



“The Cheapest Insurance in the World”? The United States and Proxy Warfare

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Abstract

Proxy warfare—that is, conflict in which a “major power instigates or plays a major role in supporting and directing to a conflict but does only a small portion of the actual fighting itself”—is receiving new attention from policymakers, analysts, and practitioners. This study uses a series of four case studies on US involvement in proxy war (the “Secret War” in Laos, the *Contras* in Central America, the African Union Mission in Somalia, and the Syrian Defense Forces) to develop a set of key themes. These themes, in turn, form the basis of a set of rules of thumb to guide senior decision-makers as they contemplate the future use of proxy forces. Finally, this report discusses implications for U.S. Special Operations Forces, which are likely to play an increasingly important role in supporting U.S. proxies.

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Cover image credit: “Tank driver, Lance Corporal Mudondo Zabina, tank commander, Corporal Kyomuhendo Ballet and tank gunner Lance Corporal Otuga Maureen of the Uganda Peoples Defence Forces on their tank.” AU/UN IST PHOTO / David Mutua.

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Executive Summary

Proxy warfare, according to one definition, occurs “when a major power instigates or plays a major role in supporting and directing a party to a conflict but does only a small portion of the actual fighting itself.”* The logic of employing surrogates is as simple as it is compelling. It is a risk-mitigation strategy in which a sponsor seeks to offload military and financial costs onto a proxy—a “principal-agent” arrangement, in the language of social science. For the proxy, such a transactional arrangement offers a wealth of potential opportunities, including the chance to acquire weapons, materiel, intelligence, and other assets.

Proxies (or surrogates) have been a feature of international politics throughout recorded history, and indirect conflict through surrogates is—and is likely to remain—an enduring feature of the international security environment. In the years following the attacks of September 11, 2001, Congress granted the Department of Defense, and US Special Operations Command, significant authorities to organize, train, equip, and advise proxy forces. However, although the United States has had extensive experience employing proxies before, during, and since the Cold War, changes in the security landscape, including the emergence of the so-called era of great-power competition, suggest that the time is ripe for senior civilian and military leaders to assess US capabilities for conducting proxy war, for evaluating costs, risks, and benefits, and for developing policies and programs that will promote US national interests abroad.

This report contributes to such an assessment. First, we present a series of four case studies: two on current proxy wars involving the United States (support to the Syrian Democratic Forces, and support to the African Union Mission in Somalia) and two historical examples (the “Secret War” in Laos, and assistance to the *contras* in Central America). These case studies explore a common set of factors, including US and proxy objectives, the nature of US support, battlefield performance, and strategic and other impacts and consequences. We then used these factors as the foundation for a comparative analysis, which we used to identify seven key themes across the cases:

* Daniel L. Byman, *Why Engage in Proxy War? A State’s Perspective*, Brookings Institution, May 21, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/05/21/why-engage-in-proxy-war-a-states-perspective/>.

1. Proxy forces have helped the United States achieve at least some of its objectives. But the proxies themselves only sometimes achieve their goals.
2. Proxy warfare reduces, but does not eliminate, a US footprint. For example, proxies tend to rely heavily on American airpower.
3. Proxies are most effective when used to fight irregular wars.
4. “Secret” wars do not stay secret for long. Large-scale US support tends to become public knowledge.
5. Proxy warfare is transactional, and relationships with surrogates should not be viewed as permanent.
6. Proxy legitimacy matters. Surrogates that are seen as mere pawns or mercenaries perform less effectively.
7. Proxies are likely to commit human rights abuses, such as deliberately targeting civilians.

Drawing on these themes, we developed a set of rules of thumb that senior civilian and military officials should consider when developing plans, policies, and programs for surrogate-support operations:

- Policy-makers should set limited, reasonable objectives for proxies to accomplish, and even then assume that some, but not all, of these objectives will be achieved.
- Support to proxies is almost by definition messier than direct US military intervention; there are likely to be more second and third-order unanticipated issues to handle, and, as a result, timelines for success are likely to be longer than initially assumed.
- The US must be alert to the fact that it cannot take a completely hands-off approach—the use of surrogates typically reduces the US footprint, but does not eliminate it entirely. Short of limiting one’s support to simply providing cash, most proxies will require at least some measure of US advice, weapons, and materiel, hand-holding and reassurance, and, in many cases, airpower.
- Policy-makers and the US military should restrict the use of proxies to irregular warfare activities against states or other nonstate armed groups, and avoid any temptations to use them as surrogate conventional armies.
- If US support to proxies is covert or clandestine, the US must be prepared for the likelihood that American backing will become public knowledge.
- Proxies are not long-term American partners requiring unending support, and the US must resist the temptation to consider them as such. The sponsor-client relationship is transactional, and the disposability of surrogates is one of the attractive aspects of using them as an instrument of national security.

- Proxies who believe that the United States “has their back” no matter what will be tempted to engage in high-risk behavior on the battlefield. Beyond that, their interests may be contrary to American interests and they may resist US entreaties to change their behavior.
- The US must prepare for the likelihood that surrogates will commit human rights abuses. It must set boundaries and redlines, and be willing to hold systematic and widespread violators accountable.

Although there are pitfalls and hazards associated with using proxy forces, the underlying logic of employing them—their relatively low cost, their disposability, and their deniability—suggests that their continued use will prove to be an attractive foreign policy option for the United States and its rivals and adversaries. Cast in that light, it is our hope that these rules of thumb will help the US to most effectively employ proxy forces in the future.

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Contents

Introduction	1
Approach.....	2
Case Studies	4
Operation Momentum and the “Secret War” in Laos	4
US objectives	6
Proxy objectives.....	7
Nature of support.....	7
Impact	9
US support to the <i>contras</i> in Nicaragua.....	11
US objectives	14
Proxy objectives.....	14
Nature of support.....	17
Impact	18
The United States and the African Union Mission in Somalia.....	20
US objectives	21
Proxy objectives.....	22
Nature of support.....	23
Impact	25
Syrian Democratic Forces and the struggle against ISIS.....	29
US objectives	31
Proxy objectives.....	32
Nature of support.....	33
Impact	36
Case study summary.....	40
Key Themes.....	41
Proxy forces helped the United States achieve at least some of its objectives	41
Proxy warfare reduces, but does not eliminate, a US footprint	42
Proxies should not be “conventionalized”	42
“Secret” wars do not stay secret for long.....	43
Proxy warfare is transactional.....	43
Proxy legitimacy matters	44
Proxies are likely to commit human rights abuses.....	45
Looking Ahead: Rules of Thumb for Policy-Makers	47
Conclusion	49
Figures	51
Tables	52

Abbreviations.....	53
References.....	54

Introduction

Proxy warfare, according to one definition, occurs “when a major power instigates or plays a major role in supporting and directing a party to a conflict but does only a small portion of the actual fighting itself.”¹ Proxies (or surrogates) have been a feature of international politics throughout recorded history (see Figure 1 for a note on definitions). Proxies come in a wide variety of forms: militias, guerrillas, private military companies (that is, mercenaries), and other “useful brigands.”² The logic of employing a surrogate is as simple as it is compelling: Rather than bearing the political, financial, and military burden of direct intervention, states can in effect hire surrogate forces to fight and die on their behalf.

Moreover, using proxies potentially reduces the risk of escalation.³ Such concerns were particularly acute during the Cold War, when every US President authorized the use of surrogates in the belief that the Soviet Union had to be confronted and contained—but without the direct commitment of US forces, which had the potential to lead to large-scale conventional conflict with Moscow, or even nuclear war. President Dwight D. Eisenhower, speaking of foreign assistance generally, but in a way that illuminates the beliefs among policy-makers about related activities such as support to surrogates, described such aid as the cheapest insurance in the world.”⁴

¹ Daniel L. Byman, *Why Engage in Proxy War? A State’s Perspective*, Brookings Institution, May 21, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/05/21/why-engage-in-proxy-war-a-states-perspective/>.

² Candace Rondeaux and David Sterman, *Twenty-First Century Proxy Warfare: A Briefing Document*, New America, November 9, 2018, <https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/reports/twenty-first-century-proxy-warfare>. Theoretically, multinational corporations could also serve as proxies. William Rosenau and Peter Chalk, “Multinational Corporations: Potential Proxies for Counterinsurgency?” in Michael A. Innes (ed.), *Making Sense of Proxy Wars: States, Surrogates and the Use of Force* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2012).

³ While surrogates may reduce the chance of escalation for the United States and other external actors, the introduction of proxies, and with them weapons, money, and materiel, can escalate the level and scope of violence within an arena of conflict.

⁴ Memorandum of Discussion at the 267th Meeting of the National Security Council, Camp David, Maryland, November 21, 1955, *Foreign Relations of the United States* (FRUS), Document ID Number: frus1955-57v10d9, accessed on <http://www.history-lab.org>.

Figure 1. A note on definitions and terminology

Throughout this paper, we use the terms “proxy” and “surrogate” interchangeably. The difference between an armed party acting on a sponsor’s behalf (which Jeffrey M. Bale defines as a “proxy”) and one acting in a sponsor’s place (which he defines as a “surrogate”) is too subtle for the level of our discussion.^a In our synthesis and analysis, we compare proxy conflicts in which proxies do all—or most—of the actual fighting as well as those situations in which, as Pfaff describes it, proxies serve as surrogate ground forces below their sponsors’ air operations.^b

The sponsor may refer to its proxy as a “partner,” but in such a context the term “partner” is used in order to be more diplomatic. As it does with a proxy, notes Shawn T. Cochran, a state provides its partners with material support; however, this assistance comes without pressure or influence from the providing state.^c Of course, there are shades of grey here—as a partnership is built on shared interests, the provision of assistance by one state (i.e., sponsor) to another state or group may result in the latter conducting military operations desired by the former. Exchange can also verge on proxy warfare, and is exactly what happened in the case of some US partners intervening in Somalia. Indeed, George Liska describes “acquisitive aid” as a donor country providing the training and equipment to a recipient so that the recipient can do a job instead of the donor having to do it.^d

There is a much more clearly defined difference between proxies and allies. Geraint Hughes notes that alliances are sealed by formal agreement.^e Similarly, Andrew Mumford refers to alliances as burden-sharing among countries with mutual identities and interests, versus the more short-term relationship between sponsor and proxy.^f A recent New America Foundation report on proxy warfare describes the responsibility all members of an alliance feel toward facing a threat—even if not all members can address it equally.^g

Sources:

^a Jeffrey M. Bale, “Terrorists as State ‘Proxies’: Separating Fact from Fiction,” in Innes, ed., *Making Sense of Proxy Wars*.

^b C. Anthony Pfaff, *Proxy War Norms*, US Army Strategic Studies Institute, Dec. 18, 2017, <https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/index.cfm/articles/Proxy-War-Norms/2017/12/18>.

^c Shawn T. Cochran, “Security Assistance, Surrogate Armies, and the Pursuit of US Interests in Sub-Saharan Africa,” *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 4:1 (Spring 2010), 111-152, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26269782>.

^d George Liska, *The New Statecraft: Foreign Aid in American Foreign Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 112-3.

^e Hughes, *My Enemy’s Enemy*.

^f Andrew Mumford, *Proxy Warfare* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013), 16.

^g Candace Rondeaux and David Sterman, *Twenty-First Century Proxy Warfare: Confronting Strategic Innovation in a Multipolar World*, New America Foundation, February 2019, https://d1y8sb8igg2f8e.cloudfront.net/documents/Twenty-First_Century_Proxy_Warfare_Final.pdf.

Typically, proxies are employed in conflicts where the sponsor's interests are perceived as significant but not vital. During the Cold War, American interventions in countries such as Angola, Laos, and Nicaragua were by proxy. Quite simply, these countries were considered to be of insufficient strategic importance to justify the commitment of US troops. But under the zero-sum logic of the Cold War, writes Geraint Hughes, "the USA had to automatically deny the USSR and its allies any advantage gained from a Communist takeover in a Third World state, no matter how peripheral"—hence, America's decision to engage surrogates.⁵

The Cold War may have been the "golden age" for proxy wars, but the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 did not mark the end of this type of conflict. Although the security environment has changed in significant ways since the end of the bipolar global order—for example, the emergence of multiple sources of international power, both state and non-state—the logic that undergirded the superpowers' use of proxies remains.

Today, states continue to pursue risk-mitigation strategies that reduce the potential for direct conflict between important powers by off-loading political and military burdens. Russia's use of proxies in Ukraine, Syria, and Libya—and, as will be discussed later in this paper, America's employment of proxies in Syria and Somalia—offer ample evidence that interventions at arm's length remain an important feature on the landscape of international security. For the United States, wrote a former commander of US Army Central, "the introduction of partner forces...mitigates US risk acceptance calculus and leads to anticipated, greater potential for enduring regional stability."⁶

It is also worth noting that today's proxy wars, like those during the Cold War, are essentially *irregular* wars. While some policy-makers, practitioners, and analysts have conflated the so-called era of "Great Power Competition" with large-scale, state-on-state violence, the evidence suggests that John Mueller was correct in 1990 when he announced the obsolescence of major war.⁷ Given the staggering cost of conventional conflict, let alone nuclear war, "most competition with Russia, China, North Korea and Iran will likely be irregular," according to Seth

⁵ Geraint Hughes, *My Enemy's Enemy: Proxy Warfare in International Politics* (Brighton, UK: Sussex Academic Press, 2014), 23.

⁶ Michael X. Garrett, William H. Dunbar, Bryan C. Hilferty, and Robert R. Rodock, "The By-With-Through Approach: An Army Component Perspective," *Joint Forces Quarterly* 89:2 (2018), 48-55, https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/jfq/jfq-89/jfq-89_48-55_Garrett-et-al.pdf.

⁷ John Mueller, "The Obsolescence of Major War," *Bulletin of Peace Proposals* 21, no. 3 (September 1990); and Thomas S. Szayna et al., *Conflict Trends and Conflict Drivers: An Empirical Assessment of Historical Conflict Patterns and Future Conflict Projections*, Rand Corporation, 2017, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1063.html.

Jones.⁸ The 2018 *US National Defense Strategy (NDS)*, while stressing the enduring importance of maintaining the ability to fight and win high-end conflicts, also insists that the United States must continue to be able to counter adversaries in environments short of all-out war, thereby suggesting *inter alia* a role for support to proxy forces.⁹

If the United States continues to employ surrogates (and there is every indication that it will), American decision-makers should make a careful assessment of the roles, missions, functions, and capabilities the United States requires for waging proxy warfare. Given the scale of America's use of proxies during the Cold War, it is essential to review those experiences and glean insights for current and future operations. But the international security environment obviously has changed, and so it also is necessary to consider more recent cases. This paper offers a series of insights into what employing proxies means for US foreign policy, the advantages and disadvantages that proxies bring, the risks that come with their use, and how to mitigate the effects of those risks.

Approach

This report includes three major components: (1) a series of four case studies that explore US involvement in proxy wars, both historical (Laos and Nicaragua) and ongoing (Somalia and Syria); (2) a set of key themes derived from a cross-case comparative analysis; and (3) potential rules of thumb for senior decision-makers to employ while considering the use of proxies.

Cases were selected using three criteria: (1) each involved large-scale and protracted US engagement; (2) rich, unclassified data, including primary sources, were readily available; and (3) the cases reflected a variety of conflicts, missions, and operations, including support to insurgency and resistance, counterterrorism, and counterinsurgency. Each case considered the following elements (or "factors"): US objectives; proxy goals; the nature and provision of US support, and impact. "Impact" explores topics including strategic outcomes (for both sponsor and proxy); diplomatic and political consequences; human rights abuses; secrecy; legitimacy; the US "footprint;" and the termination of US support.¹⁰

⁸ Seth Jones, "The Future of Warfare is Irregular," *The National Interest*, August 26, 2018, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/future-warfare-irregular-29672>.

⁹ US Department of Defense (DOD), "Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America," undated, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

¹⁰ This framework is a modified version of one developed by Hughes in *My Enemy's Enemy*.

Drawing from these elements, the paper then develops a set of key themes, such as the fundamentally transactional nature of proxy warfare; the challenge of maintaining secrecy; and the likelihood that proxies will be human-rights abusers. Building on the key themes, the paper then develops rules of thumb for policy-makers, concerning such matters as the importance of maintaining the transactional nature of US support to proxies, of establishing realistic expectations for surrogate performance, and of holding proxies accountable for human rights abuses. US experiences supporting the mujahideen in Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation and to the Sons of Iraq during the so-called Awakening also helped inform these key themes.¹¹

¹¹ The literature on US assistance to proxies in Afghanistan and Iraq is vast and the episodes relatively well known. Rather than rehash these operations, the authors chose to focus on developing cases that are less well known but analytically rich. For more on Afghanistan and Iraq, see Bruce Riedel, *What We Won: America's Secret War in Afghanistan, 1979-89* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2014); John Prados, "Notes on the CIA's Secret War in Afghanistan," *The Journal of American History* 89, No. 2 (September 2002); Joel D. Rayburn and Frank K. Sobchak, *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War, Vol. 2, Surge and Withdrawal, 2007-2011*, US Army War College Press, January 2019, <https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/display.cfm?pubID=1376>; and Carter Malkasian, "Anbar's Illusions," *Foreign Policy*, June 24, 2017, *Foreign Affairs*, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iraq/2017-06-24/anbars-illusions>.

Case Studies

This section explores four cases involving US support to surrogate forces. Each case explores American and proxy objectives; the nature of US support; and the overall impact of that support, including strategic, political, and military effects and outcomes.

Operation Momentum and the “Secret War” in Laos

By early 1961, tiny, poor, and landlocked Laos (see Figure 2) was in crisis. The US-assisted Royal Lao Government (RLG) was at war with “neutralist” forces supported by the Soviet Union, and with the Pathet Lao, a communist resistance movement that had the backing of neighboring North Vietnam. The RLG’s corrupt and incompetent army, the *Forces Armées Royales* (FAR), appeared close to defeat. Outgoing US President Dwight D. Eisenhower had warned his successor, John F. Kennedy, that this seemingly insignificant and barely functioning Southeast Asian state was the “cork in the bottle,” and that if the communists were to come to power, it would be “the beginning of the loss of most of the Far East.”¹²

The logic of the Cold War required Kennedy to take action, although he ruled out direct American military intervention as disproportionate to the limited US interests at stake.¹³ Instead, he sent a trusted advisor to negotiate an agreement that included the Soviet Union, the United States, and 12 other European and Asian nations. Under the terms of the 1962 Geneva Accord, and under terms negotiated among the Laotian factions, Laos would be “neutralized,” with all foreign military personnel required to leave the country, and a coalition government, which included neutralists and communists, would be formed. The Americans and the Soviets

¹² US Department of State (DOS), Office of the Historian, “The Lao Crisis, 1960-1963,” undated, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1961-1968/laos-crisis>. The administration was underwhelmed by the capabilities of the FAR. In the judgement of John Kenneth Galbraith, the US ambassador to India, “as a military ally, the entire Laos nation is clearly inferior to a battallion of conscientious objecters from World War I,” adding that “we get nothing from their support.” Quoted in Seth Jacobs, *The Universe Unraveling: American Foreign Policy in Cold War Laos* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012), 240.

¹³ Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), *CIA and the Wars in Southeast Asia 1947-75*, Studies in Intelligence Anthology, September 2016, <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/books-and-monographs/Anthology-CIA-and-the-Wars-in-Southeast-Asia/index.html>.

withdrew their forces, but North Vietnamese military units remained. The neutrality of Laos was a fiction, but it was in the interest of all the relevant powers to maintain the narrative. In fact, the United States was hedging its bets. On one of his last days in office, Eisenhower had authorized a covert action intended to bring pressure to bear on the Pathet Lao and its North Vietnamese counterpart, the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN). For the next 13 years, Operation Momentum would organize, advise, supply, and transport a proxy force of ethnic Hmong that would grow to some 30,000 men.¹⁴

Figure 2. Laos



Source: Source: CIA, The World Factbook.

¹⁴ American special operations forces also served in an advisory and training capacity. Beginning in 1959, under Project White Star, US Army Special Forces detachments advised FAR personnel, and later, under CIA direction, Hmong and other irregular tribal forces. The White Star teams were withdrawn following the 1962 Geneva Accord. For more on White Star, see Alfred H. Paddock, Jr., "Personal Memories of Project White Star in Laos, 1961," *Small Wars Journal*, undated, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/personal-memories-of-operation-white-star-in-laos-1961>.

Figure 3. A Hmong guerrilla company assembles in Phou Vieng, 1961



Source: Source: Wikimedia Commons,
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Weapons_of_the_Laotian_Civil_War#/media/File:Hmongs.jpg.

US objectives

For senior national security officials in the Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon administrations, building a Hmong army (Figure 3) covertly seemed like an ideal course of action that enabled the US government to preserve the fiction of a neutral Laos, while at the same time maintaining pressure on North Vietnamese forces and their Pathet Lao surrogates, and maintaining Laos as a non-communist buffer state. As the US military commitment to South Vietnam grew substantially in 1964 and 1965, the Hmong and other tribal irregulars assumed an additional burden: gathering intelligence and targeting information on PAVN supply convoys moving along the so-called Ho Chi Minh Trail—a complex network of tracks, paths, bridges, and roads stretching from North Vietnam, through Laos and Cambodia, and into South Vietnam—and carrying out limited attacks against them.¹⁵

¹⁵ For the major belligerents, Laos was always something of sideshow, important primarily for its role as a supply corridor into the “main event” taking place across the border in South Vietnam. For more on the use of so-called roadwatch teams in Southeast Laos and other intelligence and interdiction efforts along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, see William Rosenau, *Special Operations Forces and Elusive Enemy Ground Targets: Lessons from Vietnam and the Persian Gulf War* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2002), chapter 2.

Proxy objectives

Scholars and analysts have offered two primary explanations for the decision of Hmong leaders to join the American-backed resistance program. The first is anticommunism, or more properly, the fear of potential horrors of life under Pathet Lao rule, and a deep-seated hatred of the North Vietnamese, a traditional enemy. The second explanation centers on the poverty and discrimination suffered by the Hmong, a highland minority ethnic group despised by lowland Laotians. According to this view, the Hmong saw siding with the Americans as an opportunity for greater self-rule and a better way of life.¹⁶ Moreover, there was widespread belief among the Hmong that the United States had made an unbreakable commitment to the ethnic group's survival in the event that the communists prevailed in Laos.¹⁷

Nature of support

In the earlier days of Operation Momentum, the focus of US support was on developing Hmong capabilities for village self-defense and for guerrilla operations against the Pathet Lao.¹⁸ The CIA provided financial support, unsophisticated but suitable World War II-era weapons and ammunition, food (particularly rice), and, crucially, covert air support—an absolute necessity for moving men, food, and materiel quickly in a country with a very poor network of roads.¹⁹ By mid 1963, nearly 20,000 Hmong irregulars were under the command of General Vang Pao, a mercurial but charismatic and capable leader and the highest-ranking Hmong in the FAR. The CIA presence was minimal—as few as 50 case officers were assigned to Hmong, Lao, and Thai units.²⁰ The bulk of the training was conducted across the border in Thailand by Thai

¹⁶ John Duffy et al., *The Hmong: An Introduction to their History and Culture*, Culture Profile No. 18, June 2004, Center for Applied Linguistics, www.culturalorientation.net/content/.../1373/.../The+Hmong%2C+Culture+Profile.pdf.

¹⁷ “According to a study by the US Department of Health and Human Services, “[t]hough there are several versions of the ‘Promise,’ there can be no doubt that assurances were made to support the Hmong during the war, and to provide assistance in the event Laos was lost to the communists.” Ibid.

¹⁸ DOS, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, Volume XXVIII, *Laos*, memorandum from the Joint Chiefs of Staff to Secretary of Defense McNamara, “Use of Thai Special Forces in Laos,” June 5, 1964, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v28/pg_132.

¹⁹ DOS, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, Volume XXVIII, *Laos*, Memorandum from the Deputy Director for Coordination, Bureau of Intelligence and Research (Scott) to the Special Group, “Report of the Subcommittee on United States Support of Foreign Paramilitary Forces,” January 17, 1964, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v28/d1>. A CIA-owned airline, Air America, shuttled troops, refugees, food, and “hard rice” (that is, ammunition), and carried out reconnaissance and search and rescue operations.

²⁰ James E. Parker, *Covert Ops: The CIA's Secret War in Laos* (New York: St. Martin's Paperbacks, 1995), xx.

personnel. The light American footprint extended to command and control, which was left to the Hmong, albeit with “close-in guidance” from case officers.²¹ The year 1964 marked the beginning of the so-called “secret war” in Northern Laos, when for the first time the US Air Force began conducting close air support for Vang Pao’s army. In 1972, the CIA’s former chief of station in Vientiane, Douglas S. Blaufarb, concluded, “For the first time, sophisticated high-performance aircraft supported a resistance movement of primitive tribesmen, their choice of targets based in good part on intelligence supplied by tribal irregulars.”²² American air power helped give Vang Pao’s forces the ability to stand and fight—they were “guerrillas with a difference,” in Blaufarb’s view.²³ But as the war in South Vietnam intensified, Vang Pao’s army began to change. The CIA’s Bill Lair, the principal architect of Operation Momentum, “had envisioned using Hmong only for hit-and-run tactics and intelligence gathering.”²⁴ Now senior CIA officials, the US embassy in Vientiane, the White House, and Vang Pao himself, saw a new role for the secret army that went beyond hit-and-run tactics, to include direct engagement with the PAVN, easily the most capable fighting force in Southeast Asia.²⁵

In 1969, Vang Pao launched an offensive against the PAVN and Pathet Lao in the *Plaine de Jarres* (PDJ), a strategically important 500-square mile area in northern Laos, not far from North Vietnam. But the victory was short lived. In 1970, two PAVN divisions reclaimed the PDJ and threatened a key Hmong base at Long Tieng that was within striking distance of Vientiane. The North Vietnamese offensive was thwarted, due largely to the vast bomb tonnage delivered by American B-52 bombers.

During the next three years, the Hmong army declined precipitously. Casualties were high, the traditional Hmong social order was under severe strain, recruitment rates were extremely low, and child soldiers were an increasing presence on the battlefield.²⁶

²¹ Thomas L. Ahearn, Jr., *Undercover Armies: CIA and Surrogate Warfare in Laos, 1961-1973*, CIA Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2006, https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/6_UNDERCOVER_ARMIES.pdf.

²² Douglas S. Blaufarb, *Organizing and Managing Unconventional War in Laos, 1962-1970* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, January 1972), ix.

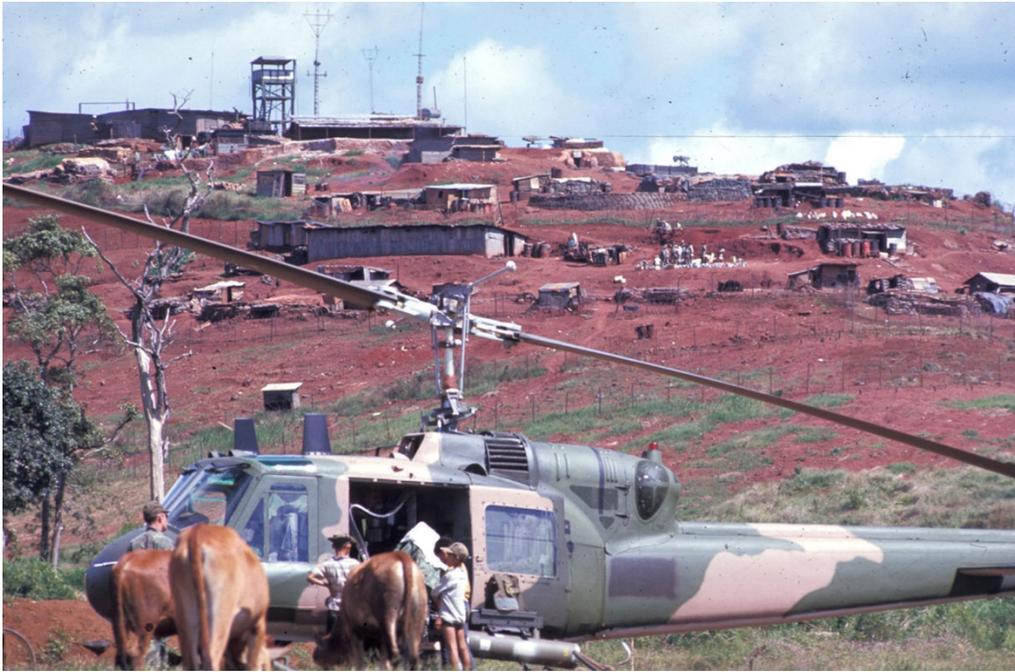
²³ *Ibid.*, 25.

²⁴ Joshua Kurlantzick, *A Great Place to Have a War: America in Laos and the Birth of a Military CIA* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016), 5.

²⁵ Ted Shackley, *Spymaster: My Life in the CIA* (Dulles, VA: Potomac Books, 2005), 138-139.

²⁶ “The war went on and on, and so many men had been killed that boys were becoming soldiers.” Roger Warner, *Out of Laos: A Story of War and Exodus, Told in Photographs* (Rancho Cordova, CA: Southeast Asia Community Resource Center, 1996), unpaginated. According to the CIA, “about 17,000 tribesmen” (most of whom were presumably Hmong) died during the war. CIA, *CIA and the Wars in Southeast Asia 1947-75*.

Figure 4. A US Air Force helicopter from the 20th Special Operations Squadron at a base in Laos, 1970



Source: US Air Force photo by Captain Billie D Tedford.

By 1973, the United States was disengaging from Southeast Asia, and soon American support for Vang Pao's army would end.²⁷ The interests of the sponsor and proxy no longer converged. The last CIA officers left in June 1974. The following year, after the fall of South Vietnam and Cambodia, the Pathet Lao pushed the noncommunists out of power. Thousands of Hmong refugees fled across the border into Thailand.

Impact

Judging from a US perspective, Operation Momentum had successes at tactical, operational, and strategic levels. At a relatively low financial cost, and with a minimal US "footprint" (at least relative to American operations in South Vietnam), irregulars in Northern Laos had managed to tie down multiple PAVN divisions—units that might otherwise have been used against

²⁷ A ceasefire between the RLG and North Vietnam was reached in February 1973, and in April 1974, a coalition government of neutralists, rightists, and the Pathet Lao was established.

American forces in South Vietnam.²⁸ At the strategic level, Operation Momentum contributed to keeping the Laotian “cork in the bottle” from 1961 until the withdrawal of American support, and, with it, the inevitable collapse of noncommunist regimes in Laos, Cambodia, and South Vietnam.

For America’s proxy force, it was an entirely different matter. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the exigencies of great-power diplomacy prevailed over the interests of the Hmong. CIA historian Thomas L. Ahearn, Jr., writes that from the earliest days of Operation Momentum, Vang Pao’s senior officers “had worried about the transitory nature of the US commitment and the future of the Hmong under a disdainful Laotian government.”²⁹ These fears were borne out. After the communist seizure of power in 1975, tens of thousands of Hmong refugees fled the country and languished in squalid camps in Thailand. The journalist and scholar Jane Hamilton-Merritt describes conditions in the Ban Vinai camp: “Here . . . was the pitiful human residue of the US-backed war in Laos. Here were some of the “little guys” who had survived the holocaust in Laos. They were crying for help and few were listening.”³⁰ In retirement, G. McMurtrie Godley, the US ambassador to Laos from 1969 to 1973, offered this postmortem: “We *used* the Meo [Hmong] . . . It was a dirty business.”³¹

Summaries of some of the key elements of this case are shown below for the US (Table 1) and for the Hmong (Table 2).

²⁸ According to Kurlantzick, the United States was spending \$500 million (roughly \$3 billion in 2019 dollars) annually on the Hmong army. This was not an insignificant sum, to be sure, but was tiny when compared to the amount the US spent on South Vietnam—a total of \$738 billion (in constant fiscal year 2011 dollars) between 1965 and 1975. Kurlantzick, *A Great Place to Have a War*, 5; and Stephen Daggett, *Costs of Major US Wars*, Congressional Research Service, June 29, 2010, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/RS22926.pdf>.

²⁹ Ahearn, *Undercover Armies*, 457.

³⁰ Jane Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains: The Hmong, the Americans, and the Secret War for Laos* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), 15.

³¹ Quoted in Roger Warner, *Back Fire* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 362. Emphasis in original. Eventually, tens of thousands of Hmong, including Vang Pao, were resettled in the United States, although only after long opposition by elements within the US government, including the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

Table 1. Secret war in Laos: Sponsor factors

Objective(s)	Objective achieved?	Secrecy maintained?	Footprint	Political / Diplomatic Consequences	Ending Support
Neutral Laos; containment/harrassment of North Vietnamese forces	Yes, until US withdrew; yes, NVA divisions pinned down	No—the war became an open secret	Small in terms of US personnel	Thousands of Hmong became refugees	Withdrew support as part of wider disengagement from Vietnam war

Table 2. Secret war in Laos: Proxy factors

Objective(s)	Objectives Achieved?	Human Rights	Legitimacy	Irregular Operations
Maintain/strengthen autonomy	No—Large number of Hmong forced to flee Laos	Use of child soldiers	Widely viewed among Hmong as legitimate resistance force	Yes, but “conventionalized” over time

US support to the *contras* in Nicaragua

In July 1979, the Sandinista National Liberation Front (*Frente Sandinista Liberación Nacional*, or FSLN) overthrew Nicaragua’s long-time, US-backed dictator, Anastasio “Tachito” Somoza Debayle.³² (Figure 5 shows a map of Nicaragua.) Daniel Ortega, a Sandinista leader, became head of the provisional Junta of National Reconstruction (*Junta de Gobierno de Reconstrucción Nacional*, or JGRN), which included a range of radical and more moderate elements who had driven Somoza from power.

Even before the revolution, Ortega and other senior FSLN figures had developed close ties with the Fidel Castro government, and, as the revolutionaries consolidated power, they deepened their relationship with Cuba as well as the Soviet Union. In addition, the Sandinistas undertook

³² The Sandinistas, founded in Havana in 1961, was a broad-based insurgent movement, whose main slogan, “Down with Somoza,” “was at once a call for rebellion by the poor, an appeal for unity among different classes, and an indictment of years of US support for a spectacularly corrupt regime.” Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge, UK, and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 339.

what one scholar termed “a determined drive for political hegemony”³³ and the forging of what Interior Minister Tomás Borge called a “new reality,”³⁴ including the creation of collective farms and the forced relocation in December 1981 of thousands of Moskito Indians, who had opposed the nationalization of untitled lands.³⁵ As the Sandinistas adopted increasing radical policies, there was an exodus of moderates from the JGRN.

Figure 5. Nicaragua



Source: CIA, The World Factbook.

During the administration of President Jimmy Carter, the United States had criticized human rights abuses of Somoza and his notorious National Guard but carefully avoided encouraging the FSLN because of its ties to Havana and Moscow and the Marxist-Leninist orientation of

³³ Hal Brands, *Latin America's Cold War* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2010), 211.

³⁴ Quoted in *ibid.*, 211.

³⁵ Minorities at Risk (MAR), “Assessment for Indigenous Peoples in Nicaragua,” undated, <http://www.mar.umd.edu/assessment.asp?groupId=9302>.

some of the revolution's key figures.³⁶ When Ronald Reagan was elected President in 1980, he took a different, harder approach to the revolution underway in Nicaragua. Washington severed formal ties with Managua, and, in December 1981, Reagan approved \$19 million in covert assistance to train 500 resistance fighters to oppose the Sandinista regime (Figure 6).³⁷

Figure 6. Contra fighters in the Nueva Guinea zone of southeastern Nicaragua, 1987



Source: Wikimedia Common. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Contra_commandas_1987.jpg.

³⁶ US Department of State, Office of the Historian, "Central America, 1977-1980," <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1977-1980/central-america-carter>. In addition, Carter reportedly authorized "non-military covert action" in an attempt to steer the course of the revolution in a non-Marxist direction. James P. Rowles, "U.S. Covert Operations Against Nicaragua and their Legality under Conventional and Customary International Law," *University of Miami Inter-American Law Review*, <http://repository.law.miami.edu/umialr/vol17/iss3/2>.

³⁷ Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The World Was Going Our Way: The KGB and the Battle for the Third World* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 129. Some support to the contras, such as humanitarian assistance, would be done openly, but much of it was handled covertly, essentially for reasons of statecraft. As Secretary of State George Schultz told the National Security Council (NSC) in January 1986, "We need to make it covert in order to go to other countries to ask for support." White House, NSC, "Review of US Policy in Central America," January 10, 1986, www.thereaganfiles.com. But American backing for the contras did not remain hidden from the public for long—the *Washington Post* revealed the covert action in 1982. Gregory F. Treverton, "Covert Action: From 'Covert' to Overt," *Daedalus* 116, no. 2 (Spring 1987), 95.

US objectives

Although two other countries, Argentina and Honduras, also provided assistance to *contra* factions, the United States was by far the biggest supporter of the anti-Sandinista resistance, which by 1986 would total some 14,000–16,000 fighters, known collectively as the *contras* (“counterrevolutionaries”).³⁸ American assistance took place during a period of intense competition between Washington and Moscow (the latter had its own headstrong proxy in the region, namely Cuba).³⁹ Reagan insisted that the United States did not intend to overthrow the Sandinista government but merely wanted to stop the flow of arms from the FSLN to regimes in the region friendly to the United States, particularly El Salvador, and prevent what the President in 1983 called the “export of violence and subversion.”⁴⁰ According to a September 1981 National Intelligence Estimate, Nicaragua had become “the hub of the revolutionary wheel in Central America” and a potential toehold in the region for the Soviet Union.⁴¹

Reagan was wary of direct US military intervention in Nicaragua, and acutely conscious that there would likely be intense opposition to “another Vietnam”—hence, his administration’s decision to support proxy forces. And while Reagan resisted the idea that the United States was attempting to bring down the FSLN government, he was certainly open to at least some form of regime change. When asked in February 1985 whether the United States was seeking to topple the Sandinistas, the President replied, “Well, remove it in the sense of its present structure, in which it is a Communist totalitarian state.”⁴²

Proxy objectives

The armed anti-Sandinista resistance was not monolithic—its membership was drawn from three distinct elements in Nicaraguan society:

³⁸ White House, National Security Council (NSC), “National Security Council Meeting: Review of US Policy in Central America,” January 10, 1986, <http://www.thereaganfiles.com/19860110-nsc-128-central.pdf>.

³⁹ Robert Vickers, “Intelligence and Punta Huete Airfield: A Symbol of Past Soviet/Russian Strategic Interest in Central America,” *Studies in Intelligence* 60, no. 2 (June 2016), 13.

⁴⁰ Ronald Reagan, “Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on Central America,” April 27, 1983, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/research/speeches/42783d>.

⁴¹ Director of Central Intelligence, *Insurgency and Instability in Central America*, NIE 82/83-81, September 1981, https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000115454.pdf.

⁴² Quoted in Hedrick Smith, “Reagan Hurls the Harshes Broadside Yet at Nicaragua,” *New York Times*, February 24, 1985, <https://www.nytimes.com/1985/02/24/weekinreview/reagan-hurls-the-harshes-broadside-yet-at-nicaragua.html>.

- Former members of the national guard and other *Somocistas* who fought the Sandinistas on behalf of the dictatorship
- Opponents of Somoza who had actively supported the overthrow of the Somoza dictatorship but felt betrayed by the FSLN once it assumed power
- Those who had not participated actively in the revolution but opposed what they saw as the Sandinistas' antidemocratic turn⁴³

Formed in 1981 through the consolidation of a number of small exile groups based in Honduras, the Nicaraguan Democratic Force (*Fuerza Democrática Nicaragüense*, or FDN) would become the largest and most active of the *contra* groups. The FDN's military command structure was dominated by figures from the Somoza regime, including former national guard members, such as Enrique Bermudez, the FDN commander from 1980 to 1983.⁴⁴ The FDN, which operated out of bases in Honduras, sought to overthrow the Sandinista regime, primarily through the force of arms.

Based in Costa Rica, the Democratic Revolutionary Alliance (*Alianza Revolucionaria Democrática*, or ARDE) was composed primarily of former Sandinistas, and was led by a renegade FSLN guerrilla, Edén Pastora, who had been a battlefield hero in the struggle against the Somoza dictatorship.⁴⁵ In the view of the ARDE, Ortega and other FSLN leaders had betrayed the revolution by failing to fulfill its promise of political pluralism, a free press, free elections, and a mixed economy. The ARDE operated in what was known as the Southern Front, but despite a shared anti-Sandinista agenda, Pastora's force refused to operate with the FDN, owing to the heavy presence of *Somocistas*.

⁴³ US House and US Senate, *Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair*, H. Rept. No. 100-433, S. Rept. No. 100-216, November 1987, Hathi Trust, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015014635240;view=1up;seq=1>.

⁴⁴ Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, "Nicaragua: Origins and Activities of the Nicaraguan Democratic Forces (FDN); Whether its Members Participated in War Crimes or Crimes Against Humanity; Whether it Still Exists (1981-February 2000)," February 10, 2000, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6ad712c.html>.

⁴⁵ *Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair*; and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), "Background: The California Story," undated, <https://www.cia.gov/library/reports/general-reports-1/cocaine/report/background.html>.

Figure 7. A child soldier at a contra base camp on the Honduras-Nicaragua border, January 1984



Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/michaeldjohns/2960235713>.

Other anti-Sandinista groups did forge relationships with the FDN, albeit uneasy ones. Along the Atlantic Coast, the leaders of the Moskitos and other indigenous peoples had been accused by the FSLN government of fomenting counter-revolution and separatism. While indigenous groups did in fact take up arms against the Sandinista regime, they were in general not motivated by the strident anticommunism of the FDN—rather, they opposed what they considered to be the FSLN’s “violent dismissal” of indigenous culture, its nationalization of untitled lands, and its heavy-handed attempts at social and economic reform.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Mateo Cayetano Jarquin, “Red Christmases: the Sandinistas, Indigenous Rebellion, and the Origins of the Nicaraguan Revolution,” *Cold War History* 18, no. 1 (2018), 95.

Nature of support

The FDN on the Northern Front was the primary recipient of US covert assistance.⁴⁷ The nature and extent of that support varied over time, due in large measure to efforts by the US Congress to limit the scope of US involvement.⁴⁸ CIA support included what the agency called “political action”—that is, financial and material support intended to help the *contras* to “exert pressure on the Sandinistas to return to the original promise of the revolution.”⁴⁹ “Paramilitary action” included the training and equipping of *contra* fighters as well as advising the *contra* leadership.⁵⁰ CIA officers also provided “guidance and media assistance ... to promote pluralism, human rights” and other US objectives.⁵¹ Among the most controversial aspects of the covert action was the CIA’s involvement in the mining of Nicaraguan harbors in 1984, an effort aimed at sabotaging the country’s economy and generating military momentum for the *contras*.⁵² Finally, the United States assisted the *contras* indirectly by waging economic warfare against the Managua government, which included a trade embargo and the blocking of loans from the World Bank and International Monetary Fund.

⁴⁷ For relatively brief periods, the CIA also supported indigenous groups in Eastern Nicaragua, and the ARDE, which operated from bases in Costa Rica.

⁴⁸ An amendment to the fiscal year 1983 defense appropriations bill (the so-called Boland Amendment) prohibited the CIA from spending funds “for the purpose of overthrowing the government of Nicaragua,” but permitted assistance to the *contras* if it was for other objectives, such as interdicting weapons flows. In December 1983, Congress placed a \$24 million spending cap on the program, an amount far below what the administration requested. In October 1984, a second Boland Amendment cut off all *contra* support from October 3, 1984, through December 19, 1985. The CIA began withdrawing personnel from the region, but the National Security Council continued to assist the resistance, and in so doing set in motion what became known as the Iran-Contra scandal. US Department of Justice (USDOJ), Office of the Inspector General, *Report of Investigation: Allegations of Connections Between CIA and the Contras in Cocaine Trafficking in the United States*, Vol. I, “Appendix A: Background on United States Funding of the Contras,” January 29, 1998, <https://oig.justice.gov/special/9712/appa.htm>.

⁴⁹ White House, “Scope of CIA Activities Under the Nicaragua Finding,” July 12, 1982, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB210/index.htm>.

⁵⁰ USDOJ, *Report of Investigation*, “Central Intelligence Agency Involvement with the Contras.”

⁵¹ White House, “Scope of CIA Activities.”

⁵² John F. Burns, “Moscow Holds U.S. Responsible for Mines off Nicaragua’s Ports,” *New York Times*, March 22, 1984; Memorandum from George J. Tenet (Senate Select Committee on Intelligence) to JH, “Direct U.S. Involvement in the Mining of Nicaraguan Harbors,” April 9, 1984, <http://digitalcollections.library.cmu.edu/awweb/awarchive?type=file&item=471883>.

Impact

As a political-military force, the *contra* factions were of dubious capability. They failed to capture or hold much territory inside Nicaragua, spark an uprising against the Managua government, or modify the leftward drift of the revolution—all ostensible goals of the Reagan administration. Indeed, the FSLN responded to *contra* attacks with increasingly authoritarian internal-security measures rather than greater political openness. The *contras* drew almost all of their external support (including aerial resupply) through American channels, and it is highly unlikely that they could have survived on their own, particularly in the face of increasingly effective operations by FSLN counterinsurgency battalions.⁵³

That said, by 1987, the FSLN was feeling the combined pressure of sustained *contra* attacks (primarily on infrastructure and agricultural targets, most notably the coffee industry, a critical source of foreign exchange) and US economic coercion. That year represented the peak of *contra* military activity, when 10,000–12,000 fighters were infiltrated into Nicaragua.⁵⁴ In the words of one scholar, the “specter of chronic guerrilla insurgency, sustained by US aid and Honduran sanctuaries, exerted additional pressure on the Sandinista government to seek a political solution.”⁵⁵ In 1988, the Sandinistas and the resistance had signed a cease-fire agreement, and two years later, opposition forces mounted a stunning electoral upset that drove the Sandinista president and the FSLN from power. It would be ludicrous to say that the anti-Sandinista resistance alone was responsible for the 1990 outcome. The FSLN was driven from power, but not by military means, as the Reagan administration had hoped. The *contra* operations—particularly attacks on softer economic targets—combined with US economic warfare, self-destructive Sandinista economic and social policies, and ruinous defense spending and inflation—contributed to the FSLN’s downfall. The resistance did not prevail on the battlefield, win “hearts and minds,” or seize power, but it did achieve one of its objectives, albeit indirectly.

However, a careful net assessment of US support to proxies must do more than evaluate whether a proxy has won or lost, directly or indirectly. In the case of the *Contras*, there were

⁵³ White House, NSC, “National Security Council Meeting: Review of US Policy in Central America,” January 10, 1986.

⁵⁴ USDOJ, *Report of Investigation*, “Central Intelligence Agency Involvement with the Contras.”

⁵⁵ Kenneth Robert, “Bullying and Bargaining: The United States, Nicaragua, and Conflict Resolution in Central America,” *International Security* 15, no. 2 (Fall 1990), 93. Even without the war, “the Nicaraguan economy would have faced a serious crisis in the mid-1980s,” writes another scholar. “The war tipped it into chaos.” William M. Leogrande, “Making the Economy Scream: US Economic Sanctions Against Sandinista Nicaragua,” *Third World Quarterly* 17, no. 2 (1996), 342.

aftershocks, all of them negative—for Nicaragua, for the region, and for the United States itself. Human rights abuses were appalling, and, while both sides were guilty of atrocities, US-backed forces were the far bigger offenders.⁵⁶ The total psychological, social, and economic toll of these abuses is impossible to measure with any precision—however, we can say that the war left 30,000 dead (a huge number for a small country such as Nicaragua) and generated some 100,000 refugees, as well as massive employment and hyperinflation. There were also direct political consequences for the United States, not least of which was the so-called Iran-Contra scandal. Faced with congressional opposition, and desperate to continue to provide support to US proxies, Reagan administration officials entered into a criminal conspiracy that badly tarnished the administration’s image.

Summaries of some of the key elements of this case are shown below for the US (Table 3) and for the *contras* (Table 4).

Table 3. Contras: Sponsor factors

Objective(s)	Objective achieved?	Secrecy maintained?	Footprint	Political/Diplomatic Consequences	Ending Support
Prevent emergence of “another Cuba”; regime change	Yes; revolution contained; FSLN voted out	No—US support quickly revealed	Relatively small in terms of US personnel	Iran-Contra scandal a major blow to Reagan administration prestige	Congress ends military assistance

Table 4. Contras: Proxy factors

Objective(s)	Objectives Achieved?	Human Rights	Legitimacy	Irregular Operations
Regime change; return to power	FSLN voted out of power, but <i>contras</i> excluded	Child soldiers; attacks on noncombatants	Low—widely perceived as US puppets	Yes—hit-and-run tactics, attacks on infrastructure and agriculture

⁵⁶ Westad, *The Global Cold War*, 347.

The United States and the African Union Mission in Somalia

Somalia (see Figure 8) has been a failed state since the 1991 overthrow of Siad Barre. In December 2006, Ethiopia invaded Somalia unilaterally in order to topple the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), which had taken control of Mogadishu.

In January 2007, the African Union (AU) established the AU Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) to maintain peace in the Somali capital after the ICU's ouster. Uganda was the first nation to contribute peacekeepers, followed by Burundi. Today, five African nations contribute military forces to AMISOM:⁵⁷ Uganda (over 6,000 troops),⁵⁸ Burundi (almost 5,500 troops),⁵⁹ Ethiopia (nearly 4,500 troops),⁶⁰ Kenya (more than 3,500 troops),⁶¹ and Djibouti (nearly 1,000 troops).⁶²

Al-Shabab, an Al-Qaeda affiliate, is the main threat to security and stability in Somalia and the Horn of Africa. The group's national agenda includes overthrowing the Somali government and establishing its own version of Islamic rule.⁶³

The United States has supported AMISOM since 2007. Somali security and governance have improved over this time—though from a very low baseline.⁶⁴

⁵⁷ From 2013-2014, several hundred troops from Sierra Leone deployed to Kismayo, Somalia, as part of AMISOM. See <http://amisom-au.org/2015/01/sierra-leone-contingent-return-home/>.

⁵⁸ <http://amisom-au.org/uganda-updf/>.

⁵⁹ <http://amisom-au.org/burundi/>.

⁶⁰ <http://amisom-au.org/ethiopia-endf/>.

⁶¹ <http://amisom-au.org/kenya-kdf/>.

⁶² <http://amisom-au.org/djibouti/>.

⁶³ Pamela G. Faber, *Al-Shabab: An Al-Qaeda Affiliate Case Study*, CNA, October 2017, DIM-2017-U-016115-2Rev, https://www.cna.org/CNA_files/PDF/DIM-2017-U-016115-2Rev.pdf, 23-4.

⁶⁴ Jonathan Schrodin et al., *Independent Assessment of the Strategic Impact of U.S. Africa Command: Summary Report*, CNA, Sep 2018, DRM-2018-U-017991-2Rev.

Figure 8. Somalia



Source: CIA. The World Factbook.

US objectives

The US objective in Somalia is to deny safe haven to Al-Shabab.⁶⁵ To this end, AMISOM’s success is also a US objective, as it provides a model for countering a threat to US national security and stabilizing under-governed spaces by local partners with limited US forces and support.⁶⁶ “The Somali Model” is a term coined during Ethiopia’s 2006 intervention in Somalia; US support for

⁶⁵ Shawn T. Cochran, “Security Assistance, Surrogate Armies, and the Pursuit of US Interests in Sub-Saharan Africa,” *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 4:1 (Spring 2010), 111-152, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26269782>.

⁶⁶ Carter F. Ham, “TRANSCRIPT: General Ham, Admiral Stavridis Testify Before House Armed Services Committee,” US AFRICOM Public Affairs, Feb. 29, 2012, <http://www.africom.mil/media-room/transcript/8834/transcript-general-ham-admiral-stavridis-testify-b>.

AMISOM builds on that model by using a multinational force, instead of an individual state, as a proxy.⁶⁷

Proxy objectives

AMISOM and, more broadly, the AU have objectives similar to those of the United States. AMISOM seeks to defeat Al-Shabab and provide security and stability to Somalia.⁶⁸ The AU also wants to prove the organization's ability to play a role in peace and security on the continent.⁶⁹

As a multilateral proxy, the objectives of AMISOM's individual contributing countries must also be considered. Burundi, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda contribute troops for four main reasons:

- National security concerns: ICU's sheltering of Al-Qaeda operatives and the development of Al-Shabab as an Al-Qaeda affiliate posed a direct security threat to Somalia's neighbors.⁷⁰
- Prestige: Kenya and Ethiopia both view and present themselves as leading players in East Africa and on the continent.⁷¹ Burundi wants the international community to consider the country an exporter of peace and security—despite internal political repression and abuses.⁷²

⁶⁷ Cochran, "Security Assistance, Surrogate Armies, and the Pursuit of US Interests in Sub-Saharan Africa," 111-152.

⁶⁸ <https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/oped/editorial/Amisom-withdrawal-Somalia/434752-4187776-9lrgqz/index.html>.

⁶⁹ <http://www.peaceau.org/uploads/psc-579-com-somalia-29-02-2016-eng-.pdf>.

⁷⁰ <http://amisom-au.org/kenya-kdf/>; https://gadebate.un.org/sites/default/files/gastatements/69/KE_EN.pdf; https://gadebate.un.org/sites/default/files/gastatements/64/64_KE_en.pdf.

⁷¹ https://gadebate.un.org/sites/default/files/gastatements/70/70_KE_en.pdf; https://gadebate.un.org/sites/default/files/gastatements/65/65_ET_en.pdf.

⁷² <https://gadebate.un.org/en/73/burundi>; <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/burundi/>.

- Increased assistance: US security assistance and training have increased to those countries that are contributing armed forces.⁷³ Further, the United Nations and European Union contribute salaries for forces deployed as part of AMISOM.⁷⁴
- Regional rivalries: Ethiopia's longstanding involvement in Somalia is related to its regional rivalry with Eritrea.⁷⁵

Nature of support

Since 2007, the United States provides AMISOM-contributing forces with bilateral pre-deployment peacekeeping, logistics, and other advanced training.⁷⁶ US Africa Command (AFRICOM) also holds an annual East Africa joint exercise, called Justified Accord, which focuses on skills necessary for the AMISOM mission.⁷⁷

The African partner nations also receive US military equipment for use in their AMISOM mission. This includes everything from medical supplies and logistical equipment, to mine-resistant vehicles, and transport, reconnaissance, and attack aircraft.⁷⁸

⁷³ Alexis Arieff, *Burundi's Political Crisis: In Brief*, Congressional Research Service, Aug. 7, 2017, R44018, 1; William E. Ward, Testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Mar. 9, 2010, https://www.army.mil/article/35595/africom_posture_statement_ward_reports_annual_testimony_to_congress.

⁷⁴ <http://www.peaceau.org/uploads/psc-579-com-somalia-29-02-2016-eng-.pdf>; https://gadebate.un.org/sites/default/files/gastatements/71/71_KE_en.pdf.

⁷⁵ https://gadebate.un.org/sites/default/files/gastatements/64/64_ET_en.pdf; https://gadebate.un.org/sites/default/files/gastatements/65/65_ET_en.pdf; Shawn T. Cochran, "Security Assistance, Surrogate Armies, and the Pursuit of US Interests in Sub-Saharan Africa," 111-152.

⁷⁶ USAFRICOM Public Affairs Office, *United States Africa Command: The First Three Years ...*, March 2011; Lauren Ploch, *Countering Terrorism in East Africa: The U.S. Response*, Congressional Research Service, Nov. 3, 2010, R41473, 30; USAFRICOM Public Affairs Office, *United States Africa Command: The First Three Years ...*, March 2011; Headquarters United States Africa Command, *United States Africa Command: The First Ten Years*, 2018.

⁷⁷ USAFRICOM Public Affairs Office, *United States Africa Command: The First Three Years ...*, March 2011; Gen. Thomas D. Waldhauser, United States Africa Command 2019 Posture Statement, Feb. 7, 2019, <https://www.africom.mil/media-room/document/31480/u-s-africa-command-2019-posture-statement>.

⁷⁸ Lauren Ploch, *Africa Command: U.S. Strategic Interests and the Role of the U.S. Military in Africa*, Congressional Research Service, Jul. 22, 2011, RL34003, 21; General Carter F. Ham, Testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Mar. 7, 2013; Alexis Arieff, *Burundi's Political Crisis: In Brief*, Congressional Research Service, Aug. 7, 2017, R44018, 11n59; Gen. Thomas D. Waldhauser, United States Africa Command 2018 Posture Statement.

Inside Somalia, US forces provide AMISOM with information operations training to counter Al-Shabab recruitment.⁷⁹ The United States also supports AMISOM through reconnaissance missions, and AFRICOM coordinates between AMISOM and local security forces in Somalia.⁸⁰

Figure 9. Ugandan soldiers from AMISOM in Kurtunwaarey after the town's liberation from Al-Shabab, August 2014



Source: AMISOM photo by Tobin Jones.

In Somalia, US forces advise, assist, and provide direct operational support to AMISOM.⁸¹ The US direct operational role in Somalia in support of AMISOM has also developed over the past decade. In 2012, General Carter Ham, then-AFRICOM Commander, told Congress that US forces in Somalia did not accompany AMISOM.⁸² However, in March 2016, the Pentagon announced

⁷⁹ USAFRICOM Public Affairs Office, *United States Africa Command: The First Three Years ...*, March 2011; Carter F, Ham, "TRANSCRIPT: AFRICOM, EUCOM Commanders Testify Before House Armed Services Committee," US AFRICOM Public Affairs, Mar. 28, 2013, <http://www.africom.mil/media-room/transcript/10553/transcript-africom-eucom-commanders-testify-before-house-armed-services-committee>.

⁸⁰ General David M. Rodriguez, Testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Mar. 6, 2014; Carter F, Ham, "TRANSCRIPT: AFRICOM, EUCOM Commanders Testify Before House Armed Services Committee," US AFRICOM Public Affairs, Mar. 28, 2013, <http://www.africom.mil/media-room/transcript/10553/transcript-africom-eucom-commanders-testify-before-house-armed-services-committee>.

⁸¹ Schrodin et al., *Independent Assessment of the Strategic Impact of U.S. Africa Command: Summary Report*.

⁸² General Carter Ham, Commander, United States Africa Command, 2012 Posture Statement.

that US forces were involved in an AMISOM raid.⁸³ In 2015, the Obama administration widened its justification for US operations in Somalia—which had targeted Al-Qaeda and Al-Shabab operatives since 2007⁸⁴—to include collective defense strikes that protect AMISOM forces.⁸⁵ In March 2017, the Trump administration further expanded justification for US operations in Somalia.⁸⁶ Also in 2017, AFRICOM noted that the number of US ground troops in Somalia had increased from 200 to 500.⁸⁷ In recent years, the US has also provided support to Somali security forces, including the *Danab* rapid assault unit, outside of the AMISOM mission.⁸⁸

Finally, the United States plays an often-overlooked role coordinating among AMISOM’s troop-contributing nations. A 2016 RAND study notes that US military officials from the Djibouti-based Combined Joint Task Force–Horn of Africa conducted regular bilateral visits to regional capitals during major AMISOM offensives in order to coordinate among the military chiefs of the AMISOM contingents.⁸⁹

Impact

AMISOM has been successful in improving Somali security, and its contingent parts have shown improvement in their operations and coordination.⁹⁰ The mission has contributed to disrupting Al-Shabab—limiting its influence in Somalia and its threat to the region, US

⁸³ Peter Cook, “Department of Defense Press Briefing by Pentagon Press Secretary Peter Cook in the Pentagon Briefing Room,” Department of Defense, Mar. 10, 2016, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/690710/departments-of-defense-press-briefing-by-pentagon-press-secretary-peter-cook-in/>.

⁸⁴ <https://www.longwarjournal.org/us-airstrikes-in-the-long-war>.

⁸⁵ Clayton Thomas, *Al Qaeda and U.S. Policy: Middle East and Africa*, Congressional Research Service, Feb. 5, 2018, R43756, 17.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 17n90; Faber, *Al-Shabab: An Al-Qaeda Affiliate Case Study*, 29.

⁸⁷ Thomas, *Al Qaeda and U.S. Policy: Middle East and Africa*, 17.

⁸⁸ Kyle Rempfer, “US troops, nonprofit trainers and a ‘Lightning Brigade’ battle for Somalia,” *Military Times*, May 21, 2019, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-army/2019/05/21/us-troops-nonprofit-trainers-and-a-lightning-brigade-battle-for-somalia/>.

⁸⁹ Seth G. Jones, Andrew M. Liepman, Nathan Chandler, *Counterterrorism and Counterinsurgency in Somalia: Assessing the Campaign Against Al Shabaab*, RAND Corporation, 2016, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR1500/RR1539/RAND_RR1539.pdf.

⁹⁰ General David M. Rodriguez, United States Africa Command 2015 Posture Statement; and Schroden et al., *Independent Assessment of the Strategic Impact of U.S. Africa Command: Summary*.

partners, and direct US national security interests.⁹¹ Further, AMISOM's success against Al-Shabab, with US support, has served as a model for US capacity-building and operations in other locations.⁹²

Until 2010, Al-Shabab was ascendant in Somalia: it had increasing territorial control and AMISOM was relegated to protecting key installations in the capital. Insurgent mistakes and counterinsurgency operations provided Al-Shabab with a series of setbacks since the group's failed "Ramadan Offensive" in September 2010. Al-Shabab's losses contributed to fracturing among the group's leadership and factions. AMISOM took advantage of this crisis by launching a counteroffensive in February 2011, with Al-Shabab withdrawing from the capital that summer. Meanwhile, Kenya and Ethiopia invaded Somalia from the south and west, respectively. Successive AMISOM operations between 2012 and 2014 took more and more territory from Al-Shabab—further reducing the group's ability to fundraise through taxes and extortion. In October 2014, Al-Shabab lost the port city of Baraawe—its last major territorial holding.⁹³

As security improved in Somalia, thousands of refugees returned from neighboring countries.⁹⁴ However, Al-Shabab has not been defeated, and Somalia is still fragile more than a decade after AMISOM began operations.⁹⁵ AMISOM's UN-approved mandate has expanded over its duration, from operating in Mogadishu to providing security and targeting Al-Shabab throughout Somalia.⁹⁶ On the one hand, this is an escalation of AMISOM's involvement; on the other, it is an indicator of the mission's success.

⁹¹ David E. Brown, *AFRICOM at Five Years* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, 2013), 81; Faber, *Al-Shabab: An Al-Qaeda Affiliate Case Study*, 27; Lauren Ploch Blanchard, *U.S.-Kenya Relations: Current Political and Security Issues*, Congressional Research Service, Jul. 23, 2015, R42967, 11.

⁹² General Carter Ham, Commander, United States Africa Command, Posture Statement, 2013; and General Thomas D. Waldhauser, United States Africa Command, Posture Statement, 2017.

⁹³ Faber, *Al-Shabab: An Al-Qaeda Affiliate Case Study*, 13-16.

⁹⁴ Janey Mitchell, "Somali refugees in Kenya begin to return home," BBC News, Jan. 5, 2013, <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-africa-20919467/somali-refugees-in-kenya-begin-to-return-home>.

⁹⁵ <http://www.peaceau.org/uploads/ll-eng-1.pdf>.

⁹⁶ "Mandate: 2006 - 2007," African Union Mission in Somalia, accessed May 1, 2018, <http://amisom-au.org/mandate-2006-2007/>; and "AMISOM Mandate," African Union Mission in Somalia, accessed May 1, 2018, <http://amisom-au.org/amisom-mandate/>.

To this day, AMISOM depends on US airstrikes against Al-Shabab to make it difficult for the militant group to organize.⁹⁷ The individual countries contributing to AMISOM have received valuable training, equipment, and other assistance from the United States through their participation in the mission.⁹⁸ Despite this support, increased operations and responsibilities have overstretched AMISOM's forces and the maintenance and logistics operations that are needed to keep pace.⁹⁹

Figure 10. AMISOM troops on patrol in Marka, July 2017



Source: AMISOM photo by Mohamed Haj.

⁹⁷ Jane Ferguson, "Trump's Military Escalation in Somalia is Spurring Hope and Fear," *New Yorker*, Apr. 5, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/trumps-military-escalation-in-somalia-is-spurring-hope-and-fear>.

⁹⁸ US Africa Command, *United States Africa Command: The First Ten Years*; Shawn T. Cochran, "Security Assistance, Surrogate Armies, and the Pursuit of US Interests in Sub-Saharan Africa," 111-152.

⁹⁹ General David M. Rodriguez, Testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Mar. 8, 2016; <http://www.peaceau.org/uploads/ll-eng-1.pdf>; <http://amisom-au.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/09/Resolution-2182-2014.pdf>

Al-Shabab has adapted to the changed security environment in Somalia. The group continues to regularly conduct insurgent attacks against AMISOM and the Somali government.¹⁰⁰ Further, Al-Shabab has repeatedly threatened—and on occasion successfully targeted—the homelands of AMISOM contributing nations.¹⁰¹ Al-Shabab has attacked inside the homelands of troop-contributing nations, including Uganda in 2010 and Kenya in January 2019.

The contributing nations' goal of increasing their prestige through AMISOM participation appears to be unmet. At the local level, the AU noted that the mission has failed to develop a positive narrative of its efforts for African, and especially Somali, audiences.¹⁰² This negative view could be a result of human rights abuses, which have dogged AMISOM throughout its existence. There have been a number of reported incidents of sexual assault on and exploitation of Somalis.¹⁰³ There have also been indications of detainee abuse and the deliberate killing of civilians by AMISOM troops.¹⁰⁴

AFRICOM has held up AMISOM as “a prominent example of how building the security capacity of our African partners promotes the sharing of costs and responsibilities, supports our national interests, and provides a high return on modest investments.”¹⁰⁵ AMISOM and its contributing nations continue to receive US support for the mission.¹⁰⁶ Indeed, troop levels and targeted strike numbers indicate that the Trump administration has reprioritized security in Somalia.¹⁰⁷

A summary of some of the key elements of this case are shown below for the US (Table 5) and for AMISOM (Table 6).

¹⁰⁰ Lauren Ploch Blanchard, *The September 2013 Terrorist Attack in Kenya: In Brief*, Congressional Research Service, Nov. 14, 2013, R43245, 2.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁰² <http://www.peaceau.org/uploads/ll-eng-1.pdf>.

¹⁰³<http://amisom-au.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/09/Resolution-2182-2014.pdf>;
[http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2297\(2016\)](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2297(2016));
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/09/08/somalia-sexual-abuse-african-union-soldiers>.

¹⁰⁴<http://amisom-au.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/09/Resolution-2182-2014.pdf>;
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/08/13/somalia-au-forces-linked-wedding-killings>.

¹⁰⁵ Brown, *AFRICOM at Five Years*, 33-34.

¹⁰⁶ General David M. Rodriguez, Testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Mar. 8, 2016.

¹⁰⁷ Clayton Thomas, *Al Qaeda and U.S. Policy: Middle East and Africa*, Congressional Research Service, Feb. 5, 2018, R43756, 17; and <https://www.longwarjournal.org/us-airstrikes-in-the-long-war>

Table 5. AMISOM: Sponsor factors

Objective(s)	Objective achieved?	Secrecy maintained?	Footprint	Political/Diplomatic Consequences	Ending Support
Deny Al-Shabab safe-haven; Model of proxy CT	Security improved; Al-Shabab not defeated	N/A	500 operators provide assistance to AMISOM and Somali forces: including air strikes, intel, and direct action	None	N/A: US support for AMISOM continues

Table 6. AMISOM: Proxy factors

Objective(s)	Objectives Achieved?	Human Rights	Legitimacy	Irregular Operations
Defeat Al-Shabab; security for East Africa; national interests	Al-Shabab not defeated; security improved; assistance for contingents	Sexual abuse/exploitation of civilians; Detainee abuse	UN/AU mandate; Somalis do not have positive view of mission	CT/COIN; info operations to win hearts and minds; training local security

Syrian Democratic Forces and the struggle against ISIS

Since 2011, Syria (see Figure 11) has been in a civil war between the regime of Bashar al-Assad and rebel forces. Within the chaos of the Syrian civil conflict, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) emerged and spread across a large swath of territory overlapping the Syrian-Iraqi border.

Figure 11. Syria



Source: CIA. The World Factbook.

In 2014, the US government decided to intervene to counter ISIS. The view also held that its involvement against ISIS would give Washington a toehold in the Syrian civil war as leverage against global competitor Russia and regional competitor Iran, both of which had intervened in the civil war on the side of the Assad regime.

Having declared Assad illegitimate, Washington needed a local partner against ISIS on the Syrian side of the border.¹⁰⁸ The Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (the Kurdish acronym is YPG) had halted ISIS gains in Kurdish-dominated territory in northeastern Syria. In

¹⁰⁸ Barack Obama, "Statement by the President on ISIL," White House, Sep. 10, 2014, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/10/statement-president-isil-1>.

October 2015, after failed attempts to train fighters from anti-regime militias,¹⁰⁹ Washington decided that the YPG and allied groups would be its proxy ground forces against ISIS in Syria. Dominated and commanded by the YPG, these combined forces called themselves the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Almost as soon as the SDF established itself, President Obama announced that US special operations forces would deploy to assist the group, and a US airdrop supplied ammunition.¹¹⁰ By the end of 2018, the SDF numbered 60,000 individuals.¹¹¹

In December 2018, President Donald Trump declared ISIS effectively defeated and announced that US forces supporting the SDF would depart Syria. As of this writing, there are still reportedly 1,000 US personnel in Syria.¹¹²

US objectives

In 2014, ISIS controlled over 34,000 square miles of territory across Iraq and Syria.¹¹³ The US government's primary objective in supporting the SDF was the territorial defeat of ISIS without major US involvement in ground operations.¹¹⁴ "Local forces, rather than US military forces,

¹⁰⁹ In 2014, Congress authorized a \$500 million train-and-equip program for US special operations forces to organize anti-Assad rebels to instead fight ISIS, which was continuing to expand its territory in Syria. Recruitment and vetting proved difficult, with some 60 fighters trained in Turkey and Jordan by mid-2015. The Obama administration planned to have deployed 5,000 fighters, who would rejoin the larger militia units from which they were recruited, through this program by the end of that year. The trained fighters, all part of the same rebel group, came under attack by Al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate almost as soon as they returned to Syria. The program was suspended later in 2015. Sources: "Senate Armed Services Holds Hearing on Strategy to Combat Islamic State," CQ Congressional Transcripts, July 7, 2015; Eric Schmitt and Ben Hubbard, "U.S. Revamping Rebel Force Fighting ISIS in Syria," *New York Times*, Sep. 6, 2015; and Eric Schmitt, "New Role for General After Failure of Syria Rebel Plan," *New York Times*, Oct. 19, 2015.

¹¹⁰ Ben Hubbard, "New U.S.-Backed Alliance to Counter ISIS in Syria Falters," *New York Times*, Nov. 2, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/03/world/middleeast/new-us-backed-alliance-in-syria-exists-in-name-only.html>.

¹¹¹ David Pollock, "How the United States Can Still Keep Faith with Its Best Allies in Syria," *PolicyWatch* 3060, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Jan. 3, 2019, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-the-united-states-can-still-keep-faith-with-its-best-allies-in-syria>.

¹¹² Eric Schmitt, "U.S. Troops Leaving Syria, but Some May Stay Longer Than Expected," *New York Times*, Mar. 29, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/29/world/middleeast/us-troops-syria-isis.html>.

¹¹³ "ISIS Fast Facts," *CNN*, Dec. 20, 2018, accessed Jan. 14, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2014/08/08/world/isis-fast-facts/index.html>.

¹¹⁴ Barack Obama, "Letter from the President — Authorization for the Use of United States Armed Forces in connection with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant," White House, Feb. 11, 2015, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/02/11/letter-president-authorization-use-united-states-armed-forces-connection>.

should be deployed to conduct such operations,” then-president Barack Obama wrote to Congress.¹¹⁵ The SDF would serve as the ground force to overthrow ISIS rule in Syria and clear the territory of ISIS fighters.

Relations with and protection of the YPG and allied militias gave the United States strategic leverage in the outcome of the Syrian civil war.¹¹⁶ In order to set up a firewall between Syria’s intertwining internal conflicts and US troops and US-supported fighters, the United States established deconfliction lines with Damascus’s ally Russia. Although not the primary reason for engaging the SDF, these self-enforced boundaries—which neither side should cross—checked the reach of Russian and Iranian forces fighting for the regime.¹¹⁷

Proxy objectives

The SDF includes the Kurdish YPG and the non-Kurdish forces of the Syrian Arab Coalition (SAC). For the most part, the SAC consists of local militias that opposed both Assad and ISIS—the latter posing a more immediate threat.¹¹⁸ The SAC objective has been to eliminate ISIS rule and terrorist threat in the local areas from which militias come.

The YPG and its overarching political party, the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), have much broader objectives. The PYD wants to be viewed as the main—if not the only—voice for Syria’s Kurdish minority.¹¹⁹ After decades of poor treatment, the PYD/YPG seeks to maintain Kurdish autonomy in the approximately one-quarter of Syrian territory that the SDF has come to dominate during the counter-ISIS fight.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ “Background Conference Call on Airstrikes in Syria,” White House, Sep. 23, 2014, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/23/background-conference-call-airstrikes-syria>.

¹¹⁷ David Ignatius, “Trump’s abrupt decision to pull American troops from Syria is riskier than it looks,” Dec. 19, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/trumps-abrupt-decision-to-pull-american-troops-from-syria-is-riskier-than-it-looks/2018/12/19/8dcbc6ba-03dc-11e9-b5df-5d3874f1ac36_story.html.

¹¹⁸ *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress | October 1, 2016 – December 31, 2016*, Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve, Feb. 2, 2017, https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/27/2001883197/-1/-1/1/FY2017_LIG_OCO_OIR_Q1_REPORT_DEC2016V2.PDF.

¹¹⁹ Selva Unal, “US determined to keep its word about YPG in Manbij, official says,” *Daily Sabah*, Mar. 1, 2018, <https://www.dailysabah.com/diplomacy/2018/03/01/us-determined-to-keep-its-word-about-ypg-in-manbij-official-says>.

Figure 12. Small arms training in northern Syria, July 2017



Source: US Army photo by Sgt. Mitchell Ryan.

Nature of support

Support for the SDF came as part of Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR), the broader military effort against ISIS in both Syria and Iraq. The SDF served as a ground force proxy for US soldiers and Marines, but the local force received US intelligence and air support in its offensive campaigns and US force protection from both ISIS and Syrian regime-based threats.

The number of US armed forces personnel in Syria increased from fewer than 50 in late 2015 to approximately 2,000 two years later.¹²⁰ US support for the SDF has been documented

¹²⁰ Barack Obama, "Letter From The President-- War Powers Resolution," White House, Dec. 11, 2015, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/12/11/letter-president-war-powers-resolution>; and Jim Garamone, "Pentagon Announces Troop Levels in Iraq, Syria," *DoD News*, Dec. 6, 2018, <https://dod.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/1390079/pentagon-announces-troop-levels-in-iraq-syria/>.

quarterly by the lead inspector general for overseas contingency operations. Throughout the Obama administration, US direct assistance to the SDF went towards building up and supporting the non-Kurdish SAC factions.¹²¹

From October 2016 through June 2018, DOD disbursed \$43.6 million to train the SDF.¹²² In less than a year, the US-led coalition trained over 11,000 SDF fighters.¹²³ The SAC, which is a less proficient force than the YPG, received basic training from the Special Operations Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve (SOJTF-OIR), as well as training to secure liberated areas.¹²⁴ As the SDF recruited and provided basic training to additional non-Kurdish fighters, US and coalition forces offered more advanced training.¹²⁵

The United States also provided stipends to hold together the SAC. Through June 2018, fighters in three SAC militias—the Manbij Military Council, the Deir ez-Zor Military Council, and the 5th Engineering Rohava Mine Clearing Operation—had received over \$6 million in stipends from DOD budget.¹²⁶

¹²¹ *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress I July 1, 2017 – September 30, 2017*, Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve, Nov. 3, 2017, https://media.defense.gov/2018/Jan/09/2001864247/-1/-1/1/2017_LIG_OCO_OIR_Q4_092017_3_508.PDF.

¹²² *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress I April 1, 2018 - June 30, 2018*, Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve, Aug. 6, 2018, https://media.defense.gov/2018/Aug/15/2001954780/-1/-1/1/FY2018_LIG_OCO_OIR3_JUN2018_508.PDF.

¹²³ *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress I October 1, 2017 – December 31, 2017*, Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve, Feb. 2, 2018, https://media.defense.gov/2018/Jun/18/2001932643/-1/-1/1/FY2018_LIG_OCO_OIR_Q1_12222017_2.PDF.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress I October 1, 2016 – December 31, 2016*, Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve, Feb. 2, 2017, https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/27/2001883197/-1/-1/1/FY2017_LIG_OCO_OIR_Q1_REPORT_DEC2016V2.PDF.

¹²⁶ *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress I April 1, 2018 - June 30, 2018*.

Figure 13. SDF graduation ceremony in northern Syria, August 2017



Source: US Army photo by Sgt. Mitchell Ryan.

Beginning in May 2017, the Trump administration announced that it was providing arms and materiel directly to the YPG.¹²⁷ In addition to weapons and ammunition, in 2017 the United States supplied hundreds of vehicles to the SDF.¹²⁸ Reportedly, they included armored vehicles.¹²⁹ The United States also provided medical supplies and communications equipment to the SAC.¹³⁰

¹²⁷ Sean Spicer, "Daily Press Briefing by Press Secretary Sean Spicer," White House, May 9, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/daily-press-briefing-press-secretary-sean-spicer-050917/>.

¹²⁸ *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress I July 1, 2017 – September 30, 2017*.

¹²⁹ Amanda Sloat, "In Syria, Trump Faces a Tough Balancing Act Between Turks and Kurds," *ForeignPolicy.com*, Feb. 6, 2017, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/02/06/in-syria-trump-faces-a-tough-balancing-act-between-turks-and-kurds/>.

¹³⁰ *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress I March 31, 2016*, Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve, May 6, 2016, https://media.defense.gov/2017/Apr/13/2001732247/-1/-1/1/FY2016_LIG_OCO_OIR_Q2_REPORT_MAR20164.PDF.

Finally, US operators also co-located with SDF forces and accompanied the SDF during operations. In addition to US special operations personnel, hundreds of Marines deployed to provide artillery support to the SDF when it began its campaign to liberate Raqqa.¹³¹ Having US forces among them provided the SDF force protection against ISIS threats and attempted assaults by Syrian regime-linked forces.¹³² In addition to receiving intelligence support from SOJTF-OIR, the SDF has provided US and coalition forces with targeting intelligence for the OIR air campaign.

Impact

President Obama and President Trump both wanted to defeat ISIS's territorial caliphate without committing significant US ground forces in Syria. The SDF was a suitable proxy in this endeavor. The SDF suffered thousands of casualties liberating and holding territory from ISIS, whereas only six US personnel were killed in combat in Syria.¹³³

However, the defeat of ISIS—the primary US objective—had yet to be achieved when President Trump announced his decision to withdraw forces.¹³⁴ Additionally, the withdrawal announcement undermined the secondary US objective of checking its adversaries' influence in Syria, as the YPG/PYD responded by reaching out to the Assad regime and to Moscow to protect Kurdish interests after US forces depart.¹³⁵ Secretary of Defense James Mattis also resigned over President Trump's withdrawal announcement—citing in his resignation letter

¹³¹ Tara Copp, "Hundreds of Marines, Army Rangers deploy to Syria in the fight against Islamic State," *Stars and Stripes*, Mar. 9, 2017, <https://www.stripes.com/news/middle-east/hundreds-of-marines-army-rangers-deploy-to-syria-in-the-fight-against-islamic-state-1.457959>.

¹³² Donald Trump, "Text of a Letter from the President to the Speaker of the House of Representatives and the President Pro Tempore of the Senate," White House, Jun. 6, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/text-letter-president-speaker-house-representatives-president-pro-tempore-senate/>.

¹³³ Eric Schmitt and Ben Hubbard, "U.S. Troops Among Dead in Islamic State Bombing in Syria," *New York Times*, Jan. 16, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/16/world/middleeast/isis-attack-syria-troops.html>.

¹³⁴ Phil Stewart and Ellen Francis, "U.S. air campaign against Islamic State in Syria likely to end," Reuters, Dec. 20, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-usa-idUSKCN10J1F5>.

¹³⁵ Sarah El Deeb, "Syria's military says it entered flashpoint Kurdish-held Manbij; US troops reportedly still there," Associated Press, Dec. 28, 2018, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2018/12/28/syrias-military-says-it-entered-flashpoint-kurdish-held-manbij-us-troops-reportedly-still-there/>.

his “core belief ... that our strength as a nation is inextricably linked to the strength of our unique and comprehensive system of alliances and partnerships.”¹³⁶

The SDF’s operational objective of liberating territory from ISIS has been mostly achieved, although as of this writing the group remains active in some SDF-controlled areas of Syria.

However, from the beginning of the Syrian civil war, the YPG operated in ways that best served its goal of Kurdish autonomy in Syria, which sometimes worked at cross purposes with the US objective of checking the Assad regime and its allies.¹³⁷ Earlier in the Syrian civil war, the YPG even fought on the side of the regime, against US-backed rebels.¹³⁸

Even after years of training, with ISIS down to 1 percent of its previous territorial control, US and coalition air support has been key to the SDF’s ability to fight.¹³⁹ When Kurdish interests were at risk elsewhere in Syria, the YPG contingent abandoned its SAC partners on the front lines of the fight against ISIS. Without its Kurdish fighters and commanders, the SDF was incapable of continuing its offensive.¹⁴⁰

As the SDF, and especially the Kurdish YPG, cleared territory, the group was accused of abuses against the civilian population. According to Amnesty International, the YPG displaced Arab civilians and even threatened them with US airstrikes.¹⁴¹ The US State Department and human

¹³⁶ “READ: James Mattis’ resignation letter,” CNN, Dec. 21, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/12/20/politics/james-mattis-resignation-letter-doc/index.html>.

¹³⁷ Carla E. Humud, Christopher M. Blanchard, and Mary Beth D. Nikitin, *Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response*, Congressional Research Service, RL33487, Aug. 21, 2018, <http://www.cq.com/pdf/crsreports-5392986>.

¹³⁸ *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress I March 31, 2016*, Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve, May 6, 2016, https://media.defense.gov/2017/Apr/13/2001732247/-1/-1/1/FY2016_LIG_OCO_OIR_Q2_REPORT_MAR20164.PDF; and *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress I October 1, 2015 – December 31, 2015*, Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve, Feb. 16, 2016, https://media.defense.gov/2017/Apr/13/2001732246/-1/-1/1/FY2016_LIG_OCO_OIR_Q1_REPORT_DEC2015.PDF.

¹³⁹ Falih Hassan and Rod Nordland, “Battered ISIS Keeps Grip on Last Piece of Territory for Over a Year,” *New York Times*, Dec. 9, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/09/world/middleeast/isis-territory-syria-iraq.html>.

¹⁴⁰ *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress I January 1, 2018 – March 31, 2018*, Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve, May 4, 2018, https://media.defense.gov/2018/May/14/2001916692/-1/-1/1/FY2018_LIG_OCO_OIR2_Q2_MAR2018.PDF.

¹⁴¹ “Syria: US ally’s razing of villages amounts to war crimes,” Amnesty International, Oct. 13, 2015, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2015/10/syria-us-allys-razing-of-villages-amounts-to-war-crimes/>.

rights organizations have reported that the SDF—and especially its Kurdish contingent—was behind a number of abuses against ISIS detainees and internally displaced persons (IDPs).¹⁴²

The employment of the YPG in Syria came at significant risk to the strategic relationship between two NATO allies—the United States and Turkey. The latter views the YPG as a terrorist group. The Trump administration has made clear that the US-YPG partnership is limited to the campaign against ISIS.

A White House spokeswoman announced in November 2017 that “once we started winning the campaign against ISIS, the plan and part of the process is to always wind down support for certain groups.... That has always been the plan and that hasn’t changed.”¹⁴³ That being said, US-Turkish relations continue to be tense as the administration has sought to stave off a Turkish slaughter of the YPG once US troops withdraw.¹⁴⁴

In January 2019, the United States announced it had begun the withdrawal of forces from Syria.¹⁴⁵ US sponsorship of the SDF highlighted the temporal nature of patron-proxy relationships. Jonathan Cohen, the deputy assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian affairs, called US support for the SDF a “temporary, transactional and tactical” arrangement to defeat ISIS.¹⁴⁶ Special Envoy Ambassador James Jeffrey broadened this point

¹⁴² *Syria 2017 Human Rights Report*, US Department of State, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/277509.pdf>; and “Syria: US ally’s razing of villages amounts to war crimes,” Amnesty International, Oct. 13, 2015, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2015/10/syria-us-allys-razing-of-villages-amounts-to-war-crimes/>.

¹⁴³ Sarah Sanders, “Press Briefing by Press Secretary Sarah Sanders,” White House, Nov. 27, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/press-briefing-press-secretary-sarah-sanders-112717/>.

¹⁴⁴ Philip Issa and Matthew Lee, “Pompeo, in Iraq, Seeks to Reassure Kurds on Syria Withdrawal,” Associated Press, Jan. 9, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/reports-on-mideast-trip-pompeo-makes-unannounced-iraq-stop/2019/01/09/a37935aa-13f0-11e9-ab79-30cd4f7926f2_story.html; and Donald Trump, “Starting the long overdue pullout from Syria while hitting the little remaining ISIS territorial caliphate hard, and from many directions. Will attack again from existing nearby base if it reforms. Will devastate Turkey economically if they hit Kurds. Create 20 mile safe zone....,” Twitter post (@realDonaldTrump), 2:53PM, Jan. 13, 2019, <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1084584259510304768/>.

¹⁴⁵ Louisa Loveluck and John Hudson, “U.S. military announces start of Syria troop withdrawal,” *Washington Post*, Jan. 11, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/us-military-announces-start-of-syria-troop-withdrawal/2019/01/11/77455bda-1585-11e9-90a8-136fa44b80ba_story.html.

¹⁴⁶ Cansu Çamlıbel, “US: Relations with YPG temporary, transactional, tactical,” *Hurriyet Daily News*, May 19, 2017, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/us-relations-with-ypg-temporary-transactional-tactical-113277>.

in December 2018: “We do not have permanent relationships with substate entities. That is not the policy of this administration and has not been the policy of other administrations.”¹⁴⁷

The SDF, and especially its Kurdish faction, expressed betrayal at President Trump’s December 2018 announcement of US withdrawal from Syria. At the same time, US efforts to address Turkey’s concerns about assistance to the YPG have given the Kurds pause.¹⁴⁸

To assuage its own concerns and balance against the Turkish threat, the PYD/YPG has reached out to the Syrian regime for protection.¹⁴⁹ While it is too soon to know the outcome, losing its US benefactor exposes the SDF—and especially the YPG—to threats from ISIS, Turkey, and the Syrian regime.¹⁵⁰

It is too soon to know the long-term, or even medium-term, results of this intervention. However, in its search for leverage against a precipitous US withdrawal, the SDF has gone so far as to threaten to release the thousands of ISIS prisoners the group holds, including several hundred foreign fighters from over three dozen countries.¹⁵¹

A summary of some of the key elements of this case are shown below for the US (Table 7) and for the SDF (Table 8).

¹⁴⁷ David Wemer, *US Syria Envoy: Syrian Kurds’ Future Lies in Syria*, Atlantic Council, Dec. 18, 2018, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/us-syria-envoy-syrian-kurds-future-lies-in-syria>

¹⁴⁸ Ellen Francis, “Wary of U.S. ally, Syrian Kurds look to Damascus for talks,” Reuters, Jul. 25, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-kurds/wary-of-us-ally-syrian-kurds-look-to-damascus-for-talks-idUSKBN1KF2NN>.

¹⁴⁹ El Deeb, “Syria’s military says it entered flashpoint Kurdish-held Manbij; US troops reportedly still there.”

¹⁵⁰ “Avoiding a Free-for-all in Syria’s North East,” International Crisis Group, Dec. 21, 2018, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/b066-avoiding-free-all-syrias-north-east>.

¹⁵¹ “SDF could release 3,200 of its ISIS prisoners, withdraw from frontline: monitor,” *Rudaw*, Dec. 20, 2018, <http://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/201220181>; and *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress I July 1, 2018 - September 30, 2018*, Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve, Nov. 5, 2018, https://media.defense.gov/2018/Nov/05/2002059226/-1/-1/1/FY2019_LIG_OCO_OIR_Q4_SEP2018.PDF

Table 7. Syrian Democratic Forces: Sponsor factors

Objective(s)	Objective achieved?	Secrecy maintained?	Footprint	Political/Diplomatic Consequences	Ending Support
Territorial defeat of ISIS; Leverage against Russia/Iran	Yes	N/A	2,000 SOF and Marines accompany and provide artillery support while SDF receives air support from coalition	Fallout in Turkish-US ties over support to YPG	US announced end of support following ISIS defeat

Table 8. Syrian Democratic Forces: Proxy factors

Objective(s)	Objectives Achieved?	Human Rights	Legitimacy	Irregular Operations
Rid local areas of ISIS; for YPG: Kurdish autonomy	ISIS territorial defeat; too soon on Kurdish autonomy	Abuse of detainees/IDPs	Kurdish YPG dominant, has own interests	CT/COIN fighting non-state group

Case study summary

As shown in the four case studies, the United States has engaged proxies for a variety of purposes, including counterterrorism (AMISOM and the SDF); containment (the Hmong and the *contras*); and regime change (the *contras*). Surrogate goals included autonomy (the Hmong and the SDF); regime change and a return to power (the *contras*); and the defeat of a terrorist group (AMISOM and the SDF).

Broadly speaking, the United States achieved its goals in each case. For the proxies, however, outcomes were mixed. America’s Laotian surrogates not only failed to preserve their autonomy, but were killed or driven from their country in large numbers. In Nicaragua, regime change did occur, but the *contras* never returned to power. In Somalia and Syria, surrogates achieved at least some of their goals.

Proxies that were perceived to have local, regional, or international legitimacy (the Hmong, the SDF, and to a lesser degree, AMISOM) tended to outperform those with little or no legitimacy (the *contras*). In each of the cases, the US had a military or paramilitary footprint, albeit a relatively small one. In most cases, US surrogate support had some negative political backlash

(the *contras*, the Hmong, and to a lesser degree, the SDF). In each case, proxies engaged in irregular warfare, although in Laos, American surrogates became increasingly conventionalized. Finally, each of the proxy forces committed serious human rights abuses, including the deliberate targeting of civilians and the use of child soldiers.

Key Themes

Looking across the four cases, and considering information from the US experience supporting the Afghan mujahideen and the Sons of Iraq, seven major themes emerge:

1. Proxy forces have helped the United States achieve at least some of its objectives
2. Proxy warfare reduces, but does not eliminate, a US footprint
3. Proxies should not be “conventionalized”
4. “Secret” wars do not stay secret for long
5. Proxy warfare is transactional
6. Proxy legitimacy matters
7. Proxies are likely to commit human rights abuses

Each of these themes is explored in Table 9 and in the discussion below.

Table 9. Cross-case comparison of key themes

Case	US Objectives Achieved	US Footprint	Irregular Ops	Secrecy Maintained	Transactional Relationship	Proxy Legitimacy	Human Rights Abuses
Laos	X	X	X		X	X	X
Nicaragua	X	X	X		X		X
Somalia	X	X	X	n/a		X	X
Syria	X	X	X	n/a	X	X	X
<i>Iraq</i>	X	X	X	n/a	X	X	X
<i>Afghanistan</i>	X		X		X	X	X

Source: CNA.

Proxy forces helped the United States achieve at least some of its objectives

In none of the cases we examined was a proxy absolutely decisive in terms of defeating the adversary. The successes of outcomes were multicausal, and included everything from economic coercion, to enemy weaknesses and errors, to the appropriate application of US air

power. Yet in each case, proxy forces contributed substantially to the achievement of at least some US goals. For example, while AMISOM has not defeated Al-Shabab, the force has disrupted the group and shrunk its operational space—and, in doing so, has improved the security environment in some parts of Somalia, most notably in the capital, Mogadishu. Similarly, the Sons of Iraq were able to suppress insurgent operations and, in doing so, arguably reduced US casualties.¹⁵² The *contras*, while of questionable military value, were part of a package of measures—including US economic coercion—that weakened the FSLN regime. In Afghanistan, the mujahideen harassed Soviet forces and contributed at least in part to Moscow’s decision to withdraw.¹⁵³

Proxy warfare reduces, but does not eliminate, a US footprint

As discussed above, sponsors support proxies as a way of confronting an adversary without bearing the political burdens and financial costs of direct military intervention. It is a “hands-off” risk-mitigation strategy, but even in the most successful cases, the United States had a battlefield presence to a greater or lesser degree. In Laos, CIA case officers did close-in advising; in Nicaragua, the CIA resupplied the *contras* and mined harbors; in Somalia, US forces advise, assist, and accompany AMISOM units during operations; and in Syria, US special operations forces advised and accompanied the SDF, and hundreds of US Marines deployed to provide artillery support. Additionally, in Syria, Somalia, and Laos, the United States supported its clients with considerable amounts of close air support and other forms of air power. Finally, the use of proxies has allowed the United States to reduce but not eliminate American casualties—in Laos, for example, a handful of case officers were killed while supporting the Hmong army, and a small number of Americans have been killed in the fight against ISIS in Syria as well.

Proxies should not be “conventionalized”

Proxies should not be conventionalized, and they should not engage in direct combat with government military or police units.¹⁵⁴ The Laos case illustrates the dangers of using irregular forces in conventional roles against a capable and determined professional army. When the Hmong operated as guerrillas, they had considerable success against the PAVN as well as the

¹⁵² Rayburn and Sobchak, eds., *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War*.

¹⁵³ Hughes, *My Enemy's Enemy*, 125.

¹⁵⁴ The exceptions here are AMISOM, which is composed of conventional military and police units acting in a counterinsurgency role, and the Sons of Iraq, whose adversaries were other irregular forces. For more on the effective use of irregular forces, see Patricio Asfura-Heim, *Risky Business: The Future of Civil Defense Forces and Counterterrorism in an Era of Persistent Conflict*, CNA, CRM-2014-U-00881, https://www.cna.org/cna_files/pdf/CRM-2014-U-008881.pdf.

Pathet Lao. For a brief period, they were able to regain strategically significant ground from the communists, albeit with heavy US air support. Ultimately, however, the secret army was no match for the PAVN, and “conventionalization” led to devastating Hmong losses.

“Secret” wars do not stay secret for long

In each of the cases that was conducted as a covert action (that is, “[a]n activity or activities of the United States Government to influence political, economic, or military conditions abroad, where it is intended that the role of the United States Government will not be apparent or acknowledged publicly”¹⁵⁵) it quickly became known that the United States was heavily involved. American backing for the *contras*, the mujahideen, and, to a lesser degree, the Hmong became common knowledge shortly after the covert action programs began. To some degree, then, these covert action programs *qua* covert action were failures, since the hand of the US government was so readily apparent.

Proxy warfare is transactional

Although the United States has sometimes framed its use of proxies in moralistic terms, such as Ronald Reagan’s comparison of the *contras* to the Founding Fathers, the relationship between patron and client is transactional. According to Byman, “Proxies enable intervention on the cheap. They cost a fraction of the expense of deploying a state’s own forces and the proxy does the dying.”¹⁵⁶ What does the proxy get out of the deal? Weapons, ammunition, materiel, logistical and close-air support, training, and less tangible assets, such as information operations conducted on their behalf—in short, tools and capabilities that can quickly turn a rag-tag militia into a fighting force. But what makes a proxy attractive to the sponsor also

¹⁵⁵ Eric Rosenbach and Aki J. Peritz, *Covert Action*, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, July 2009, <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/covert-action>. *Covert* frequently, but not always, means *clandestine* or *secret*. The Department of Defense (DOD) defines clandestine activities as “operations sponsored or conducted by governmental departments in such a way as to assure secrecy or concealment” . . . Unlike covert action, clandestine activities do not require a presidential finding but may require notification of Congress. This definition differentiates clandestine from covert, using clandestine to signify the tactical concealment of the activity.” Michael E. DeVine and Heidi M. Peters, *Covert Action and Clandestine Activities of the Intelligence Community: Selected Definitions in Brief*, Congressional Research Service, April 25, 2018, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/intel/R45175.pdf>. For more on the concept of plausible deniability, see Rory Cormac and Richard J. Aldrich, “Grey is the New Black: Covert Action and Implausible Deniability,” *International Affairs* 94, No. 3 (2018).

¹⁵⁶ Daniel Byman, “Why States are Turning to Proxy War,” *The National Interest*, August 26, 2018, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/why-states-are-turning-proxy-war-29677>.

makes it vulnerable and disposable.¹⁵⁷ Much like private military corporations and contractors, proxies can easily be cut loose after they have served their purpose. For example, a senior US State Department official said in 2017 that Kurdish proxies “are in this fight because they want to be in this fight. Our relationship is temporary, transactional and tactical.”¹⁵⁸ For its part, the SDF harbors no illusions about the potentially fleeting and fickle nature of US support, and has been careful to maintain relationships with other important actors, including Russia and the Assad regime itself.¹⁵⁹

Proxy legitimacy matters

Proxies that lack local, regional, or international legitimacy appear to have less operational effectiveness than proxies that enjoy such support. For example, while AMISOM has struggled to build its legitimacy among the Somali population, the fact that it is an African Union peacekeeping mission operating under a UN Security Council mandate gives it credibility and standing regionally and internationally. The ranks and leadership of the secret army in Laos were drawn from Hmong communities that perceived themselves to be under threat from North Vietnamese communists and their Laotian proxies. And while Americans and Thais quietly provided assistance, the face of the resistance was exclusively Hmong. Conversely, the *contras* were viewed by many ordinary Nicaraguans, regional actors, and much of the international community as little more than *Somocista* hirelings of the United States with no legitimate claim to be Nicaragua’s “liberators.”¹⁶⁰ Similarly, Turkey, a NATO ally, views the YPG as a Kurdish terrorist group and was sensitive to thought of the US arming it; thus, in order to serve as a successful proxy for the US, the YPG needed to partner with the SAC and other local Sunni groups to build a more diverse and locally and internationally legitimate force.

¹⁵⁷ For more on “disposability,” see Armin Krishnan, *Why Paramilitary Operations Fail* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), chapter 9.

¹⁵⁸ Cansu Çamlıbel, “US: Relations with YPG temporary, transactional, tactical,” *Hurriyet Daily News*, May 19, 2017, <http://www.hurriyetaidailynews.com/us-relations-with-ypg-temporary-transactional-tactical-113277>; and David A. Wemer, “US Syria Envoy: Syrian Kurds’ Future Lies in Syria,” Atlantic Council, December 18, 2018, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/us-syria-envoy-syrian-kurds-future-lies-in-syria>.

¹⁵⁹ Bilal Wahab and Jackson Doering, *Managing the Shift in U.S. Relations with Syria’s Kurds*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, December 8, 2017, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/managing-the-shift-in-u.s.-relations-with-syrias-kurds>.

¹⁶⁰ AMISOM, “AMISOM Mandate,” undated, www.amisom-au.org/amisom-mandate.

Proxies are likely to commit human rights abuses

In all of the cases considered in this study, American proxies carried out serious human rights abuses. These include the use of child soldiers (Laos); sexual assault on civilians (Somalia); detainee abuse (Somalia, Iraq); torture (Afghanistan); the forced displacement of Arab populations (Syria); and indiscriminate attacks on civilians (Afghanistan, Nicaragua).¹⁶¹ In each of these conflicts, the adversaries of the proxies also carried out grave human rights offences.¹⁶² Explaining the prevalence of these abuses is beyond the scope of this paper, but they might be understood, at least in part, as a function of such factors as loose command and control arrangements, cultures of unaccountability, and the moral hazard problem, where proxies may take greater risks on the battlefield (as well as commit human rights abuses and other actions contrary to American interests and international norms) in the belief that their sponsor will “bail them out.” Whatever the case, proxies present the United States with what C. Anthony Pfaff and Patrick Granfield call a “dirty hands” problem:

War is always messy and proxy war often more so. It can easily make a mockery of our values. Atrocities committed by American-backed right-wing forces in Central America three decades ago . . . illustrate these risks And if and when atrocities occur despite our best efforts, a proxy’s feet must be held to the fire. Their leadership has to hold perpetrators accountable.¹⁶³

¹⁶¹ Patricia Gossman et al., *The Forgotten War: Human Rights Abuses and Violations of the Laws of War Since the Soviet Withdrawal*, <https://www.hrw.org/reports/1991/afghanistan/1AFGHAN.htm>; Robert Parry, *New Study Alleges Contra, Sandinista Abuse*, February 18, 1986, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP90-00965R000605040041-5.pdf>; Human Rights Watch, *The Power These Men Have Over US: Sexual Exploitation and Abuse by African Union Forces in Somalia*, September 8, 2014, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/09/08/power-these-men-have-over-us/sexual-exploitation-and-abuse-african-union-forces>; and Stockholm Center for Freedom, *UN experts Accuse Kurdish-dominated SDF of Rights Violations in Syria*, March 7, 2018, <https://stockholmcf.org/un-experts-accuse-kurdish-dominated-sdf-of-rights-violations-in-syria/>.

¹⁶² Open Society Foundations, *Casting Shadows: War Crimes and Crimes Against Humanity, 1978-2001*, Afghan Justice Project, July 18, 2005, https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/uploads/291156cd-c8e3-4620-a5e1-d3117ed7fb93/ajpreport_20050718.pdf; United Nations, *UN Commission of Inquiry: Syrian Victims Reveal ISIS’s Calculated Use of Brutality and Indoctrination*, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, November 14, 2014, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=15295&LangID=E%23sthash.qBo7S6ZC.dpuf>; and Greg Bruno, *Finding a Place for the Sons of Iraq*, Council on Foreign Relations, April 23, 2008, <https://www.cfr.org/background/finding-place-sons-iraq>. For more on the legal issues surrounding the use of proxies and war crimes, see Gregory Raymond Bart, “Special Operations Forces and Responsibility for Surrogates’ War Crimes,” *Harvard National Security Law Journal* 5, no. 2 (2014).

¹⁶³ C. Anthony Pfaff and Patrick Granfield, “How (Not) to Fight Proxy Wars,” *The National Interest*, March 27, 2018, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/how-not-fight-proxy-wars-25102>. See also C. Anthony Pfaff, *Strategic Insights: Proxy War Norms*, U.S. Army Strategic Studies Institute, December 18, 2017, <https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/index.cfm/articles/Proxy-War-Norms/2017/12/18>. For more human rights training, see Patrick Paterson, *Training Surrogate Forces in International Humanitarian Law: Lessons from Peru, Colombia, El Salvador, and Iraq* (MacDill Air Force Base: Joint Special Operations University Press, 2016).

Having identified these seven key themes from our cases, we next provide some rules of thumb for policy-makers on the use of proxies going forward.

Looking Ahead: Rules of Thumb for Policy-Makers

Building on the key themes identified in the previous section of this report, the following rules of thumb should be kept in mind, so that policy-makers and military leaders responsible for planning and executing policies and operations involving surrogates can maximize the chances for success and minimize the risks.

- Policy-makers should set limited, reasonable objectives for proxies to accomplish and even then assume that some, but not all, of these objectives will be achieved.
- Support to proxies is almost by definition messier than direct US military intervention; there are likely to be more unanticipated second and third-order issues to handle; and, as a result, timelines for success are likely to be longer than initially assumed.
- The US must be alert to the fact that it cannot take a completely hands-off approach—the use of surrogates typically reduces the US footprint, but does not eliminate it entirely. Short of limiting one’s support to simply providing cash, most proxies will require at least some measure of US advice, weapons and materiel, hand-holding and reassurance, and, in many cases, airpower.
- Policy-makers and the US military should restrict the use of proxies to irregular warfare activities against states or other non-state armed groups, and avoid any temptations to use them as surrogate conventional armies.
- If US support to proxies is covert or clandestine, the US must be prepared for the likelihood that American backing will become public knowledge.
- The US must resist the temptation to consider proxies long-term American partners requiring unending support. The sponsor-client relationship is transactional and the disposability of surrogates is one of the attractive aspects of using them as an instrument of national security.
- The US must beware of the moral hazard problem. Proxies who believe that the United States “has their back” no matter what will be tempted to engage in high-risk behavior on the battlefield and beyond. Their interests may be contrary to American interests, and they may resist US entreaties to change their behavior.
- The US must prepare for the likelihood that surrogates will commit human rights abuses. It must set boundaries and redlines, and be willing to hold systematic and widespread violators accountable.

Although there are pitfalls and hazards associated with using proxy forces, the underlying logic of employing them—their relatively low cost, their disposability, and their deniability—suggests that their continued use will prove to be an attractive foreign policy option for the United States and its rivals and adversaries. Cast in that light, we hope that these rules of thumb will help the US to most effectively employ proxy forces in the future.

Conclusion

Proxy warfare has long been a feature of the international security environment, and its prevalence and significance appear to be growing. This mode of conflict, according to Amos C. Fox, “is the spirit of the age and the general character of war in the 21st century.”¹⁶⁴ For major powers such as the United States, the logic of employing proxies is both simple and compelling—rather than bear the military and other burdens of intervening directly with one’s own forces, a state can induce others to fight and die on its behalf. If the use of proxies remains part of the American national-security repertoire—and there is every indication that it will—senior civilian and military leaders should make a careful assessment of what capabilities are required, what advantages and disadvantages come with the employment of surrogates, and what potential risks and rewards might come with their use.

To help guide policy-makers, this paper developed a set of case studies on major US efforts to use proxies to advance US national interests. Two of the cases are contemporary (support to AMISOM, and assistance to the SDF), and two are historical (the “Secret War” in Laos, and support to the *contras*). Much has changed since the Cold War—not the least of which are the proliferation of actors in proxy conflicts, such as private military companies, militias, and criminal elements, and the greatly enlarged information space. Still, many of the dynamics that were at work during that period continue in the current environment. These case studies explored a common set of factors, including American and proxy objectives, the nature of US support, and the military, political, and humanitarian impact of the conflict on both sponsor and surrogate (or “principal and agent,” in the language of social science).

After a cross-case analysis, the paper went on to identify a set of key themes, such as the fundamentally transactional nature of proxy warfare; the challenge of maintaining secrecy; and the likelihood that proxies will be human-rights abusers. Building on the key themes, the paper then developed rules of thumb for policy-makers. These concerned such matters as the importance of maintaining the transactional nature of US support to proxies (remembering Jeffrey’s injunction that “we do not have permanent relationships with substate entities”); establishing realistic expectations for surrogate performance; and holding proxies accountable for human rights abuses.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁴ Amos C. Fox, *In Pursuit of a General Theory of Proxy Warfare*, Association of the United States Army, Land Warfare Paper No. 123, February 2019, 1.

¹⁶⁵ Wemer, “US Syria Envoy: Syrian Kurds’ Future Lies in Syria.”

Using these themes, the report developed a broad set of guidelines and insights that senior civilian and military decision-makers should consider as they grapple with the complexities of surrogate warfare. These include the need to set reasonable expectations regarding proxy performance; the importance of resisting any temptations to employ proxies in conventional military operations; and the need to recognize that the use of proxies minimizes but does not entirely eliminate an American footprint.

Figures

Figure 1.	A note on definitions and terminology	2
Figure 2.	Laos	5
Figure 3.	A Hmong guerrilla company assembles in Phou Vieng, 1961.....	6
Figure 4.	A US Air Force helicopter from the 20th Special Operations Squadron at a base in Laos, 1970	9
Figure 5.	Nicaragua	12
Figure 6.	Contra fighters in the Nueva Guinea zone of southeastern Nicaragua, 1987 ...	13
Figure 7.	A child soldier at a <i>contra</i> base camp on the Honduras-Nicaragua border, January 1984	16
Figure 8.	Somalia.....	21
Figure 9.	Ugandan soldiers from AMISOM in Kurtunwaarey after the town's liberation from Al-Shabab, August 2014	24
Figure 10.	AMISOM troops on patrol in Marka, July 2017.....	27
Figure 11.	Syria.....	30
Figure 12.	Small arms training in northern Syria, July 2017.....	33
Figure 13.	SDF graduation ceremony in northern Syria, August 2017	35

Tables

Table 1.	Secret war in Laos: Sponsor factors.....	11
Table 2.	Secret war in Laos: Proxy factors.....	11
Table 3.	<i>Contras</i> : Sponsor factors.....	19
Table 4.	<i>Contras</i> : Proxy factors.....	19
Table 5.	AMISOM: Sponsor factors	29
Table 6.	AMISOM: Proxy factors	29
Table 7.	Syrian Democratic Forces: Sponsor factors.....	40
Table 8.	Syrian Democratic Forces: Proxy factors.....	40
Table 9.	Cross-case comparison of key themes	41

Abbreviations

AFRICOM	Africa Command
AMISOM	African Union Mission in Somalia
ARDE	Alianza Revolucionaria Democrática
AU	African Union
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
DOD	Department of Defense
DOS	Department of State
FAR	Forces Armées Royales
FDN	Fuerza Democrática Nicaragüense
FSLN	Frente Sandinista Liberación Nacional
ICU	Islamic Courts Union
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
IW	Irregular warfare
JGRN	Junta de Gobierno de Reconstrucción Nacional
NDS	National Defense Strategy
OIR	Operation Inherent Resolve
PAVN	People's Army of Vietnam
PDJ	Plaine de Jarres
PYD	Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party
RLG	Royal Lao Government
SAC	Syrian Arab Coalition
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
SoI	Sons of Iraq
SOF	Special operations forces
UW	Unconventional warfare
YPG	Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units

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