

THE NEW COLD WAR IN SYRIA: UNDERSTANDING THE SYRIAN CONFLICT
THROUGH PROXY WARS BETWEEN THE UNITED STATES AND RUSSIA

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ABSTRACT

Since 2011, Syrians have been facing a never-ending conflict that has cost the lives of thousands and displaced millions of others. Initially, the Syrian civil war was seen as just another conflict of the Arab Spring. However, today Syria is the battlefield of many interested actors, most crucially the United States and Russia. These two key actors' involvement reminds political scientists of the Soviet intervention of Afghanistan, which had a devastating impact on the country. While analyzing the growing roles of both the United States and the Russian Federation, this paper examines the Syrian revolution as it relates to broader global foreign policy. I argue that the Syrian war has developed into a proxy war between the US and Russia. Despite the fact that the Syrian conflict is by far one of the most violent conflicts in contemporary world history and the number of civilian casualties has reached record highs, this seven-year war has become the newest hub for the US-Russian modern-day Cold War.

INTRODUCTION

Since 2011, Syrians have been facing a never-ending conflict that has cost lives of thousands and displaced millions of others. Initially, the Syrian civil war was seen as just another conflict of the Arab Spring. However, today Syria is the battlefield of many interested actors, most crucially the United States and Russia. These two key actors' involvement reminds political scientists of the Soviet intervention of Afghanistan, which had a devastating impact on the country. While analyzing the growing roles of both the

United States and the Russian Federation, this paper examines the Syrian revolution as it relates to broader global foreign policy. I argue that the Syrian war has developed into a proxy war between the US and Russia. Despite the fact that the Syrian conflict is by far one of the most violent conflicts in the contemporary world history and the number of civilian casualties reaching record high this seven-year war has become the newest hub for the US-Russian modern-day Cold War. The paper argues that the brewing tensions between the United States and Russia in Syria a new form of post-Cold War proxy-war. While it is debated whether the Cold War ended or not is for the purpose of this paper, I will consider 1991 as the end of the Cold War era based upon the official dissolution of the former Soviet Union. The paper begins with a background section on the conflict to facilitate understanding of the key events that are pertinent to the ongoing conflict in Syria. The next section discusses proxy war as a foreign policy tool. This section is followed by a discussion on proxy war in Afghanistan which helps us better understand the complex manifestations of an indirect war waged between powerful countries on a foreign territory. The following section examines the ongoing proxy war between the United States and Russian in depth.

BACKGROUND

On July 10th, 2000, Bashar Al Assad rose to power rather suddenly when his father passed away as Bashar was a dentist in London (Lesch, 2013). Following his father's footsteps, Hafez al-Assad, Bashar created an administration that runs under the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party. President Assad intended to maintain but modernize and

ratify his father's political agenda. The Baath party, of which both Assad presidents were members, is a socialist party imitating the French political structure (Lesch, 2013). The party's core goal is to create a social overpass linking the upper and lower classes by creating a modified socialist party whose backbones are constructed by Islamic concepts. The ideal Syrian society that the Baath party hoped to achieve was modern and secular, and quickly became popular amongst the youth during its uprising in the 1940s (Lesch, 2013).

Before the series of unfortunate events that began in the 2011, Syria was the home of 24 million people. Historically considered as an oasis for sectarian groups around the region, Syria's population consists of Christians, Alawis, Druze, Shia Muslims, Kurds, Jews, along with a number of other sectors of Shia and Christianity who have come to live within the Sunni Muslim majority population (Salibi, Suleiman and Hourani, 2019). Condensed in a land that measures roughly 71,498 square miles in area, Syria struggled economically with its limited resources and its economic challenges were further exacerbated by the severe drought of 2008 that led to persistent multi-year crop failures and water shortages (Salibi, Suleiman, and Hourani, 2019). In 2006, a cataclysmic drought dried up to 800,000 farms and starved 85% of livestock to its death, costing thousands of families their livelihood (Salibi, Suleiman, and Hourani, 2019). Thousands abandoned their farms and found their way to the city, searching for jobs that did not exist in the crashing economy. This job scarcity put over 2 million Syrians under the poverty line (Salibi, Suleiman, and Hourani, 2019). The 2006 economic tragedy paved Syria into a path of violence, revolt, and intolerance. Tensions

began to rise among different groups towards the Assad regime due to the economic instability and wealth disparity, contributing the massive revolt against the regime in 2011.

December 18, 2010 marks a pivotal moment that ignited the widespread Arab Revolution (Lesch, 2013). On that fateful day, a Tunisian man named Tarek el-Tayeb Mohamed Bouazizi, set himself on fire as a way to protest what he believed was the mistreatment of citizens in Tunis. His protest lit up an international flame that became known as the Arab Spring (Lesch, 2013). After this event, various protests soon sparked, and inspired citizens of multiple Arab states to revolt against their governments.

Less than a year after the Tunisian incident, citizens of the Syrian Republic decided to speak up against the Assad regime. On March 15th, 2011, demonstrators took the streets in Damascus old City (Lesch, 2013). They were outraged about the Assad-led armed forces arresting and torturing Daraa school boys who had painted anti-government graffiti on their school walls, reading "Your turn is coming, Dr. Assad" (Editors,2018). The army of President Bashar al-Assad was quick to react to the demonstrations and forcefully shut them down. Protests continued on the 18th in Daraa, however, where military forces took a more brutal approach to the demonstrators, opening fire and killing four protesters (Editors, 2018). The four protesters are considered the first casualties of the uprising, and their deaths lead to demonstrations all across Syria. One month after the Damascus demonstrations, civilians of the third largest city in Syria, Homs, protested the government with a sit-in. By August 18, 2011,

the international community, especially the United States, began to pay to attention to the crisis unfolding in Syria (Editors, 2018). One of the critical moments that marked the Syrian conflict was on July 18, 2012, when a bomb was set off at the Syrian National Security headquarters during a high-level government meeting in Damascus, killing four top officials including the Syrian Defense Minister and Deputy Defense Minister (who was Bashar al-Assad's brother-in-law). Since then, the conflict began to develop into a full-scale civil war against the government, involving multiple factions and in a scale that is unparalleled (Editors, 2018).

In July 2012, the battle for Aleppo began when rebels successfully gained control over multiple regions in the city. Aleppo is the largest city in Syria and was one of the areas that was most affected by the war in 2012. The city is home to the largest population of Christians in Syria and contained 10% of Syria's population before the conflict (Carter, 2017). Aleppo was soon divided into two fragments: the west was government-lead while the east coast was rebel-lead. In response to the rebel's control over the region, the Syrian government began to bomb the rebel-lead areas to gain back control in the beginning of 2013 (Carter, 2017). The pneumatic use of bombs gained the attention of the international community, including the United States, who considered the condition in Aleppo as a humanitarian crisis. The Syrian government was accused of using "barrel bombs" which are "improvised containers (?) (e.g. an oil drum or gas cylinder) dropped from an aircraft and filled with explosive, incendiary, or other substances and often includes additional materials to increase fragment projection" (Carter, 2017). The United Nations has accused the Syrian government on

multiple occasions for having chemical substances in these bombs, which violates international law (Carter, 2017).

The Syrian war has now drawn both the state and non-state actors who are directly or indirectly involved in the conflict. Non-state actors include Hezbollah, ISIS, Al Qaeda, and Kurdish rebels all of which have competing interests in the conflict (Carter, 2017). State actors such as Russia, Turkey, the United States, Iran, and the Arab Gulf states also carry particular interests in the conflict and have played some role in exacerbating this brutal ongoing war and its end is nowhere near in sight (Carter, 2017). While the list of actors present in Syria is quite long, the two most crucial and influential actors in the Syrian revolution are Russia and the United States. Both these economically and militarily powerful nations are writing contradictory destinies for both President Bashar al-Assad, and the people of Syria. What was first a civil war attempting to overthrow the Assad regime, has now become a power game of foreign policy between Russia and the United States. During the uprising of conflict both states were hesitant about militarily entering the conflict. However, both sides were fairly clear about whose side they support. The United States remains unequivocal in its stand against the Assad regime staying in power, while the Russian Federation, an old ally of Syria, remains loyally pro-Assad (Marshall, 2016). The political relationship between Syria and Russia dates back to 75 years and it provides a context for why Russia is willing to intervene to protect its long-time ally but also its own strategic interest in Syria (Marshall, 2016). As a result of the competing interests of these two nuclear powers as

it pertains to Syria, the country has become a site of proxy war waged between Washington and Moscow.

PROXY WAR

Proxy warfare is a form of policy that many states have found as a convenient option when they are willing to strike their enemy but are too hesitant to do so directly. A proxy war occurs when actors “patronize surrogates in locales where norms are weak in the hope that victories abroad will reverberate internationally and at home” (Sanders, 2016, p 165). In a proxy war, state or non-state actors act on behalf of the parties involved but are not directly involved in the warfare between one another. Syria’s proxy war includes its state actors such as Turkey, Iran, and the Gulf states and non-state actors such as Hezbollah, ISIS, Kurdish rebels, or the Free Syrian Army fighting against or in alliance to either the US or Russia (Lucas,2018). While some of these actors are not necessarily in formal alliance with either major power, they are all contributing to the proxy war in the post-Cold War era.

Despite the end of the Cold War, the relations between the United States and Russia have remained adversarial and antagonistic. The United States and Russia are both involved in military interventions in Syria but claim to be present for certain goals (Trenin, 2018). Their opposing political agendas have led both states to indirectly sabotage the other’s chances of victory. Declaring a war against one another could cause serious security risk around the world and the war the US and Russia are fighting against one another remains indirect (Lucas, 2018). Russia has used its United Nations

veto power on multiple occasions to protect the interests of Bashar al Assad and his regime. The United Nations Security Council proposed resolutions that were pushed by Western and Arab states in which states were voting to implement military intervention along with economic sanctions against the Syrian government (UN, 2016). Russia was quick to use its veto power to protect its ally's interests. Between 2011 and 2017, the Russian Federation vetoed twelve United Nations Security Council resolutions on Syria (RTE, 2018). But in order to understand the Syrian conflict in the context of proxy war between the United States and Russia, the case of Afghanistan during the Cold War era offers a useful comparative insight (Trenin, 2018).

Cold War Proxy War in Afghanistan:

Afghanistan became the site of a proxy war between Moscow and Washington during the Cold War in 1978. In many ways what is happening today in Syria echoes the war in Afghanistan during the Cold War (Kalinovsky, 2009). These similar patterns highlight the significance of involvement from Washington and Moscow in Afghanistan and Syria. While Washington has had a clear hand in both conflicts, Russia has played different roles in its stance in each. Both cases, however, show Moscow's clear support to the centrist government and the contribution to lethal aid. On April 27th, 1978 the centrist government that was under the leadership of President Mohammed Daoud Khan's government was overthrown by a coup by Nur Mohammad Taraki and his military officers, who were left wing hardcore communists. Daud was the first president of Afghanistan and was a member of the Afghan National Revolutionary Party. His

relationship with his Soviet neighbors continued to progress negatively during his presidency due to his campaign against Afghan communists. Daud Khan was killed in the coup, leaving the position of presidency open for Taraki, who carried the support of Moscow (Steele, 2012). Not too long after Nur Mohammad Taraki claimed the presidency, he signed a friendship treaty with the Soviet Union (Steele, 2012). Signed in December 1978, the treaty proclaims Afghanistan into a one-party state (Cadwell, 2011). The treaty granted Afghanistan military and economic assistance by the Soviet Union.

On December 25th, 1979, only three months after the assassination of Taraki, the Soviet Union sent 30,000 troops into Afghanistan. The troops assumed military and political control of the capital, Kabul, and a large portion of the country. Moscow had finally decided to enter Afghanistan with its first mission to replace Hafizullah Amin with Babrak Karmal, a Soviet-endorsed politician, to become the new head of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (Steele, 2012). The political intentions that came with the Soviet Union entering Afghanistan could arguably be considered an invasion, but this paper shall consider it as a military intervention. This is due to the history of Soviet domination in Afghanistan that dates back to 1972. Throughout its history, Russia, or the USSR, has been internationally influential and has acted as “a qualified pluralist state in a contested normative environment” (Steele, 2012). Its actions towards military intervention is significantly impacted by its deeply rooted belief of the importance of regional and domestic state order.

The Soviet intervention of Afghanistan marked a turning point in the US - Soviet relations. The United States president at the time was Jimmy Carter, who had a very strong reaction towards the Soviet invasion. As a sign of a risk of diplomatic relations, the President then called US ambassador to the Soviet Union, Thomas J. Watson, Jr. back home. The Carter administration viewed the Soviets intervention as unacceptable, and believed it was time to begin trade restrictions with Moscow (Caldwell, 2011). Subsequently thawing relationships that were established by former president Richard Nixon came to an end. The peak of the Cold War was this very intervention, and it marked the breaking point of economic and diplomatic relationships between the US and the Soviet Union.

While proxy wars can be efficient they entail serious and disastrous effects. One of the common outcomes of proxy wars is the principal-agent relationship. In a traditional sense, the principle has the task of setting the agenda that the agent is required to implement. Actors can either be state or non-state actors. The use of non-state actors makes it at times difficult to contain their actions. It is typically a challenge for principles to effectively control their agents who carry their own priorities in the political agendas (Byman, 2006). The principal-agent dilemma that exists in a proxy war was evidently seen in Afghanistan. The United States used a rebel group, the Mujahideen who were guerrilla-type military groups to fight against the Soviet troops and Soviet-backed army of Afghanistan. However, the United States failed to fully control the Mujahideen from pursuing their own political agenda. Eventually, many of those who were once part of the Mujahideen, joined more extremist groups like the

Taliban and Al Qaeda. The US covert assistance to the Mujahideen was not designed to allow the group to achieve control of Afghanistan, but rather push the Soviets out (Caldwell, 2011). Within the Mujahideen, there existed a principal-agent problem. The group found it difficult to cooperate among themselves.

Throughout the history of the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, proxy relationships existed. “Communist and anti-communist proxies carried out a wave of atrocities that the superpowers actively encouraged, but rarely publicly acknowledged” (Sanders, 2016: p 172). To prevent a nuclear warfare between the United States and the Soviet Union, both states deliberately avoided using direct military combat. They instead focused primarily on expanding their influence throughout the global community. In both Syria and Afghanistan, Washington and Moscow were on different sides of the battlefield but avoided direct combat against one another. The Soviets had the government, the US had the rebels.

As the Soviet Union was hunting for a cooperative replacement of Taraki and Amin, they began to deploy troops to Bagram Air Base which is just outside of Kabul. Their combat military presence led the Carter administration to search for a proxy that would assist with achieving the US’s goal in Afghanistan (Byman 2006). The US began to supply non-lethal aid to the Mujahideen, as the Soviets were seeking to take advantage of the current administrative mess and wanted to arrange a military takeover. Proxy warfare in Afghanistan contributed to the study of proxy warfare. Supplying and pursuing interests through non-state actors led to a rise in terrorism in Afghanistan, and as will be explained in later sections, in Syria.

Proxy - sponsor relationship in the case of Afghanistan occurred over a matter of ten years and incorporated military, special-forces troops, and weaponry assistance. Similar to the proxy warfare occurring in Syria, the proxy war in Afghanistan had several sponsors involved. Anti-communist actors, like France and the United Kingdom, backed the United States' support of the Mujahidin (Hughes, 2014). What differs, is the amount of proxies there are. While the Mujahideen were the main proxy in Afghanistan, the war in Syria has numerous sponsors that are backing numerous proxies.

Post-Cold War Proxy War in Syria

Ironically, the international community, during the initial phase of the Syrian conflict, assumed that problems in Syria would go away. It was as if the world assumed that the Syrian government would deal with the situation and avoid starting another war in the Arab Spring (Lesch, 2013). Despite the violence that the Assad regime perpetrated against its protesters, the international community continued to be hesitant towards intervening in the beginning. No one, neither the US nor Russia, wanted to see another case of instability, and violence that would precipitate the removal of the central government. They all predicted that such a drastic change would lead numerous interested actors, specifically sectarian groups, in fighting for power. Josh Landis, at the time, stated, "Syria is the cockpit of the Middle East, and a struggle for control of Syria would be ignited" (Lesch, 2013:p 123). By 2011, countries like the United States and Russia could no longer ignore the situation. They both needed to protect their interests and to refrain the Syrian situation from escalating.

Similar to the rest of the world, the United States' approach to Syria at first was muted and cautious. With wishful thinking, Washington assumed that the Assad would do the "right thing" and step down from power (Lesch, 2013). However, when it became clear that would no longer be the option, the United States finally began to have a direct hand in the conflict. The "American-led intervention in the Syrian Civil War" refers to the United States support of the Syrian opposition army, FSA. The Free Syrian Army (الجيش السوري الحر) was founded on July 29, 2011 by officers who were originally part of the Syrian Armed Forces (Landis, 2011). By late 2011, the FSA began to weaken due to its lack of funding and Islamic groups began to overshadow the opposition (Landis, 2011). When the FSA weekend, the United States began placing its hand in the conflict by supplying the rebels of the Free Syrian Army with non-lethal aid, such as food and transportation (Sanger, 2017). As the conflict further progressed, Washington began providing extended resources including military training, money, intelligence, and began to communicate directly with selected Syrian rebel commanders. Once the Obama administration decided to start backing Syrian rebels at the beginning of the conflict, it eliminated the chances of Russia cooperating with the US on Syrian policy.

In August 2011, President Barack Obama formally ordered President Assad to step down from office for "the sake of the Syrian people" (Conway, 2017). When the conflict in Syria began to violently escalate, Obama announced that his redline would be the Assad regime using chemical weapons. "We have been very clear to the Assad regime, but also to other players on the ground, that a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized. That would change

my calculus,” said President Obama (Rhodes, 2018:pn). On August 21, 2013 Assad’s forces conducted the use of chemical weapons against the Syrian people. Nearly 1,500 civilians were killed, including children. This act put President Obama in a tough position due to his previous remark of the “redline” (Rhodes, 2018). In response to the attacks, the administration began to hint that the President was considering a “limited” military intervention in Syria.

President Donald Trump was elected in the fifth year of the Syrian revolution. Similar to Obama, Trump wanted to avoid any military involvement in the Middle East, but this proved to be a difficult goal. Towards 2017 the United States found itself in a tough position that had developed into something that is different than what it had been before (Rhodes, 2018). At this point, United States military intervention would not just be considered directed at only the Assad regime but also at his allies. Bashar Al-Assad used his long-term relationships with Iran and Russia to his favor by gaining military support from both. The three actors now are working together to eliminate the rebels that want to overthrow the Assad regime.

Dependence of United States allies in Syria has made it difficult for President Trump to go through with his recent desire to withdraw from Syria. The Kurdish people, opposing the Turks, were sent by the US to Syria. The United States leaving Syria would mean abandoning key allies along with giving the opportunity for Russia to gain geopolitical victory in Syria. The presence of the United States in Syria continues to exist as of today but may not last for long. A sudden withdraw from Syria would give Russia the upper hand, and an unchallenged presence in the region (Trenin, 2018). As

the US and Russia are battling against one another in an indirect manner, they have also proved the reality of their tensions. The United States continues to use sanctions against Russia as a tool to weaken the economic and diplomatic capabilities of Russia. Sanctions are imposed almost every time Russia takes part in international relations or pursues state interests outside its borders. While the US continues to directly target Russian prosperity through a series of shady sanctions, the rivalry, or post-Cold-War Cold War, began to get more agitated when both states became large actors in the Syrian conflict (Trenin, 2018).

The post-Cold War Cold War became evident in 2014, at the time of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Ever since then, the tensions between these two major powers have intensified. The Cold War dynamic that defined the US-Russian relations seem to have escalated when both states became active in the Syrian civil war. Standing on opposite ends of the spectrum, tensions reached their peak when the Trump administration began to accuse the Syrian government and its Russian ally of conducting war crimes in 2018. President Trump's accusations were an aftermath of the chemical attack in Douma, located in the suburbs of Damascus (Trenin, 2018). The US accusation resulted in a US-led coalition airstrike on Sharyat naval base that was meant to warn the Assad regime to refrain from using chemical weapons. The US strike on the Sharyat naval base was the first direct US attack against the Syrian government (Conway, 2017). After the airstrike, Russia announced that it will be withdrawing from a previous agreement with the US that promises to share information about Russian movement in Syria. This event clearly suggested a post-Cold War Cold War had begun.

While the United States viewed US military intervention as necessary for protecting the Syrian people from their own government, President Vladimir Putin viewed US attacks as an “act of aggression” directed to Russian forces. Putin said that these strikes could “have a destructive effect on the entire system of international relations” (Shinwari, Khan, Ali, 2018:p 48).

The war in Syria is more than just a war between people and their government. It has escalated to be a war between large powers, competing against one another to accomplish opposing goals in the same country. Both the United States and Russia have created allies with both state and non-state actors playing a role in the conflict, and carry a personal agenda that sways their current foreign policies towards Syria. Their adverse goals have generated a growing tension between the two states (Trenin, 2018). While both are militarily present in Syria and are on different sides of the battlefield, the states have recognized that declaring war on one another would be disastrous. Instead, both have set up proxies to do the work for them (Hughes, 2014). Their proxies, as shown in Figure 1, were strategically selected. The table is simplified to include the actors that are discussed here and excludes a number of actors that are also playing some role in the Syrian conflict. Those excluded from the table are either proxies of proxies, or work as proxies at a smaller scale that does little change to international relations.

Figure 1: Proxies in the Syrian Conflict

Russian Proxies	US Proxies
Iran	Saudi Arabia (GCC)
← Adversaries →	
Turkey	Kurdish Rebels
← Adversaries →	
Assad Regime	Free Syrian Army
← Adversaries →	
Hezbollah	The West
← Adversaries →	

Homs, 2019

The post-Cold War era has shown a trend amongst global powers to use proxy wars to pursue their foreign policy. Several factors contribute to this trend. First, a majority of the Western public no longer supports military engagement for the sake of state-building and regime change (Conway, 2017). Second, the development of private military companies that aim to externalize production and profit off conflicts and they do not include the domestic public. Finally, the stronger intelligence agencies now use cyberspace to conduct low-risk attacks through proxy servers (Hughes, 2014). Governments can be in plausible deniability of such attacks due to the privatization of intelligence agencies. These developments that encourage the use of proxy wars have allowed non-state, or irregular actors, to take part in global conflicts. Three of the actors listed on the table are characterized as irregular; Hezbollah, Kurdish Rebels, and the Free Syrian Army (Hughes, 2014). The use of proxies who are irregular, or non-state, leads to other major issues that will be discussed in the later section.

The post-Cold War era has shown a trend of states having funding proxies to weaken their adversaries. This trend of proxy wars most commonly are conducted through rebels, insurgent groups, groups already involved in the war, and even at times terrorists. Two factors that hamper the analysis of a proxy warfare are the fact that sponsors are typically in plausible deniability of any involvement, making it difficult to prove the exclusivity of insurgent groups and external actors (Hughes, 2014). The second factor is the likelihood of the central government hosting this proxy war to blame foreign powers for the domestic ongoing conflict. What is significant about the Syrian war is the fluidity of it. Throughout the conflict, actors that are interested and involved in the conflict continue to switch sides and use different proxies. At the beginning of the conflict, in 2011, bloodshed and losses of lives could be solely blamed on the Assad regime (Hughes, 2014). Today, in 2019, the bloodshed could be blamed on numerous groups, state and non-state, in direct or indirect combat.

Hughes believes that states are motivated to use proxy warfare as a tool of policy for three goals: coercion, disruption, and/or transformation. All three of these goals have been pursued by the United States (Trenin, 2018). Coercion was seen in President Obama's red line policy of threatening with an intervention if chemical weapons were used again, and then hitting on the Assad air force when they were. Aiming to force Assad to give up all his chemical capabilities; sponsoring the FSA to strengthen while weakening the Syrian Army by providing the FSA with American weapons; training, and providing intelligence are all examples of disruption. Finally, an attempt of transformation continues to be seen as the United States aims to transform the central

government by removing Assad from power and potentially replacing him with someone loyal to the US and its allies in the Middle East, specifically Israel.

For now, it is important to understand the roles of each of these proxies. The Kurds have been valuable proxies to the US by having the capabilities of providing foot soldiers on the battlefield along with intelligence for American airstrikes (Hughes, 2014). The Kurds are willing to die in battle fighting for a possible establishment of a Kurdish sovereign state. By using them as a proxy, however, the US has risked its historical relationship with Turkey, who fears the establishment of such a state. Turkey is fighting against the Kurdish rebels as they are considered, by Ankara, to be a terrorist group. Saudi Arabia, an American ally, has supported the anti-Assad campaign to eliminate Iran's influence in the region (Hughes, 2014). If Assad were to end up being removed from power and a regime change took place, Tehran would lose its most valuable Arab ally. Iran, on the other hand, has continued to support the Assad regime to maintain its supply line that goes through Syria and into Lebanon, to Hezbollah (Hughes, 2014).

Hezbollah has been categorized by the United States State Department as a terrorist organization. Russia disagrees, and has worked closely with the Shia organization to fight against anti-Assad actors. Iran and Russia have both provided weapons along with troops from Hezbollah (Marshall, 2016). Russia's dedication to maintain diplomatic and military support for the Assad regime comes from its fear to lose its only loyal ally. The use of proxies minimizes the economic and military losses of war, both of which Russia cannot afford to lose. The message behind Russia's commitment in Syria is to prove to regional players that once Russia commits to support

a government against uprising, it will not desert it when time gets tough (Marshall, 2016). This message is mainly signaled at the United States, has the intention, in Putin's perspective, of deserting a regime when opposition groups seize control.

The failure of Washington and Moscow to cooperate as two strong powers has cost lives of thousands of Syrians. Their post-Cold War Cold War proxy-war, as defined here, has opened the doors to irregular actors to play a role in the conflict. The use of proxies, and the determination to undermine one another has made it foresee an end to this ongoing conflict. The war in Syria is no longer just another uprising of the Arab Spring but rather it has developed into a conflict much more devastating and complex. While the US and Russia were too focused on the use of proxies on top of the already complicated Cold War taking place in Syria, terrorist groups began to flourish in Syria, including the rise of ISIS. Eliminating ISIS would be one issue that the United States and Russia, along with all their proxies can potentially agree on (Marshall, 2016).

The international community has agreed to a common enemy regardless of their position on the battlefield: ISIS or the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS). It is also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), or Daesh in Arabic.¹ The proxy war that is taking place has enhanced major destruction in Syria which has allowed ISIS to gain a foothold there. Foreign involvement playing a power game in the region has contributed to the establishment of such a large and influential terrorist group. The social and political chaos of Syria created a void that ISIS is seeking to fill (Shinwari, Khan, Ali, 2018).. This organization was founded under the jihadist, Abu Musab

¹ The word Sham is Arabic for Levant.

al-Zarqawi, who wanted to fight the Soviets in 1989 in Afghanistan with the mujahideen but never had the chance to do so. He instead decided to establish his own organization, originally named Al Qaeda in Iraq which was derived from the “original” Al Qaeda of Afghanistan. His extremist acts began with assassinations and suicide bombings during the war in Iraq and attempting to develop chemical weapons of mass destruction. In spring 2006, Al-Zarqawi was killed by an American air strike, but his death did not prevent the organization from expanding.

The ultimate goal of ISIS is to establish a caliphate state across Iraq, Syria, and spread through Muslim majority countries. They wish to govern their state with *Sharia* Law and create a society that resembles that of eighth-century Islam. ISIS has proved to be more strategic than other terrorist groups that seek to establish an international influence. They are the first terrorist group who had an active role on social media. With the use of social media sites such as Twitter and YouTube, ISIS has become a terrorist group that anyone with a smart device knows about. They have promoted reactionary politics and religious fundamentalism with modern tools that are specifically aimed to recruit youth from all over the globe (Hauer, 2017). The ISIS recruiters also offer economic and safety incentives to the families who were hurt in the Syrian war and were unable to flee. According to the Congressional Research Service, fighters of the terrorist group earn between 400 and 1,200 dollars a month, plus a 50-dollar stipend for their wives and 25 dollars for every child (CNN Money). Kidnapping young boys, as seen with the 140 Kurdish schoolboys in 2014 in Syria, forcing them into training and studying Islamic theology, has also been a recruitment strategy (Hauer, 2017). Having a

terrorist organization is quite expensive, and ISIS has found its way to collect revenue through oil production and smuggling taxes, kidnap ransoms, extortion, and stealing ancient artifacts and selling them on the black market (Hauer, 2017). In 2014 alone ISIS had profited over two billion dollars and used the money to pay off its fighters and buy weaponry.

Terrorist groups target states that are suffering from political disorganization and exploit the society within, and the ISIS case is no different. ISIS's time in Syria has allowed them access to recruiting devoted soldiers, gain stronghold in certain regions in the country, and have even been able to occupy areas and claiming them as an ISIS territory (Hauer, 2017). On the first week of Ramadan 2014, ISIS proclaimed itself as the caliphate and was then claiming a territory the size of Great Britain as its own. Its territory at the time was approximately 34,000 square miles spreading from the Mediterranean coast to the south of Baghdad. But by 2016, the US estimated that ISIS had lost 40% of this territory (Hauer, 2017). The radical camp in Syria's opposition groups has been driven by sectarianism and the different domestic political aspirations between groups. The role and influence of external actors have also contributed to the evolving radical camp of the opposition.

The United States and Russia's military interventions are to protect their national interests, whether it is to remain or remove the Assad regime. They have both justified their presence in the conflict on the grounds of humanitarian aid and the right to protect these interests. Today, Syria has become a hub of terrorism and its vulnerability is dangerous to the entire world. Since their establishment, ISIS has conducted 90 attacks

in 21 different countries, and their extremist ideologies are slowly spreading into the west (Hauer, 2017). For this reason, the United States and Russia are now justifying their presence in Syria to fight the Islamic State. While they both agree to ISIS being an enemy, the US and Russia have failed to maintain joint a counterterrorism approach. This contradiction comes from the fact that they do not agree on which groups, specifically Syrian opposition, to designate as terrorist, and which areas to strike and avoid.

The strategy of facilitating insurgent groups to weaken the former institutions of a state is seen by the United States. As previously discussed, the United States sponsored opposition groups in Syria by strengthening them (Berti, Paris, 2014). When much of the opposition weakened, many of those who were originally a part of the Syrian opposition movements joined ISIS, bringing with them their American-based training and intelligence training. The entire establishment of ISIS can easily be linked to the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, which left behind tanks and weapons that are present in Syria today. “Such state of confusion created security vacuum and Sunni alienation, indirectly inviting the insurgent groups which tactfully exploited the deprived citizen to fight for: their identity; revenge against state and US forces repressions; and, to over through the existing regime based on authoritarian design of setup” (Salibi, Suleiman, & Hourani, 2019:pn).

The development of a proxy war creates a gap and a significant amount of chaos that allows groups like ISIS to get their hands on resources that are not meant for them (Berti, Paris, 2014). External sponsors of the war, including Russia and the US have

allowed ISIS to secure resources. The pool of capital that ISIS has acquired allowed the group to be a part of powerful negotiations that supplement the potential for ISIS to become self-perpetuating. It is hard to determine who is effectively manipulating the other, sponsors of proxy wars or irregular actors like ISIS (Berti, Paris, 2014). “The circuits of capital created by blossoming transnational crime under such conditions also contain within them major disproportionalities, patterns in which flows of ‘hot’ money further the potential for generating and prolonging an international system prone to favoring both wars of plunder and proxy warfare” (Marshall, 2016:pn).

This is not to say that the US and Russia purposely contributed to the rise of ISIS in 2014, but the proxy war has allowed leeway for the development. Generally speaking, as long as there are external actors involved in a conflict, irregular actors are given the possibility of connecting with external actors that are willing to supply them (Berti, Paris, 2014). Essentially, a conflict could last forever as long as there are weapons and money flowing in and irregular actors are still motivated. While the weapons that ISIS has in their possession are not enough to take out the US and Russian forces, they are enough to keep the conflict going. Winning the proxy war in Syria is about capacity, something that the United States and Russia have when working together (Hauer, 2017). However, the different sides of the conflict have made it especially difficult to balance the peace and eliminate the common enemy.

■ ISIS territory



Source: Wikimedia Contributors; Understandingwar.org

In 2014, ISIS was quite popular. People were willing to join, and the organization began to prove itself as quite capable. However, ISIS is now showing signs of its weakness. Its extreme ideology has grown significantly unpopular between local and regional forces (Hauer, 2017). Its expansionist attitude has disregarded local cultures, authority, territory, and is ambiguous about who its sponsors are. In order for it to rise again, ISIS may need to make truce with other opposition groups in Syria that are leaning for the support of US and Russia. The job that is left for the US and Russia is to put aside their national interests and eliminate the opportunity for extremist groups like ISIS to continue to exploit the chaos. Security and stability will continue to be impossible as long as a large flow of weapons and money are funneling into different actors, and as long as the proxy war in Syria still is waged by the powerful states like the United States and Russia (Hauer, 2017).

CONCLUSION

The use of proxy wars has been an increasingly popular strategy used by major powers. The international system in the Cold-War era was significantly different than what it is today. The world is no longer divided into two polar powers, the Soviet sphere and the Western sphere. One of the main factors that existed in the Cold War that no longer exists today is the opposing ideologies that the US and Russia had established and wished to expand. Today, Russia and the United States are both capitalist countries that consider themselves democracies on some level. But all these factors do not change the troubled relations that exist due to the competition between US and Russia. The relationship between the two countries has not significantly improved as one would hope. There is more confrontation than cooperation between their foreign policies.

Proxy warfare has appeared to be a very attractive policy option for sponsors, mainly state actors. However, as risk-free as this policy option may appear to be, it certainly entails adverse aspects. Proxies are vulnerable to be manipulated by their external patrons, and often treated as expendable. External aid also often worsens the factionalism within proxy groups, leading to clashes between its commanders due to the lack of unified command among rebel groups (Hughes, 2014). Aside from the problems proxy warfare instigates within the time of conflict, policymakers fail to prepare for long-term implications of this policy option. It is still premature to determine the long-term implications of proxy warfare in Syria, but it is not difficult to assume that it will be similar to that of Afghanistan (Hughes, 2014). The United States abandoned the

mujahideen in Afghanistan once the US's overall goal was achieved: The Soviet withdrawal. Abandonment of the proxy that was generated by carrying support of the US eventually lead to the establishment of the Taliban, and the rise of al Qaeda. Terrorist groups are already present in Syria, and if the US and Russia were to abandon their assets again, the number of groups will only grow.

Throughout history, proxies have found ways to manipulate their sponsors to pursue their own political agenda. It is difficult to determine, however, when exactly the sponsor is manipulating the proxy or when the proxy is manipulating the sponsor. For example, the Afghan Communist Party seized of Kabul in 1978 was against the orders of Moscow. Another example would be the United States failure to recover all advanced weapons that were originally provided to the Mujahideen. The "blowback" of the establishment of Islamic fundamentalism that occurred after the funding of the Mujahideen can also be viewed as a principal - agent problem that commonly occurs in proxy wars (Marshall, 2016). It would have been predicted that the United States would not pursue policies in Syria that may potentially have the same outcome as of that of Afghanistan. The use of proxies and supporting non-state groups caused a rise of terrorism in both cases.

Key similarities between Afghanistan and Syria are the collapse of the central government, the distribution of armed weapons, the motivation of major powers acquiring access to political influence and natural resources, and the opportunity for rebels to seize the moment and gain power. Control is easily lost in conflicts like those of Afghanistan and Syria, and the continuing tit-for-tat vengeance makes it hard to

estimate when the conflict will ever end. The crumbling of relationships between states that were once allies, like Turkey and the US, has developed international trust issues and a weakening of diplomacy. All of these elements that existed in Syria and existed in Afghanistan in the 1970-1980s.

Whether the outcome of the Syrian conflict is eventually removing the Assad regime from power or replacing it, major scars will remain within the administration and the society. The removal of the Assad regime will bring major western influence and the use of Syria to pursue their national interests in the Middle East. It will potentially allow Israel, a key American ally, to gain power on the borders and expand on their regional power plans. If the Assad regime were to stay in power, the power game between the United States and Russia will continue to grow and a Cold-War tension will be hard to overcome. Russia will gain a permanent military foothold and pursue stronger relationships with its Middle Eastern allies (Lucas, 2018). Either way, the government will struggle to find a balance between stability and development. The Syrian society will most likely end up similar to that of Lebanon, severely sectarian. The different ethnic and religious groups will continue to try to achieve their own political presence and strive for territory. Kurds, Sunnis, Shiaa, Alawites, Druze, and Christians will find complications with the distribution of territory and it will be hard to return to the previous sectarian integration that once existed in Syrian society.

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