Game of Proxies – Towards a new model of warfare: Experiences from the CAR, Libya, Mali, Syria, and Ukraine

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Abstract

The objective of the study is to carry out a meaningful comparison that demonstrates the similarities and differences of various conflict theatres where proxy forces were employed. The analyses of the discussed cases focused on different aspects of the conflict and nature of the proxy use. The analyses presented on the following pages were conducted on the basis of the literature on the subject, governmental research and reports, and supporting sources reporting recent developments that complemented academic sources. Various non-state actors such as ethnic militias, paramilitary units, and private military companies have become more and more visible on contemporary battlegrounds. Modern states employ those actors to further their objectives, as this limits their own political and financial costs. This increasingly visible phenomenon points to an emerging new model of warfare where state actors are relying ever more on proxies of various character and nature. It is highly likely that any future conflict will be characterised by a proxy-based model of warfare, which will consist of a limited footprint made by regular forces (or none at all) and, consequently, the extended use of proxies supported by special forces. Because such an approach is less costly, proxies will be more often employed by low-budget states, previously reluctant to carry out such costly military endeavours. Denying the actions and affiliations of these proxies will inevitably follow and, in turn, a lack of political accountability and responsibility for the conflict's outcome.

Introduction

In contemporary conflict theatres, however various and remote, a similar phenomenon emerges. Armed conflicts of the last decade have not been great power confrontations, yet rather secondary or surrogate struggles where internal rebellions or insurgencies turned into internationalised conflicts with external states and actors involved. These intervening states tend to be reluctant to deploy their armed forces and explore various other opportunities that can substitute their national armies. This consequently leads to outsourcing of warfare to local militaries, indigenous proxies and private military companies supported by highly mobile joint-task forces, special forces and high-end military technologies. Use of proxy forces becomes a rule rather than an exception. This study will provide five contemporary cases where proxies have become significant actors in contemporary armed conflicts.

This leads us to the main hypothesis of the following article which claims that developments observed on modern battlegrounds of the last decade in Mali, Ukraine, Syria, the Central African Republic, and Libya commonly exemplify a new facet of warfare – the one that is characterised by a limited footprint of regular forces with the simultaneous increasing employment of proxies – whether local militaries, militias or private military companies. The authors of this article analyse the aforementioned battlespaces with special attention given to the limited use of regular troops on the intervening side and outsourcing to local militaries, native tribal militias, paramilitary groups, pro-government militias, private military companies, and other similar entities that create a myriad of various non-state actors that infest the contemporary battleground.

This phenomenon has been already identified by other researchers (notably Martin van Creveld, John Mueller, and Mary Kaldor) and the authors of this analysis intend to build upon the previous studies. Van Creveld observed in 1999 that privatisation of warfare and the re-introduction of mercenaries into the battlespace "in the service of both governments and their opponents is one of the outstanding developments of the last quarter of the twentieth century" (van Creveld, 1999, p. 406). Some years later, while defining "the new wars", Kaldor described their actors as "a disparate range of different types of groups, such as paramilitary units, local warlords, criminal gangs, police forces, mercenary groups and also regular armies, including breakaway units from regular armies" (Kaldor, 2012, pp. 9–10). To this seemingly open list of "new war" actors, John Mueller adds other predatory "entrepreneurs of violence" such as "criminals, bandits, and thugs" who serve as "mercenaries hired by desperate governments or as independent or semi-independent warlord or brigand bands" (Mueller, 2004, p. 1). It is this article's hypothesis that these very actors are not only visible in contemporary theatres of war, yet also serve as proxy forces for the state actors of "the old wars", thus constituting a new model of warfare. The model of warfare in which "new wars" transcend "old wars" and modern states derive from both to further their objectives, relies increasingly on proxies of various character and nature.

The analyses presented on the following pages were conducted upon literature on the subject, governmental research and reports, and supporting sources reporting recent developments that complemented academic sources. The theoretical base of this study regarding proxy forces and proxy wars is built upon the most recently published monographs on the subject, namely by Ariel I. Ahram (2011), Andrew Mumford (2013b), and Tyrone L. Groh (2019). These are supplemented with other sources as listed by a given section's author.

In order to carry out a meaningful comparison that demonstrates the similarities and differences, the analyses of the discussed cases focused on various aspects of the conflict and the nature of the proxy use. The analytical part of the article opens with an examination

of the Malian case (the section authored by Cyprian Aleksander Kozera) as it is chronologically the first armed conflict in this set to transform from an internal insurgency into an internationalised conflict with direct foreign military intervention (Operation Serval, 2013) employing local supporting non-state actors. Next, the study continues with the Russian intrusion into eastern Ukraine in 2014 (by Paweł Bernat), which was dubbed a hybrid war due to its unique methods of using concealed regular forces and open support for proxies, without a regular military invasion. The Syrian case comes next (by Cüneyt Gürer), which has been internationalised to an enormous extent with the Gulf States, Iran, the US, Russia and Turkey intervening in a way that most clearly exemplifies what modern proxy warfare is. Russia's involvement in the Central African Republic is an interesting case (by Błażej Popławski) of a private military company (PMC), the Wagner Group, which served as a sui generis example of a proxy closely related to Moscow. The last investigation of the contemporary battleground (by Mehmet Alper Sözer) is devoted to the Libyan civil war that due to its most recent developments, consists of proxy deployment by Russia and Turkey.

Proxy Warfare

Proxy is a substitute, an intermediary, and so is any actor used by another in order to pursue the former's aims. The same applies for warfare where, most commonly, non-state actors are employed as proxies by foreign powers. For Andrew Mumford, proxy wars are "the indirect engagement in a conflict by third parties wishing to influence its strategic outcome" (Mumford, 2013b, p. 1). In more detail: at least two actors – an intervening state and its proxy – engaged in cooperation and a common security-related goal are needed to call it a case of proxy war – as Tyrone L. Groh explains (2019, p. 6). We shall therefore understand proxy warfare as a phenomenon that entails employment of an intermediary in pursuing aims of and by an external state actor in armed conflict. It is worth noting, as the discussed case studies illustrate, that such a patron-state can be both directly and indirectly involved in a conflict: with its own forces (directly) and by a proxy (indirectly).

Interestingly, from the position of a third party intervening state, a proxy war is also "the least bad option" according to Groh (2019, p. 6). Generally, employing an additional component of a proxy allows military leverage and the legitimacy of the intervening power to be increased, limits its own casualties and improves access to local knowledge of the human and physical terrain (Cigar, 2014, p. 60). By outsourcing some of the tasks, the patron also avoids displaying its capabilities (or lack of them) and preserves them for times of greater need (Groh, 2019, p. 7). In some cases, it can also provide the space for a certain deniability as the further analysed Ukrainian conflict demonstrates. Use of proxies can help avoid escalation into an all-out war, as will be seen, although it does not eliminate the risk entirely. It therefore generally reduces operational (or political) costs for the sponsor-state, hence it is dubbed 'warfare on the cheap' – as Andrew Mumford reminds us (2013b, pp. 1, 45). On the other hand, proxy warfare poses significant challenges, especially to the post-operational phase, and can produce undesirable outcomes in the concerned environment in the long-term perspective (Kozera, 2018, pp. 17–19). The external powers, however, rarely pay attention to long-term effects, leaving the responsibility to deal with them to local communities, national governments or international organisations.

Groh listed three conditions that may lead a state to consider becoming involved in proxy warfare and these are: (1) the state's interests and identity transcends its borders, (2) there is a connection between its security and conditions in other states, and (3) the state has an overall capacity to engage in international affairs (Groh, 2019, p. 4). These

conditions do not appear as infrequent and, in fact, it can be argued that in a globalised world full of transnational security threats, the majority of states fulfil them. It is perhaps a reason why the proxy war, or use of a proxy component in military intervention, is such a widespread phenomenon.

Operation Serval and "Local Facilitators" in the Malian Conflict (2013)

When the French military initiated Operation Serval in Mali in 2013, intervening on the request of the government in Bamako and in response to the United Nations Security Council Resolutions (UNSCR 2056/2012, 2071/2012, 2085/2012), it met with a myriad of irregular actors controlling or striving for control of the northern provinces of this western Sahel state. When French troops set their boots on the ground on 11th January 2013, the situation in Mali was more than precarious – the country was de facto divided in two, where the three northernmost provinces of Gao, Timbuktu and Kidal had come under the control of radical Islamist movements more than a half a year earlier. The struggling Malian interim government had come to power after the March 2012 coup d'état conducted by disappointed junior military officers. The coup in Bamako was itself the consequence of yet another revolt in northern Mali (January 2012) initiated by disfranchised nationalist Tuaregs coming from war-torn Libya (since 2011), who later (June 2012) had been marginalised by jihadist elements within their alliance and their ranks (Assemblée Nationale, 2013, pp. 19, 31; Pezard and Shurkin, 2013, p. 6; Sénat, 2013, pp. 34, 38–39, 70).

In the wake of the French intervention, armed extremist groups had already gone south in their speedy and mobile 'technicals' (all-wheel drive pick-up trucks), directing their intrusion towards the strategically important Sévaré Airport in the central Mopti region, and the capital city of Bamako. The loose alliance of the extremists consisted of the Algerian Arab-dominated Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Tuareg-led Islamist Ansar Din, and heterogenous Berrabiche Arab-led MOJWA (Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa; Assemblée Nationale, 2013, pp. 20–21; Comolli, 2015, pp. 101–102; Sénat, 2013, p. 43). Boko Haram fighters from Nigeria supported the emergence of this self-declared 'Saharan Emirate' (Comolli, 2015, pp. 102–103). The nationalist Tuaregs from the MNLA (National Movement for the Liberation of the Azawad), who had sparked the insurgency, had been marginalised by June 2012 and had since regarded the Islamists as their foes (Sénat, 2013, pp. 34, 70). Not all the Tuareg were involved in the irredentism, some, often those of a traditionally lower status within the Tuareg society, decided to remain with Bamako, in order to increase their position, and formed the GATIA (Imghad Tuareg Self-Defence Group and Allies) later incorporated into the Platform – a loyalist movement that included other ethnic groups. The two movements, the MNLA and the Platform, reveal how France and the central government in Bamako have been exploiting local facilitators and proxies. This section focuses on the cooperation between France and the Tuareg during operation Serval in 2013.

The special relations of France with the Tuareg, and specifically with those of the Kel Adagh confederation of tribes (and the Ifoghas clans within this confederation), was initiated in colonial times, at the beginning of the 20th century. In 1916-1917 and the 1920s, the Kel Adagh were instrumental in subjugating other warring and revolting Tuareg tribes, increasing their own status and wealth at the expense of the subjugated, and acting as a French proxy. Since then, they have remained an ally of France which has contributed to a romanticised myth of "Africa's blue people of the desert" within French and other European societies (Grémont, 2010, pp. 4–9; Pezard and Shurkin, 2013, pp. 3–4, 8).

When the French intervened at the request of the Malian interim government in 2013, their forces amounting to a brigade (about 4000 soldiers, max. 5168 in the middle of February; supported by Chadian and Malian forces), quickly and efficiently stopped the jihadists' incursion and then successfully gained ground at the expense of the Islamist armed groups. Yet, when the French reached the northern territories, and especially the mountainous massif of Adrar des Ifoghas in the northernmost Kidal region, the jihadists were prepared to fight a final battle in desert and inaccessible terrain in the Tigharghar mountains (part of Adrar des Ifoghas; Assemblée Nationale, 2013, pp. 20–21, 52–54, 63, 100). The limited French force already risked being overstretched in a large area of northern Mali. In order to limit the risk and avoid operating in unknown and treacherous mountain territory on their own, the French forces employed local Tuareg belonging to the MNLA, many of whom were from the Ifoghas. The Tuareg of Ifoghas clans are not only the traditional dwellers of Adrar des Ifoghas (and, hence, the name of the place) but are believed to have a strong presence within the MNLA, and the Kidal region is the group stronghold (Sénat, 2013, p. 59). The MNLA, as locals but also traffickers and militants, have intimate knowledge of the terrain, water wells, caves and other hideouts. They were also willing to cooperate with the French, perhaps out of vengeance against the Islamists, but more importantly in order to increase their bargaining position in future peace negotiations (Allemandou, 2013; Le Roux, 2013; Pezard and Shurkin, 2013, p. 10). Though the French initially distanced themselves from cooperating with any group known for undermining Bamako authority in the north (Sénat, 2013, p. 42; Powelton 2014), they later admitted cooperating with "Tuareg militias" (Goya, 2013), especially since the MNLA had renounced independence claims and entered the peace process (Sénat, 2013, pp. 57, 70). Therefore, in Adrar des Ifoghas, it could not have possibly been any other group than the MNLA.

The cooperation between the French and the Tuareg from the MNLA was most vividly exemplified, and thus became incontestable, by the incident in al-Khalil (a.k.a. In-Khalil). By the end of February 2013, the MNLA had established itself in this Malian village on the border with Algeria to cut off the Islamists refuging in Adrar des Ifoghas. The settlement, which allows the control of trade and trafficking routes to Algeria, had been previously occupied by the Arab-dominated AQIM. The local Arab inhabitants complained of rough treatment and criminal abuses by the MNLA, and it led to an intervention against the Tuareg by a secular self-defence militia of the Arab Movement of Azawad (MAA). The MNLA called upon the French, suggesting that the attack was led by the extremist MOJWA elements, leading to the French airstrikes on the MAA (RFI, 2013; Jamestown Foundation, 2013). The outcome leads to two important conclusions. Firstly, the French cooperated with the MNLA to the point of trusting their local partner in providing (para) military support and targeting identification leading to lethal airstrikes. Secondly, the French might have been abused (as the presence of the MOJWA elements have not been confirmed) and used in the intra-ethnic rivalry.

The French extended their cooperation to other non-state armed groups operating in northern Mali, including the Islamic Movement of Azawad, Movement for the Salvation of Azawad, but also the open enemies of the MNLA, the Imghad Tuaregs of the GATIA led by a Malian army colonel and a Tuareg, ag Gamou (Jamestown Foundation, 2013; Guibert 2018). It seems, though, that this cooperation was much more limited. Somehow privileged, though not openly admitted, relations between the French and the secular Tuareg of the MNLA seem to be born out of mere necessity and due to their intimate knowledge of terrain, legitimacy and presence in the region rather than any political preferences of Paris. However, the secular ideology of the MNLA was certainly not a disadvantage.

The Malian government has openly employed the Imghad GATIA, the Songhai Ganda Koy and other non-state armed groups as proxies in order to divide and rule the north

(Pezard and Shurkin, 2013, p. 4; Lacher, 2012, p. 3; Kozera, 2018, p. 20). The French were much more cautions in cooperating with local actors who were, in most cases, facilitators rather than proxies. On the other hand, the character of the French cooperation with the MNLA Tuareg leads us to question whether it was not the patron who became a proxy intertwined in inter-ethnic competition, as the Khalil incident may imply.

Cooperation with local actors, which may occasionally lead to a "proxisation" of actions on the ground, is rarely free of trade-offs and is usually a double-edged sword that facilitates achieving certain aims, yet compromises others. In operation Serval (and later, Barkhane), the MNLA Tuareg supported the French, increasing French troops' operational efficiency and capacity, yet at the same time forcing Paris to assume the uneasy role of their temporary *de facto* supporter, if not the patron. It put significant pressure on the French leadership to conduct further activities in a way that did not favour any specific group at the expense of others and the central government in particular. On a battleground full of various fragmented and competing non-state armed groups, it requires enormous sensitivity to local characteristics and variables, and certainly a limited trust in local partners.

Russian Hybrid War against Ukraine – the Use of Proxy Warfare

The inception of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in 2014 marked by the annexation of Crimea and the ongoing military act of war in the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts should be perceived as a ramification of the internal political situation in both Russia and Ukraine, as well as the current geopolitical situation in the region.

In November 2013, the first year of President Vladimir Putin's third term, his official approval rate among the Russian public reached a historic low of 61%, which was accompanied by the highest disapproval rate of 37% (Levada, 2020). There were two main reasons why Russians turned their back on the authorities, namely an economic crisis and the alleged vote fraud in the 2011 legislative and 2012 presidential elections. Despite continuing high oil prices, Russia's GDP grew only by 1.3% in 2013. The trend of declining investment continued, inflation began to rise and, in consequence, Russians reduced their consumption (OSW, 2015, pp. 11–12). The vote fraud on a large scale, in both elections, was confirmed by many videos captured by Russians (France 24, 2011; Hudson, 2012) and statistical and demographic analyses (Enikolopov *et al.*, 2013, p. 452; Skovoroda and Lankina, 2017). The claim that President's Putin decision to annex Crimea and initiate military action in eastern Ukraine was motivated by internal affairs seems legitimate. Throughout history, leaders have often initiated and exploited external conflict for mobilising the public and improving their public perception. During the Second Chechen War, Putin's approval rating quickly rose from 30% to over 80% (Balzer, 2015, p. 84). That tactic, replicated in Georgia and Moldova in 2008, proved to be successful again in the case of the conflict with Ukraine – President Putin's approval rate skyrocketed from 61% in November 2013 to 86% in June 2014 (Levada, 2020).

Klotz argues, in our opinion, successfully, that there were four main reasons for Russia's aggression against Ukraine, namely (1) Russia annexed Crimea in order to maintain its naval base in the Black Sea, (2) the annexation and destabilising of eastern Ukraine was a reaction to NATO's and (3) the EU's expansion, and finally (4) *"in order to strengthen its legitimacy within Russia, the political leadership created an enemy image of the West, which must be fought on Ukrainian territory"* (Klotz, 2017, pp. 265–279).

According to a general definition of proxy war, it is a war that is carried out by someone else – the representatives of the states (or non-state actors) or a mediated war (Konyuk-

hovskiy and Grigoriadis, 2018, p. 2). From this perspective, the annexation of Crimea cannot be recognised as proxy warfare in its pure form but rather as hybrid war. Of course, "little green men" (i.e., masked soldiers of the Russian Federation) did not bear any insignia indicating their identity and Russian soldiers from the 31ˢᵗ Separate Airborne Assault Brigade were dressed in Berkut (Ukrainian riot police unit) uniforms (Pavlushko, 2015), but the direct Russian involvement was evident. Russian military engagement was confirmed by President Putin on 17 April 2014 (Putin, 2014).

In their analysis of the operations in the east of Ukraine, the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine and the National Defence University of Ukraine have distinguished two periods of armed conflict. During the first one (early April – 5 September 2014), the Ukrainian forces were engaged in combating the Russian hybrid aggression and fighting off the invasion; the goal of the second one (since 5 September 2014) had been to contain the conflict across separate areas of Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts (Ministry of Defence of Ukraine, 2017, pp. 19–39). In both of those cases, Ukraine fought against either Russian troops or separatist proxy forces backed by Russia. Again, according to the classic definition, the discussed armed conflict is not a proxy war *per se,* because on the Ukrainian side there are no "representatives" and government military forces are involved, and the conflict takes place, at least officially, on Ukrainian territory. The West has provided significant financial support. According to the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the US has given between $270 million and $510 million of aid to Ukraine each year since 2014. The European Union has given, on average, over $710 million per year (King, 2019). Moreover, security assistance was also provided by the US that included "everything from Humvees and patrol boats to counter-artillery radar and lethal weaponry such as Javelin antitank missiles" (Kim, 2019). However, the western powers do not wage war against Russia on Ukrainian territory. On the other hand, the proxy war phenomenon should be perceived as evolving in a way that mirrors geopolitical changes. Mumford argues that contemporary "proxy wars have become arm's-length 'effects-based operations' whereby a specific objective is desired (…) without risking foreseen consequences (conflict escalation with a rival superpower, for example) and at an acceptable monetary cost (…) – all of which is achieved without a state having to directly commit military forces of its own (Mumford, 2013a, p. 45). In this sense, both, the annexation of Crimea and armed conflict in eastern Ukraine can be conceived as Russia's proxy warfare actions undertaken for the reasons provided by Klotz and listed above.

After 18 March 2014, when a deal (deemed as illegal by the international community) was arranged with Crimea joining the Russian Federation, Russia began to establish separatist organisations and illegal armed groups in the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. In April 2014, according to the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine, Russian military and political authorities sent special forces troops, saboteurs and provocateurs (2017, p. 13). At the same time, they started recruiting armed personnel. Among the recruits were "corrupt personnel from Law Enforcement Agencies (LEA), unemployed young people, contract personnel from Russia and other countries" (Ministry of Defence of Ukraine, 2017, p. 14). Later on, they became the core of the proxy troops used by Russia. The reasons for using proxies are easy to identify – Russia intended to achieve its strategic goals (discussed above) without risking severe consequences. Proxy actions allow low-level armed conflict to be induced and sustained without suffering repercussions. In this case, international sanctions were imposed on Russia that economically hurt the country, but no other state militarily engaged in the conflict and Crimea remains under Russian jurisdiction. From the perspective of Russian authorities, the decision to use proxies was the right one.

It has to be stated, however, that Russia, in its attack on Ukraine, did not only use proxy forces. On the contrary, the presence of their military units is well known and docu-

mented, e.g. a medal "For the Return of Crimea" was established based on the Order of the Minister of Defence of the RF on 21 March 2014 and given to over 300 individuals. Among the troops taking part in the annexation were troops from the Intelligence Directorate of the General Staff and the 45th detached airborne regiment of the Russian Armed Forces, and the Russian Black Sea fleet blocked Ukrainian Navy vessels in their bases (Ministry of Defence of Ukraine, 2017, p. 18). While the use of proxy troops in the Crimea annexation was limited, they are the ones fighting against the Ukrainian government in the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. Under the leadership of Russian military personnel, the so-called "soldiers of fortune" armed groups were organised who, on 14 April 2014, declared the establishment of the so-called "Donetsk People's Republic." The so-called "Luhansk People's Republic" was established two weeks later, i.e. on 27 April. Officially, Russian forces did not cross the border, but they relocated up to 41,000 troops close to it and, according to the Pentagon, these battalion groups consisted of infantry, armour and artillery and had air defence capabilities (Bowen, 2014). Throughout the whole conflict, Russia has provided the separatists with training, weapons, and logistic support. The OSCE Special Monitoring Mission has continuously reported the presence of weapons and military equipment that is used exclusively by the Russian army, e.g. the heavy flamethrower system "Buratino" (OSCE, 2015). Nevertheless, Russia has denied any involvement.

The actions taken by Russia in the east of Ukraine has led to a civil separatist war, as a result of which, according to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, 9940 people have been killed and up to 23,455 injured (2019). The deep division between the two sides seems irreversible. Yet the conflict continues, even though, according to the International Crisis Group report (ICG, 2019), Russia has slowly retreated from plans to annex parts of Ukraine, and that has caused schisms between the Kremlin and its separatist proxies in the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts.

In summary, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict does not entirely match the traditional concept of proxy war, but undoubtedly the Russian Federation used the proxy strategy in its hybrid war against Ukraine. The separatist movement in east Ukraine was, to a large part, externally triggered, fuelled and supported. Despite numerous, internationally acknowledged evidence of Russian interference, the Russian Federation continuously denied it.

Conflict in Syria and Proxy War

The Syrian conflict started with local demonstrations sparked by the Arab Spring protests in the broader region, requesting freedom in the country and demanding government reforms. Smaller scale protests started in January 2011 in different parts of the country. In March 2011, Syria security forces arrested ten school children in the city of Daraa, and kept them in custody, which increased the number of demonstrations around the country. Families of the pupils claimed the children were being tortured by the security forces and took to the streets requesting their release; however, government forces reacted to these demonstrations violently, opened fire on the crowd and killed several people (Macleod, 2011). The government forces killed more people during the demonstration at the funerals of these people and not only ended the possibility of reducing violence in the country, but also spread the violence to several other cities rapidly (Gelvin, 2018, p. 52). With the increasing demands of the public and growing tensions, the Assad regime started to react to the protestors by using extreme force, resulting in many deaths in various cities.

With the involvement of regional and global powers and their support for local militant groups, the Syrian conflict quickly became a multidimensional proxy war (Levanoni,

2020) and according to Panayiotides (2020, p. 69) "divergent interests of the great powers (the USA and Russia) and of their allies prolonged the conflict". The Syrian conflict not only involves global and regional powers such as the US, Russia, Turkey, Iran, Israel and Saudi Arabia but it also involves different ethno-sectarian groups such as the Sunni Arabs, Alawi, Druze, Shia, Christians and Kurds (Akhtar and Nageen, 2019). Another dimension of the conflict involves insurgent groups such as IS (the so called "Islamic State"), al-Qaeda, Jabhat al-Nusra, and Hezbollah.

In order to start explaining this complex structure of conflict in Syria, we can commence with simply explaining supporting and opposing countries of the Syrian regime. Countries' positions and priorities towards the Assad regime changed significantly over the years; nevertheless, the general structure remained the same. The positions of the states involved, their policy changes and interest calculations will be explained briefly. In this complex composition, Russia, Iran and its proxy Hezbollah, are the three main actors supporting the Syrian regime and providing technical equipment, tactics, strategies and hard power elements during the conflict. Iran was the first country to become involved in the Syrian conflict, supporting the Assad's government against the demonstrations and rebellion in the country. Iran has been providing intelligence, tactics and various control strategies for anti-government protests from the very early stages of the conflict. The Syrian government invited Iran to provide direct support and expertise for the Syrian Armed Forces against the uprising from the very beginning of the uprising. The Iranian Revolutionary Guards (IRG) and Hezbollah-affiliated militias became the first outsiders involved in the Syrian conflict (Levanoni, 2020, p. 165). In the later stages, Iran supplied weapons through an air bridge and provided attack helicopters to increase the capacity of the Syrian Army. In addition, Iran sent combat forces to assist the Syrian regime: there were more than 3000 Iranian soldiers from the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps fighting in Syria (Gelvin, 2018, p. 62). Russia also provided weapons and experts. The Russian air force naval elements were deployed to Syria and advisors were sent to work with the Syrian military (Gelvin, 2018, p. 63). When the Assad regime started losing ground and major cities to IS after 2014, Russia supported the regime with direct intervention starting in September 2015. Russia's direct involvement in the conflict has changed the balance of power in favour of pro-Assad forces (including Iran). IS was the main concern of the US, which opposed Assad at the same time; therefore, Russia justified its direct military involvement (supporting the Syrian regime) as part of the fight against the IS.

Saudi Arabia and Qatar have pursued their historical policies to counter the Iran-Syrian influence in the region by providing financial and military support to different groups in Syria. As a part of this historical policy, conflict in Syria provided a new opportunity for Saudi Arabia to intervene and reduce the impact of Iran on the Syrian government. Previous attempts of the Saudis to distance Assad from Iran and to break the Shia axis in the region had not been successful; therefore, it was considered a golden opportunity to pursue the historical agenda (Kraus, 2018). As a result, Saudi Arabia supported groups with radical ideology (such as Jays al-Islam – the Army of Islam – and Ahrar al-Sham – the Free Men of Syria) with the United Arab Emirates and Qatar adding their financial contributions to rebel groups. According to Kraus (2018), Saudi intelligence played an important role in convincing the US to intervene by providing evidence of the Syrian regime preparing to use chemical weapons in February 2013. Saudi Arabia and Qatar cooperated with Turkey in supporting the Syrian opposition and most of the financial support of these two countries reached Syria through Turkey and Jordan (Hughes, 2014).

At the beginning of the uprising, Turkey preferred to use diplomacy to convince Assad to make concessions, assuming that the Syrian President would listen Turkey's reform proposal and introduce reforms. One of the reasons for this misconception was the

previously developed good relations between these two states that led to a historically unprecedented connection between the countries. However, at the same time, Erdogan's government was hosting the Syrian opposition and developed connections with defected Syrian armed groups and allowed them to reorganise from Turkish territory. Turkey also tried to convince Assad to give the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated figures more powerful positions in the government. Assad's rejections of Turkey's initial diplomatic attempts to reduce violence and introduce reforms changed Turkey's approach to Assad immediately and dramatically. Turkey started actively supporting the opposition, reorganising them and making overthrowing Assad the number one priority of its Syrian policy (d'Alema, 2017).

Turkey hosted the first meeting of the Syrian opposition on 1st June 2011 in Antalya, and in August 2011, the opposition announced the foundation of the Syrian National Council (SNC) as the unified structure of the Syrian oppositional groups (Harris, 2018). One of the SNC's key roles consisted of enabling foreign powers to channel assistance to "moderate" opposition forces (Gelvin, 2018). In addition to political opposition, an armed opposition group formed by a group of defected Syrian army soldiers known as the Free Syrian Army (FSA) was set up in July 2011. Its command and headquarters were established in the Hatay province (Turkey) in October 2011. The FSA was a loose structure of local groups operating independently and lacked a structured military organisation from the beginning. Turkey's ultimate goal was to bring all these different groups under one organisational structure to manage them more effectively; however, that did not happen until a meeting between the political and military structures of the opposition in late 2019, and the future of this convergence is still not clear.

In the early phases of the conflict, the US supported rebel groups against the Assad regime to remove Assad from his position. However, the emergence of IS in Syria (in 2013 and 2014) changed the US priorities in the region and destruction of IS became the number one priority. In September 2014, the US-led coalition forces launched airstrikes inside Syria to destroy IS targets. Instead of conducting direct intervention on the ground, the US supported the Syrian Kurds in the fight against IS in Syria. Although, at the initial stage, both Turkey and the US had a similar objective of removing Assad, in the later phases, changing priorities of the US and supporting the Syrian Kurds, set Turkey and the US against each other. Turkey considered that strengthening Kurdish groups in Syria would pose a direct threat to its own national security and therefore opposed the US support of the Kurdish groups in the region strongly. With the Kurdish administrative (Kurdish Democratic Union party, PYD) and military (Kurdish People's Protection Units, YPG) enhancement in the region, Turkey also changed its priority from removing Assad to reducing the influence of the Kurdish groups in the region.

Turkey had concerns about Kurdish expansion towards its southern frontier. In order to secure the borders from both IS and the Kurdish forces, Turkey conducted the first direct military intervention in Syria in August 2016, followed by subsequent military operations in 2018 and 2019. Turkey used proxy forces (the FSA later renamed as the Syrian National Army, SNA) in all three operations actively within its military structures. According to many observers, the SNA elements were involved in war crimes and human rights abuses during these operations (Zaman, 2020). Turkey recently deployed proxy groups originating from Syria to Libya and to the recent conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh between Armenia and Azerbaijan (Cookman, 2020).

Turkey-backed proxy forces can be categorised into three major groups (Yüksel, 2019); *secular revolutionary groups* (Turkey pays the salaries of members of these groups and has direct control and influence), *nationalist, and Islamist groups* (with an agenda that uses religion as a tool, or to spread radical religious ideologies; Turkey provides financial and

logistical support as well transfers support of other countries in the region), *Salafi jihadist groups* (Turkey covertly supports them by providing logistical equipment including weapons, either directly through the intelligence agency or small scale private companies, or tolerates their use of Turkey's territory as the ground for their operations; Yüksel, 2019).

The other actor that played an important role in defining the nature of the conflict in the earlier phases was the United Kingdom. According to Hughes (2014), the British Chief of the Defence Staff met his French, Turkish, Jordanian, Qatari and UAE counterparts in December 2012 to coordinate assistance to the opposition in Syria. For the UK, the rationale for the involvement of the West to coordinate the opposition was the belief that "without any Western aid the anti-Assad rebellion could become dominated by radical Islamist groups." (Hughes, 2014, p. 525). The UK had similar constraints as the US had, with domestic politics preventing the government from direct involvement, and the use of proxy forces became the only option for these countries to support the Syrian opposition groups.

The Wagner Group in the Central African Republic

The Wagner Group is a Russian organisation that has served as a private military contractor in several African countries. Although presumed to have been founded by Dmitri Utkin, a former Lieutenant Colonel in the 2nd Spetsnaz Brigade based in the Russian city of Pskov, and owned by billionaire restauranteur Yevgeny Prigozhin (known as 'Putin's chef'), there are varying beliefs about control of the organisation; some believe that it is a semi-state force connected to Russia's Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) (Østensen and Bukkvoll, 2018, p. 25).

Wagner's physical presence in Africa has been widely reported on, particularly in unstable and dysfunctional countries and conflict zones: the Central African Republic (CAR), Sudan, Mozambique, Mali, Libya and Madagascar. Estimates of Wagner Group private military contractors in Africa vary between 1,350 and 2,000 (while hard data is difficult to come by, it can be assumed that there are 3,500–5,000 fighters in the Group) (Grossman, Busj and DiResta, 2019, p. 3).

The CAR has been embroiled in an intense civil war since 2012 (*de facto* started in 2004) that is being waged, among other forces, by religiously driven factions. The country has been a particular focus for the Russian government because of mining investments. In exchange for trading weapons and providing advisors in a fragile civil war setting, Russia gains access to some of the most coveted natural resources in Africa: oil, diamonds, gold, iron, uranium diamonds, timber, cotton, coffee. From the perspective of the Kremlin, the geographical situation of the CAR – thanks to the decreased presence of France in this country after the peacekeeping operation Sangaris ended in 2016 – is crucial. The country is positioned along a vital crossroad between the western and eastern parts of the continent, and it borders the Sahel as well as Sudan, traditionally influenced by Russia (Maślanka, 2020, p. 1).

Russian support for CAR President Faustin-Archange Touadéra's administration – which has struggled to wrest back control over parts of the country from local warlords since 2016 – has included military assistance, and information operations. Russia's surge in the CAR had its genesis in a 2017 exemption to the UN arms embargo that allowed the African country to acquire a modest quantity of light arms. The Wagner Group has operated in the country at least since 2018. According to some regional media, as many as 1,400 Russians were stationed in the CAR between 2018 and 2020 (Goodison, 2019, p. 39).

Russia began its deliberate actions in the CAR by twisting a UN Security Council sanctions exception to its benefit, donating a large cache of AK-47s to Bangui and sending 170

"civilian instructors" from the Wagner Group in with them, accompanied by 5 uniformed Russian officers. A camp of PMCs was set up about 60 kilometres from the capital Bangui in Berengo. The Group provided military training to CAR special forces there (Bugayova and Regio, 2019, p. 39). The PMCs also provides security for senior officials of the government. Valery Zakharov, a former member of the Russian security services and an associate of Prigozhin, was named the Special Security Advisor to President Touadéra. "The presence of Prigozhin in the CAR is widely publicised, which illustrates the blurred lines between official and off-the-books activities" – gauged Paul Stronski in an analysis of Russia's return to Africa (2019, p. 22). To this, it can be added that the former commander of U.S. Africa Command, General Thomas Waldhauser, testifying before the House Armed Services Committee in 2019, stated: "Wagner is heavily involved [in the CAR], not only in training but also influence at the highest levels of government to include the president. They've been able to work the situation so they can have mineral extraction and so forth" (Waldhauser, 2019). There are many examples of this kind of engagement of the Wagner Group in CAR. For instance, in 2019, Zakharov and Prigozhin arranged meetings with the Islamic rebels that were facilitated by Prigozhin, using his private plane. In fact, they discussed the division of the sphere of influence. Not accidentally, many of the diamond mines where Prigozhin has his contracts are located in rebel-held areas (Marten, 2020).

The issue of Wagner's presence in the CAR became even more fraught in July 2018, when three Russian investigative journalists, Orkhan Dzhemal, Aleksandr Rostorguev, and Kirill Radchenko, were shot dead while trying to make a documentary on the PMCs in the CAR and the level of the corruption among African politicians associated with the Kremlin. These journalists were killed by unidentified assailants while they were on their way to a town located in an area with deposits of gold, diamonds, and uranium, which is currently under the protection of Prigozhin's people. Dzhemal, Rostorguev, and Radchenko worked under the auspices of the Investigations Management Centre, an organisation run by Mikhail Khodorkovsky, a political opponent of Putin (Kuczyński, 2019, p. 14).

The murder of the three Russian journalists was never independently investigated. For the majority of analysts, this case was a clear signal that the Kremlin is not quitting its business in the CAR. Currently, it should therefore be endorsed that *"Russia does not appear to be interested in creating permanent military facilities in the country (which would be a costly and hardly profitable enterprise). (…) Russia will continue its current strategy – using «shadow» para-military personnel (a «hybrid» combination of legal military advisors and members of PMCs) to reap economic profits in the country"* (Sukhankin, 2020).

It is worth noting that the CAR is only one example of the Wagner Group's involvement in Africa as they have been reported in Libya, Madagascar, Mozambique and Sudan, which clearly points to Russia's growing interest and influence on the continent.

The Libyan Conflict as a Proxy War Streaming Towards a Conventional Warfare

Right after changing the political landscape in Tunisia, the turbulent wave of the Arab uprising did not take long to hit Libya. The 42 year tyranny of Muammar Gaddafi was toppled by a coalition of mixed groups, who later became rivals, and by a NATO military intervention mainly orchestrated by the US and France. Framing what was happening in Libya at that time is quite a struggle. To some it was a civil war, to others it was a proxy war in which various clans and tribal leaders fought each other, constantly changing their stakes according to power-shifts in the field, attempting to further their gains at all costs (Fulvio, 2020). Libya, right from the beginning of the post-Gaddafi era, had been a battleground for great powers, neighbouring countries, adventurist Gulf States, and ex-colonial powers.

The proxy wars in Libya worked in a reciprocal way. An array of armed groups in Libya swiftly attempted to gain influence over others and filled up spaces in the vacuum of any institutional government body. All of these groups and Libyan power brokers called for foreign aid, military support, and arms from external actors which were readily available and in search of proxies to reshape oil-rich Libya, aligning with their own interests. Qatar, the most assertive intervening power at the beginning, intersected with groups that were ideologically close to the Muslim Brotherhood, whereas, the United Arab Emirates supported rival groups more prone to anti-Islamic tendencies (Wehrey, 2020, p. 28). However, these two Gulf States did not operate without being under the close scrutiny of greater powers.

France, Saudi Arabia, Russia, and Egypt, especially after the Morsi era, aligned with the Emirates, but Turkey and Sudan worked in line with Qatar. Over time, disentangling the armed groups became a little bit easier as the Tobruk-based parliament was internationally recognised as was its alliance with the Libyan National Army (one of the main movements largely known from Operation Dignity, supported by the Emirates and its allies). The second crucial faction was the Libyan Dawn coalition which consisted of militias from eastern and central Libya along with the elected General National Congress, based in Tripoli and backed by Qatar and its allies. Ansar al-Sharia, a radical Salafist group, and the Islamic Youth Shura Council, an extremist Islamist group that had links to al-Qaida and later pledged allegiance to Islamic State, also played critical roles on the Libyan battleground (Reeve, 2014).

Between 2011 and 2014, the Libyan conflict was not influenced by any direct military intervention by external actors, as it is today, even though special operation forces of many countries were evident on the ground. The rival armed groups were trained, fuelled with arsenal, and fed with intelligence by external forces, and were utilised as proxies in compliance with each country's own agenda. In 2014, with a new offensive initiated by Marshal Khalifa Haftar, a second civil war broke out (Fulvio, 2020). Starting from 2014, Libya witnessed escalating tension between two groups, namely the Libyan National Army commanded by Haftar and the Government of National Accordance (GNA) led by Fayez al-Sarraj, and their external allies. The Emirates' engaged with its air force and it was the first direct foreign military intervention in Libya since the NATO-led coalition's airstrikes in 2011. Since then, tension in Libya has been constantly escalating and eventually has reached a point where regular forces of certain countries could clash.

The Libyan conflict has been serving as an area for drone competitions along with mercenaries outsourced from a variety of conflict zones in and out of Libya. The Emirates attempted to control the air space and established air dominance through use of its own piloted aircraft, Chinese-made armed drones, and French-made Mirages. As an opponent, Turkey struck back with its national-made TB2s. Many civilians lost their lives because of haphazard use of drones on the battlefield (UNSC, 2019). The Emirates, in particular, caused significant civilian casualties; nevertheless, as Wehrey observes, it did not receive any serious international scrutiny due to Western diplomatic backing of the UAE (Wehrey, 2020, p. 10).

On the ground, conflicting external forces preferred using, by and large, infantries consisting of local militias, African mercenaries and radical Islamist groups. Readily available warriors of African countries with fresh hands-on fighting experience in neighbouring southern Libya served as a fighter markets for both sides (Debos, 2016, p. 131). However, fighting forces were not limited to outsourced mercenaries; countries not only deployed their own Special Forces personnel as trainers and advisors, but also hired private military companies as contractors. Russia's well-known Wagner Group conducted effective opera-

tions on the ground, its snipers had a devastating effect on the Sarraj-led GNA, and later expanded its influence over the command level in the Haftar-led Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF). In the same way, Turkey, with its military contractor, SADAT, operated in the battlefield. Many ununiformed military personnel carried out missions along with SADAT. On the other hand, France deployed its military aid in the form of a paramilitary organisation linked with the French Directorate General for External Security (Wehrey, 2020, p. 21). All three governments of these patron-states officially denied their relationship with the aforementioned private military companies.

From the battlefield, the proxy war spread into social and conventional media as well. Each side initiated Twitter campaigns against the other. They used bot-accounts and hired twitter trolls pumping fake news into social media aligned with their interests, and also broadcast on TV stations in order to gain influence and superiority in the propaganda realm, which escalated tensions and fuelled the conflict (Wehrey, 2020, p. 18).

After signing an agreement on the maritime border with the GNA in November 2019, Turkey expanded its military presence in the field and deployed its own military force supported by Syrian militias by the authorisation of the Turkish Parliament. This, Turkey's last manoeuvre, changed the equilibrium in favour of the GNA and, as a result, two international conferences were held; one in Moscow, between Turkey and Russia in the aftermath of Turkish gains on the battlefield, and another in Berlin to secure the concerns of the EU. Turkey's military deployment in Libya along with Turkey's search for hydrocarbon resources in the Mediterranean and the Aegean Sea, and a rival ideological stance, provoked Egyptian repercussion. Sisi threatened to send its own military in response to Turkey's operation. If that had happened, an enduring proxy war would have rapidly turned into a conventional battle between two countries.

The proxy war in Libya has never mitigated conflicts nor done any good for the Libyan people; in contrast, it gradually escalated the tension, and created a long-lasting battlezone as in Syria, Somalia, and Yemen. The multiplicity of meddling powers on the ground made it very hard, if not impossible, to generate any unity and accord within the country. The region constantly experienced unintended consequences such as the uncontrolled flow of weapons, which poured into the hands of radical terrorist groups, a warning sign for possible future bloodshed and instability in the Sahara and beyond. Moreover, the enduring proxy war created the serious problem of refugees. People from the countries in its conflict flew neither to Russia nor to the Gulf States, preferring to head for Europe, where they believe they can find a better life. Italy, in particular, stood as a gateway to the migrant flow from Africa, and for that very reason, supported proxy militias in controlling refugee crossings in the Mediterranean (Fulvio, 2020).

The world has been witnessing a proxy war in Libya, another failing state affected by the devastating effect of the Arab uprising. Libya's proxy war, in contrast to Syria's, is mainly sponsored by Libya's own money and fuelled by local power brokers (Fetouri, 2019). Increasing meddling of multiple states has only worsened the situation. What is more dangerous in Libya is that the tension among the conflicting countries has gradually increased and has highly internationalised the conflict, sometimes approaching the edge of a conventional war that has a potential to strew over the region[1].

Conclusions – Towards a Proxy-based Model of Warfare?

As the last decade's battlefields have manifested, the state actors tend to outsource part of their military burden to proxies. Whether the French in Mali, the Russians

1. After completing this section, on 11th November 2020, a breakthrough deal was announced at the peace talks held in Tunis and warring sides agreed to hold free, fair, and inclusive elections in 18 months. The implementation of this arrangement, as its impact on the situation on the ground, remains to be seen.

in Ukraine and the CAR, Turkey and the Gulf States in Syria and Libya, Iran and the Americans in Syria (and beyond), all modern state actors have been relying on proxies in armed conflicts. In Mali, in 2013, the ethnic militias played only a support and liaison role as Paris deployed enough regular forces to conduct kinetic operations on their own. The presence of Malian, Chadian and other African troops served mostly as a factor legitimising the French presence on the ground. Local militias connected the French to the human and physical terrain of the operational area and linked them with local populations and provided guidance in an otherwise unwelcoming territory.

Russia mastered a very different approach to warfare with the use of proxies. In Ukraine, the involvement has been much broader, including not only operational cooperation, but also arming and funding. The eastern Ukrainian Kremlin proxies also took part in hostilities, mostly with Russian-provided equipment and military guidance. Russian soldiers, however, not openly operated in Ukraine, therefore it was not the point of the limited capabilities of the Russian troops, they could be and were deployed. The idea behind using proxies in Ukraine was utterly political – it provided necessary deniability in the first phases of the conflict, which in consequence allowed fait accompli politics to be successfully implemented.

On the other hand, in the geographically remote Central African Republic, Moscow decided to support its interests through a more distant approach. The Wagner Group, a private company, but one close to the GRU and the Kremlin, provided necessary political detachment for Moscow (officially, Russia was not even involved in the conflict), at the same time securing its interest in the CAR. These interests were much more limited; therefore, several dozen "military advisors" could do the job. In the event of failure, Russia would not lose face or be held responsible for the Bangui "business partners".

The Libyan and Syrian conflicts exemplify what chaos an array of foreign actors' involvement can bring to a local conflict. With the Gulf States, Iran, Russia, Turkey, and the US intervening in these theatres of war, a nationally-solvable conflict becomes an internationalised and intertwined affair of many states with their conflicting interests and proxies, struggling for scraps of power. These conflicts also illustrate the unrestrained and open use of proxies which has, seemingly, become the new normal on the modern battlefield.

The French approach to use of proxies was limited, risk-averse and reflected rational operational pragmatism towards their local partners. The Russians mostly profited from the 'political fog' that the use of proxies spread. Washington has been using proxy forces in Syria, where they would not risk their own military due to the high risk of casualties, embroilment in prolonged conflict and other political reasons. Turkey was initially expecting more from its proxies. Although, as soon as Ankara realised the proxies would not be sufficiently efficient in achieving planned objectives, Turkey did not hesitate to involve regular military forces in Syria, but still supplementing its military interventions with proxies to legitimise its presence and limit its own casualties. In some cases, Turkish proxy forces fought alongside ranks of regular units, creating additional problems for the sponsoring state related with human rights abuses. In Libya, Turkey's engagement with proxies was a cost-effective approach to pursue its political-economic interests. On the other hand, the Libyan theatre of war also showed how the 'international game of proxies' prolongs, escalates and even risks bringing the conflict to the brink of a conventional war.

Operational pragmatism, deniability, and political flexibility – these are the three most important characteristics that the use of proxies provides to the modern battlespace. As the conflict theatres of the last decade demonstrate, these are valuable factors that states engaging in warfare seek. The plasticity of proxy-based solutions is alluring, yet at the

same time disregards long-term consequences that support for non-state warring parties instils into local conditions, most frequently at the expense of local populations and opportunities for conflict resolution.

It is, therefore, highly likely that any future conflict will be characterised by a proxy-based model of warfare, which will consist of a limited regular forces' footprint (or none at all) and, consequently, the extended use of proxies supported by special forces. Because of the lower costs of such approach, proxies will be more often employed by low-budget states, previously reluctant towards costly warring endeavours. Denial of the proxies' actions and affiliations will follow and a lack of political accountability and political responsibility for the outcome of the conflict. Therefore, a significantly greater flexibility towards conflict resolution exists, without the need to bear the consequences of a politically painful "losers' withdrawal" of troops. It seems, therefore, that the proxy-generated fog of war is the daily weather in warfare and will be spreading towards other territories.

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