between co-optation and orchestration, where the degree of insertion into the Kremlin's hierarchy would not be fixed. Nevertheless, this odd positioning of the Russia-Wagner relationship in Abbott et al.'s typology may well be explained by Russia's regime type, and namely the importance of oligarchy in the post-Soviet Russian regime. Indeed, Prigozhin himself has been identified as an oligarch who works in tandem with Putin, seeking profit while also being at the service of the Kremlin's needs.

Marten sheds some light on the relationship between the Russian regime's structure and the hierarchy in the Russia-Wagner relationship, which understands the Russia-Wagner relationship as highly hierarchical by considering the group as a "semi-state security force."[107] Indeed, a potential explanation for their ambiguous legal status is their role in enriching Putin's "personal cronies."[108] This is linked to the fact that Russian bureaucracy is rather concerned with punishing unsanctioned infringements of the law rather than actual violations of it, with Putin having the say as to what should or should not be punished. This argument therefore supports the fact that the Russia-Wagner relationship is shaped by oligarchic concerns about individuals closely connected to Putin's regime profiting from the Wagner Group's

[106] Ladd Serwat et al., *Moving Out of the Shadows*; Østensen and Bukkvoll, "Russian Use of Private Military and Security Companies," 28.
[107] Marten, "Russia's use of semi-state security forces," 181.
[108] Marten, "Russia's use of semi-state security forces," 186.

activities.[109] Therefore, the Wagner group serves the interests of the Kremlin and is hierarchically controlled by Putin, but is given a certain degree of autonomy in its profit-generating ventures.

Overall, the control mode chosen by Russia to govern its relationship with the Wagner Group in Syria was co-optation, as the Kremlin exerted soft *ex ante* controls by enlisting the mercenary group in order to guarantee plausible deniability, while choosing to apply hard *ex post* controls characterized by the highly hierarchical relationship between the two entities, which nevertheless left the leeway for profit generation through Wagner's operations. This subsection has argued that rather than competence-control preoccupations, it is the Russian regime's oligarchic structure and the regime's domestic international political concerns maintain its non-costly air campaign narrative in Syria. This is also reflected in the lack of accountability mechanisms that would have prevented the group from engaging in activities violating international law and humanitarian standards. Nevertheless, Wagner's ability to operate covertly can also be tied to competence-control requirements, namely due to the group's competence in maintaining plausible deniability by not bearing any direct links to the Russian institutions similarly to Kruck's argument.

5.3. Iran and Hezbollah at the Assad Dynasty's Twilight

5.3.1. A Short History of the Axis of Resistance

The relations between Iran and Hezbollah, as well as the dynamics the Axis of Resistance have been the subject of extensive study as cases of proxy use and state-NSAG relations. Indeed, the entire Axis, and more specifically Iran and Hezbollah, openly supported the Assad regime from the very start of the revolts in Syria in 2011, and did not hesitate to fully commit to ensuring the survival of their allied regime once the civil conflict started in 2012. This subsection provides a backgrounder on the relations before Iran and Hezbollah and the constitution of the Axis of Resistance before the Syrian conflict.

Hezbollah (the "Party of God") was founded in Lebanon in 1982 by Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps – Quds Force (IRGC-QF) operatives who travelled to the Beqaa Valley to spread Ayatollah Khomeini's *vilayat-e faqih* (guardianship of the jurisprudence)

[109] Marten, "Russia's use of semi-state security forces," 181-204.

ideology and to train and equip local Shia communities. The Party spearheaded Shia military operations in the Lebanese Civil War and provided a shattering response to the Israeli invasion of the country.[110] Between 1982 and 2006, Hezbollah developed itself as the tip of the spear of Islamic resistance by repeatedly fighting in Israel and declaring victory over it in 2006 after Israel was forced to withdraw from Southern Lebanon. During that period, the group engaged in a process of "Lebanonisation" and became a prominent political force and social provider in Lebanon, appealing to groups beyond the Shia minority.[111] However, the Party's legitimacy suffered from accusations of being an Iranian proxy. Indeed, IRGC-QF Brigadier General Qasem Soleimani enabled Hezbollah, under Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah, to establish itself as a regional actor thanks to financial aid and equipment provided by Iran, amounting nearly 200 million US dollars every year.[112] By the beginning of the Syrian Civil War, Hezbollah had cemented itself a leading member of the Axis of Resistance, an alliance led by Iran and gathering Syria, Hezbollah, and a plethora of other NSAGs, against the US and Israel.

Before the outbreak of the conflict, Iran and Syria had already become extremely close partners. As a matter of fact, the two states had been getting closer after the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, with Iran seeking to gain access to the land bridge to Lebanon and the Mediterranean that Syria represented, while Syria sought to strengthen its deterrent capabilities against Israel. Syria proved vital in smuggling arms into Iran during the Iran-Iraq, allowing Iran to overcome the 1983 US embargo on arms and to fend of Saddam Hussein's forces. In October 1990, the two regimes gathered to form the Syrian-Iranian Cooperation Committee, in which IRGC officials represented Iran. After his father's death, Bashar al-Assad became President of Syria and further expanded security cooperation with Iran, which culminated in the signing of a "NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation)-style" defence cooperation agreement with the Islamic Republic.[113] This agreement therefore came with the guarantee that Iran would step in to save Assad's regime if need be. Furthermore, the

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[110] Sirrs, *Iran's Qods Force*, 209-219.
[111] Krista E. Wiegand, "Reformation of a Terrorist Group: Hezbollah as a Lebanese Political Party," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 32, no. 8 (2009): 669-80.
[112] Farhad Rezaei and Ofira Seliktar, eds. "Rescuing the Assad Regime and Turning Syria into a Client State," *Iran, Revolution, and Proxy Wars*, 167–201 (Switzerland: Springer International Publishing AG, 2019); Marisa Sullivan, *Hezbollah in Syria*, Middle East Security Report 19 (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, April 2014), 9, https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Hezbollah_Sullivan_FINAL.pdf.
[113] Rezaei and Seliktar, "Rescuing the Assad Regime," 168-69.

official Iranian discourse about Syria also demonstrated the importance, with IRGC top brass qualifying Syria as Iran's "35th province," while Soleimani claimed that if "we lose Syria, we lose Tehran."[114] At the dawn of the civil war, Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah constituted the three core members of the Axis of Resistance, and had reached a near-symbiotic relationship. Once it became clear that the Assad regime was faced with a real prospect of defeat, Iran and Hezbollah came to its rescue and justified the intervention through the danger posed by radical Sunni Islamists to the Shia shrines and populations (including the Alawites) in Syria.

5.3.2. Hezbollah to the Rescue: A Holy Intervention

Since the very beginning of the protests in Syria, Hezbollah began backing the Assad regime mainly in an advisory and supporting capacity. The Party initially refrained from more comprehensive and overt assistance to the Assad regime due to its standing in Lebanon and the Arab world after its success in fending off Israeli troops from Lebanese territory during the 2006 South Lebanon War. This perceived victory had enabled Hezbollah to brand itself and in appearance become a successful Islamic resistance organisation which was able to garner broad support. There was therefore an essential antithesis between Hezbollah as a resistance organisation and the Assad regime, which took extensive oppressive measures against its populations during the 2011 Arab Spring in Syria. This gap was further marked by Hezbollah and Iran's vocal support to the revolts taking place in Tunisia and Egypt.[115] However, by fall 2011, the Party started being accused of providing support to the Syrian regime and acting on behalf of it, with Lebanese media pointing to Hezbollah fighters dying in Syria and Syrian government defectors claiming Hezbollah snipers were employed against the demonstrators.[116] By mid-2012, it became more and more clear that Hezbollah was working in tandem with Assad's regime as the US Treasury claimed Hezbollah "directly trained Syrian government personnel inside Syria and has facilitated the training of Syrian forces by Iran's terrorist arm," referring to the IRGC-QF.[117] During October 2011, due to the rising rumours about Hezbollah

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[114] Mahjoob Zweiri, "Friends over Freedom: The Cases of Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Lebanon," *Arab-Iranian Relations Since the Arab Uprisings*, 1st ed., 1:86–108, (United Kingdom: Routledge, 2024), 88; Rezaei and Seliktar, "Rescuing the Assad Regime," 170.
[115] Sirrs, *Iran's Qods Force*, 215.
[116] Sullivan, *Hezbollah in Syria*, 11.
[117] U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Targets Hizballah for Supporting the Assad Regime," Press release, August 10, 2012, https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/tg1676.

operating in Syria, Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah denied any involvement of his forces alongside the Syrian regime but acknowledged that Hezbollah operatives were fighting in Syria but only to defend Lebanese nationals (of Shia confession) across the border.[118]

From then on, Hezbollah began scaling up its involvement in Syria, with its forces taking on a direct combat role by early 2013. With the mounting threat of the opposition toppling Assad, Iran also markedly increased its support to the Syrian regime and Hezbollah by increasing its number of supply flights and sending more and more IRGC-QF personnel in the Levant. For its part, Hezbollah concentrated its activities around the areas of Damascus and Homs in order to preserve and protect the supply routes towards Lebanon.[119] An essential dimension of Hezbollah's involvement in Syria was its creation and training of the National Defence Forces (NDF), which was set to become a 50,000 men strong Syrian Shia militia copying the Hezbollah template, and would effectively enable the Axis of Resistance to preserve control of Syria in the scenario of Assad's fall.[120] The first key shift in Hezbollah's display of its involvement in Syria happened in April 2013, after Nasrallah travelled twice to Tehran to meet with Ayatollah Khamenei and Soleimani, where the Iranian Supreme Leader allegedly pressured Nasrallah for greater involvement in Syria.[121] As a result, Nasrallah made several speeches throughout April and May 2013 during which he admitted to Hezbollah supporting Assad's regime while framing the Party's operations in Syria as part of a greater struggle against *takfiri* (apostates, referring to IS and other radical Islamist groups present in Syria) but also against Israel and the US.[122]

Hezbollah's first major combat involvement in Syria occurred in April 2013 during the assault on the city of al-Qusayr. During that operation, Hezbollah launched a 2-month long campaign to retake the city, which had been under rebel control since 2012 and was near the regime's main lines of communication, granting the area strategic significance. Despite SAA attempts at capturing the city, the Syrian regime was unable to take back the city, leading to Iran

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[118] Sullivan, *Hezbollah in Syria*, 12.
[119] Sullivan, *Hezbollah in Syria*, 13.
[120] Sullivan, *Hezbollah in Syria*, 14; Brandon Friedman, "Iran's Hezbollah Model in Iraq and Syria: Fait Accompli?" *Orbis (Philadelphia)* 62, no. 3 (2018): 438–53; Julian Borger, "Iran and Hezbollah 'Have Built 50,000-Strong Force to Help Syrian Regime'," *The Guardian*, March 14, 2013, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/mar/14/iran-hezbollah-force-syrian-regime.
[121] Sirrs, *Iran's Qods Force*, 229; Sullivan, *Hezbollah in Syria*, 14.
[122] Sullivan, *Hezbollah in Syria*, 14.

"probably" making the strategic decision to dispatch Hezbollah soldiers to do the job.[123] After isolating the city, cordoning it off, and having it bombed by the Syrian Air Force and army, Hezbollah launched a ground assault which ended on June 3rd, 2013, when Hezbollah finally managed to take the city. Nevertheless, as the group had involved itself in direct combat, it suffered sizeable losses with around 200 casualties out of the nearly 1500 Hezbollah fighters participating in the battle. Not only did this incident constitute the largest-scale Hezbollah deployment outside of Lebanon, but it also marked the Party's heavy imprint in Syria and the formalisation of its operations.[124]

The Party's following operations in Syria took place in the areas of Homs, Damascus, and Qalamoun. Hezbollah's involvement in Damascus was particularly important for the Party's justification of its presence in Syria as it stood to defend the Sayyida Zeinab Mosque in the outskirts of Damascus, which provided theological and ideological grounds for Hezbollah to justify its operations in the area to both its constituency and members, as they were wary of getting involved in Syria.[125] In Homs, as well as in Aleppo, the group took a more indirect role in battle by coordinating and providing tactical advice to the NDF and SAA which did the bulk of the fighting, employing the same tactics as in al-Qusayr. Finally, the Party's operations in Qalamoun were particularly important due to the region's proximity to Lebanon, and primarily consisted of special operations at village level.[126]

Overall, Hezbollah's operations in Syria took place in parallel with Iran's IRGC-QF-led interventions, and were primarily aimed at rescuing the regime, or at least presented as such. A deeper, perhaps more cynical analysis of Iran's and Hezbollah's objectives in Syria displays a different picture. Indeed, Syria forms an essential part of Iran's regional strategy for both the spread of its ideology and its support to its various affiliated NSAGs near the Mediterranean. Iran's prioritisation of the training of new Shia militias following Hezbollah's blueprint can be understood as an attempt to create parallel, non-state institutions in Syria, which would safeguard

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[123] Rabinovich and Valensi, *Syrian Requiem*, 63.
[124] Sullivan, *Hezbollah in Syria*, 14-16; Marina Calculli, Self-Determination At All Costs: Explaining The Iran-Syria-Hezbollah Axis, *Annali della Fondazione Luigi Einaudi* (Fondazione Luigi Einaudi, 2020), 114.
[125] Dania Koleilat Khatib, ed., "Iran and 'Exporting' the Revolution: The Syrian Case," *The Syrian Crisis*, 69–86 (Singapore: Springer, 2021), 82-84; Sirrs, *Iran's Qods Force*, 209-10; Hadi Wahab, *Hezbollah: A Regional Armed Non-State Actor*, 1st ed. (Oxford: Routledge, 2022), 106.
[126] Sullivan, *Hezbollah in Syria*, 16-22.

Iranian interests in the country while securing its supply routes to Hezbollah. Hezbollah itself greatly contributed to this objective by training and operating alongside the NDF throughout its campaign, but also used its involvement in Syria to strengthen its footprint in the Syrian Golan Heights as a means of deterring and threatening Israel, which would also prove to be an argument that would tend to Hezbollah members wary of supporting Assad by framing the intervention in Syria as a means of advancing the fight against Israel.[127]

Throughout the Civil War in Syria, Iran and Hezbollah, officially working under the umbrella of the Axis of Resistance to defend Syria and preserve the Assad regime, worked to advance a shared agenda of deeper entrenchment in Syrian society and institutions in order to strengthen their regional agendas. While it is unclear whether the Islamic Republic exerted hierarchical controls on Hezbollah, it appears the two worked as partners who sought to achieve very similar objectives in Syria and therefore enjoyed great preference alignment. This preference alignment, characterised by a close "ideological relationship […], mutual dependence, and high degree of trust" between the Iranian regime and Hezbollah explains Iran's granting of authority to the latter under the umbrella of the Axis of Resistance.

5.3.3. Iran and Hezbollah: Trusteeship or Delegation?

Hezbollah has long been considered an Iranian proxy and primarily understood as such, however the group's own agency has only recently been recognised. Indeed, Hezbollah became more than just a foreign proxy in Lebanon, becoming a truly Lebanese social and political actor while proposing a narrative of resistance against oppression since its inception.[128] The Party's involvement in Syria has shed the light on this contradiction in Hezbollah's identity and purpose, as it was faced with two primary concerns. On the one hand, Hezbollah was compelled to tend to its Lebanese audience and address its political challenges in the domestic arena while further legitimising itself within Lebanese society. On the other hand, if Hezbollah did not intervene to save the Assad regime in Syria, its vital land bridge to Iran that enabled the group's armed wing to obtain arms and equipment would risk being ruptured and would phenomenally hamper the group's military capabilities, and most importantly deterrent capabilities vis-à-vis Israel.

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[127] Sirrs, *Iran's Qods Force*, 250-53.
[128] Joseph Alagha, *Hizbullah's Documents* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011).

Iran's calculus mirrored the latter point of Hezbollah's preoccupations, as the fall of Assad and a subsequent disruption of the land bridge to the Levant would be an unparalleled defeat for the regime that would entail a massive loss in regional influence and power projection across the Middle East by cutting off supply routes to other members of the Axis of Resistance. Both Iran's and Hezbollah's strategic reliance on Syria therefore pushed them to commit great economic and human resources to save the Assad regime and repel the various rebels aiming to overthrow it. With their intervention in Syria justified by the context of saving an ally of the Axis of Resistance, it can be concluded that Iran granted authority to Hezbollah, and effectively chose to employ hard *ex ante* controls. This claim is substantiated by accusations that Hezbollah constitutes an "organic part" of the Islamic Republic.[129] Such a theory would also have implications on the hierarchical nature of the relationship as Hezbollah would constitute an organ of the Iranian state and thereby be subjected to its own command structure. But how does that theory hold up when confronted with Hezbollah's intervention in Syria?

The fact that Nasrallah officially declared Hezbollah's intervention in Syria after flying twice to Tehran to meet with Ayatollah Khamenei and Soleimani could indicate a certain degree of verticality in the relationship between Iran and Hezbollah, which would be translated into hard *ex post* controls. Such a relationship would also explain Nasrallah's initial failure to provide a consistent and credible justification of Hezbollah's intervention in Syria.[130] Nevertheless, the strategic importance of Syria for Hezbollah's survival should not be downplayed, and the decision to intervene in the Syrian conflict may well have been a necessary enterprise that was decided by Hassan Nasrallah. As put in a report by the Institute for the Study of War, Hezbollah's continued commitment in Syria showed that the "benefits outweigh the costs," thereby making the case for Hezbollah's autonomy in deciding to intervene in the conflict.[131] The question about the nature of the *ex post* controls employed by Iran to govern its relationship with Hezbollah in Syria boils down to a debate on Hezbollah's own agency on a broader scale.

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[129] Wahab, *Hezbollah*, 189.
[130] Koleilat Khatib, "Iran and 'Exporting' the Revolution," 79.
[131] Sullivan, *Hezbollah in Syria*, 26.

Overall, the relationship between Iran and Hezbollah is between trusteeship and delegation, depending on the degree of agency Hezbollah had in choosing to participate in the Syrian conflict, which determines the hierarchical structure between the two entities. Nevertheless, both these control modes share a common *ex ante* control mode: they both consist of modes that imply the granting of authority. This granting of authority by Iran to Hezbollah is intrinsically linked to Iran's regime, as the Axis of Resistance effectively constitutes the regime's strongest asymmetric warfare asset and has been central to its strategy of spreading its ideology throughout the Middle East.

6. Cross-Case Comparison

The three cases have highlighted the different processes through which each patron's regime has influenced its control mode choice. In the US-SDF case, the US democratic institutions valuing accountability led the US and the SDF to form a symbiotic relationship whereby US support was contingent upon goal convergence and respect of human rights standards. In the Russia-Wagner case, the existence of oligarchic structures entangled in the Russian state's functioning meant that Wagner both worked for its own profit while also being enlisted to pursue strategic objectives set by the Kremlin. Finally, in the Iran-Hezbollah case, while Hezbollah's agency is still a question up to debate, the Iranian regime's pan-Islamic and anti-American vision embedded in the Axis of Resistance meant that it could grant its authority to Hezbollah. Overall, these case studies have shown that the democratic state chose to orchestrate its proxy, while the two authoritarian regimes did not exhibit a similar control mode. The difference between Russia's and Hezbollah's control modes to govern their proxy relationships respectively is primarily explained by the strategy pursued by each state, with Iran opting for an overt approach to convey its regional reach and ambitions while Russia opted for a covert approach to maximise plausible deniability and sustain its narrative of a non-costly aerial operation.

When breaking down the control mode choices into their *ex ante* and *ex post* subcategories, the comparison between the three cases demonstrates key differences. In terms of *ex ante* controls, the US chose to enlist the SDF's authority, just as Russia did with Wagner, but unlike Iran which granted its authority to Hezbollah under the Axis of Resistance umbrella. The similarity between the US' and Russia's *ex ante* controls can be associated with various factors.

Indeed, both states enjoy great international visibility due to their permanent membership in the UN Security Council's and general global military and diplomatic influence. That consideration is especially salient in Russia's *ex ante* control mode choice, as enlisting authority effectively enabled Russia to avoid being scrutinized for its actions by the international community for its venture to secure resources and rent in Syria. Simultaneously, it allowed for diminished public reticence at the domestic level in the US about intervening in the Syrian conflict. On the other hand, with Iran being labelled as an SST and promoting openly anti-American and anti-Israeli ideas, the regime's international or domestic standing did not push it to conduct covert operations in Syria, but instead to publicise the IRGC-QF's and Hezbollah's involvement in the war. The key difference explaining the variation in *ex ante* controls between Russia and Iran is therefore each regime's openness about its ambitions in Syria rather than the very nature of the regime. Indeed, Russia aimed to overtly support the Assad regime through an airstrike campaign, but also covertly gain control over oil and gas resources in Syria. In contrast, Iran jumped head-first into the conflict by directly involving its foreign special operations arm and coordinating with Hezbollah. Iran's higher level of commitment in the conflict may therefore also have dictated its granting of authority to the Party of God.

In addition, the two authoritarian regimes demarcate themselves from the democracy concerning the domestic aspect of enlisting authority. Indeed, Russia did not prevent Wagner from sending Russian citizens to Syria while denying they were its citizens and minimising the number of dead Russians. Such a behaviour corresponds to a lack of consideration by the regime of the domestic arena when conducting its proxy operations, similar to Iran, which itself used both Iranian and Lebanese (as well as many other foreign) fighters to achieve its goal of protecting the Assad regime. Finally, Russia and Iran's *ex ante* control mode choices were not influenced by concerns about accountability in terms of human rights and international standards, with Wagner troops committing torture and summary executions while Hezbollah may have taken part in ethnic cleansing. Concerning *ex ante* controls, this comparative analysis has demonstrated that while each state's choice to either enlist or grant authority was determined to a great extent by its regime type, there is no compelling difference in the Syrian case in terms of *ex ante* controls between democratic and authoritarian regimes. A confounding variable which may have influenced this result is the proxy type, as while the SDF and Hezbollah are categorised as NSAGs, the Wagner Group is a PMSC. A comparison of the democracy-NSAG and authoritarian

regime-NSAG *ex ante* controls reveals a difference between the two regime types, with the former enlisting and the latter granting authority.

However, a comparison of the *ex post* control choice in the three cases reveals a lesser impact of regime type on whether the patron exerts hierarchical or non-hierarchical controls over its proxy. As a matter of fact, the US chose to hold a horizontal relationship with the SDF while the Russia-Wagner and Iran-Hezbollah cases exhibit a blurrier picture. The lack of clarity concerning the two authoritarian regimes' *ex post* control choice, as in both cases the extent to which the proxies operated independently is difficult to estimate mostly due to the Russian and Iranian regime's lack of publicly available data on the formal links between each regime and its proxy. Despite this lack of clarity concerning the two authoritarian regimes, there persists a stark difference between the blurry hierarchy of their relationships and the clear horizontality of the US-SDF relationship. This difference can be partly traced back to the origins of each proxy, as in contrast with the SDF, the Wagner Group and Hezbollah were Russia and Iran's respective own creations. The decision by these states to create their own semi-independent proxies can however be linked to the nature of their regimes, which have a lesser regard for international law than democracies and are therefore more prone to create proxies to support their objectives.[132] Nevertheless, *ex post* control choices appear to have been primarily motivated by rational calculations from each state, as in the case of the US-SDF partnership, the non-hierarchical nature of the relationship allowed the SDF to leverage its knowledge of the territory, language, and legitimacy to thrive in the Syrian battleground. Similarly, the blurry hierarchy between the Kremlin and Wagner allowed the group to secure a contract with the Syrian government and exploit its resources while directly benefitting Russia's leaders and not sparking a Western response. That ambiguity in the hierarchy between Iran and Hezbollah translated in Hezbollah participating in the Iranian effort to save the Assad regime while allowing it to conduct its own operations near the Lebanese and Israeli borders. The *ex post* controls chosen by the patron in these three cases can therefore be partly associated with each state's regime type, but are also greatly influenced by rational calculations to maximise the proxy's effectiveness for each state, which corresponds to Abbott et al.'s conceptualisation of competence. Nevertheless, the difference between the US-SDF relationship's clear horizontality and the other two cases' blurry

[132] Goldman, "Do Democracies Support Violent Non-Governmental Organizations," 439-66.

hierarchy provides strong support to the hypothesis that regime type plays a major part in determining a state's control mode choice to govern its proxy relationship.

All in all, this cross-case comparison has demonstrated that regime type plays in shaping a state's control mode choice in governing its proxy relationships. Indeed, accountability to both the international community as well as domestic audiences, combined with its institutional framework, has appeared as a key determinant of the US's decision to use orchestration to govern its relationship with the SDF. In the case of Russia and Wagner, the Kremlin's disregard for humanitarian violations, combined with its oligarchic structure shaped its relationship with the PMSC by ensuring a hierarchical control which nevertheless enabled for profit-making, while enlisting a group that existed in an ambiguous legal gap. In the case of Iran and Hezbollah, the Iranian regime's aggressive regional policy of forward defence and ambitions coupled with its deterrence objectives against Israel and the US enabled it to grant authority to Hezbollah, while the regime's history of multidimensional support to Hezbollah may have played a role in the hierarchical structure governing their relationship.

Nevertheless, several variables have also appeared to influence control mode choice, including the proxy's origin, its competence, and its legitimacy, as well as each state's overtness concerning its operations and ambitions in Syria. Concerning the proxies' origins, it was shown that in contrast with the selected democracy, both chosen authoritarian regimes had played an essential role in the creation of their proxy. This confounding variable, which in this study mirrors the case distribution across the regime type variable, could potentially provide an explanation for the difference in *ex post* control modes. Competence requirements, which lay at the core of Abbott et al.'s theoretical framework, also seem to have played a part in shaping control mode choice by influencing the states' *ex ante* controls depending on whether they wanted to be formally associated with the proxy or not, and whether they could be held accountable for the proxy's actions. Furthermore, the issue of each proxy's legitimacy constitutes yet another confounding variable impacting *ex ante* controls, as both Russia and the US, which chose that control mode, were concerned with their proxies' ability to be dissociated from the local perceptions of their states' ambitions in the Middle East. Finally, the overtness (or lack thereof) of each state about is ambitions in Syria constitutes yet another confounding variable. As a matter of fact, Russia's choice to enlist a force enabled it to sustain its non-costly air campaign

narrative without admitting to sending any ground troops to Syria, which comes at a stark contrast with Iran's policy of granting its authority to Hezbollah under the umbrella of the Axis of Resistance which showed unity and was underpinned by the shared goals of the two entities. However, despite the existence of alternative explanations for the states' control mode choice, including the ones put forward by Abbott et al., each state's regime type, associated with its values, institutions, respect for international law, and mechanisms for accountability, has greatly shaped each state's choices in determining the nature of its proxy relationship.

7. Conclusion

With the internationalization of the Syrian Civil War after the protests that started in 2011 sent the country spiraling down into a bloody conflict, multiple great and regional powers sought to expand their influence in the war-torn country and pursue their own strategic objectives in the Middle East. The cases of US, Russian, and Iranian support to proxies in the Syrian battleground have demonstrated the extent to which these states were willing to commit resources to achieve these objectives. However, these three cases of proxy support differed in their core control characteristics, with the US orchestrating the SDF, Russia co-opting the Wagner Group, and Iran being between delegation and trusteeship in its relation with Hezbollah. This thesis has set out to identify and explain the difference in control modes between these three cases, and demonstrated that regime type plays an important role in shaping a state's control mode to govern its proxy relationships, which are broken down into *ex ante* and *ex post* controls following Abbott et al.'s Competence-Control framework.

This controlled comparison has shown that regime type greatly influenced the three states' *ex ante* control mode choices. Indeed, the US's enlistment of the SDF was shaped by the US's objective to defeat the IS while avoiding arming and supporting any radical groups while cooperating with a highly reliable and accountable force. This particular emphasis on accountability was a direct result of the US's democratic institutions and values, as well as their perception as such at a domestic and international level. Concerning Russia's *ex ante* control mode choice, enlistment appeared as the only means for the Kremlin to deny any links to the Wagner Group. Russia's choice to enlist Wagner came at a stark contrast with the US, as this soft *ex ante* control mode allowed the mercenary group to commit war crimes and capture resources

for the benefit of Russia while ensuring plausible deniability. The lack of any oversight over the group's criminal activities therefore supports this thesis' hypothesis as an authoritarian regime is expected to overlook these issues. Iran's choice to grant its authority to Hezbollah was also deeply linked to the regime's authoritarian nature by reflecting its policy of both overt and covert support to NSAGs in the name of the Axis of Resistance without any regard for international law or civilian casualties.

However, the hypothesis also seemed to hold less explanatory value when it came to the hierarchy in each of the three cases. The clarity of the US-SDF partnership's horizontality is vastly different to the blurrier, more hierarchical relationship entertained by Russia and Iran with their respective proxies. This difference in *ex post* controls chosen by the democracy and the two authoritarian regimes supports this thesis' hypothesis and can be once again explained by the importance of accountability mechanisms and transparency in democracies. Conversely, the verticality of the Russia-Wagner relationship appears to be a product of Russia's oligarchic system, but fails to align with the Iran-Hezbollah strategic and ideological partnership, thereby showing variations in *ex post* control modes across the two chosen authoritarian regimes. Throughout this research, several other variables potentially intervened in the observed outcomes, ranging from proxy type to its competence and legitimacy, with the latter forming the core of the Competence-Control model.

This thesis has set out to demonstrate that factors beyond questions of competence and control can influence control mode choice in Abbott et al.'s Principal-Agent model variation. While the regime type variable, characterised by institutional frameworks, checks and balances, values, and the respect for international law, did provide sound explanations for multiple aspects of the three studied relationships, it is important to recognize the Competence-Control model's typology's value in explaining these outcomes. Future research on this model's applications in proxy warfare could broaden the number of cases studied by choosing different conflicts and different timeframes. From a methodological standpoint, it appears important to develop means of approaching the Competence-Control model's control modes using quantitative research methods in order to produce more generalisable research on all the factors shaping a state's controls in proxy warfare.

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