

Understanding the New Proxy Wars: Battlegrounds and Strategies Reshaping the Greater Middle East

Peter Bergen, Candace Rondeaux, Daniel Rothenberg, and David Sterman, eds. (Oxford University Press, 2022), 416 pages, index.

Reviewed by Alissa M.

During the Cold War, proxy wars were tools for great powers to confront each other without the risk of escalation into nuclear conflict. The nature and structure of these proxy conflicts—e.g., the Vietnam War and the US efforts to oust the Soviets from Afghanistan—were well understood in the international relations literature, but since the Arab Spring (2010–12) proxy wars have changed and the old bipolar model does not help scholars or policymakers understand these conflicts. With that in mind, Peter Bergen et al., have compiled a volume of essays exploring the new generation of proxy wars in the Middle East—primarily the conflicts in Libya, Syria, and Yemen.

The core thesis is summed up in the book’s closing pages: “Proxy wars are not just for great powers anymore.” (319) If there is a second thesis, it’s that proxy wars are best used to achieve destructive ends—toppling existing regimes, defeating terror groups—but patently unsuccessful at achieving constructive objectives like rebuilding civil society and governing. The contributors have a variety of backgrounds, including journalism, academia, and government. Edited by a trio of Arizona State University professors and journalist Peter Bergen, *Understanding the New Proxy Wars* was born out of a project to explore proxy conflict through fieldwork, oral histories, data collection, and other ground-level research methods.^a The strongest chapters cleave closely to that methodology. The examinations of conflict from the perspectives of a state actor or the leadership are less compelling.

The book is divided into three sections: first establishing the need for a new understanding of contemporary proxy conflicts, then examining the role of local dynamics on the success or failure of proxy use, and ending with analysis of proxy strategies at the nation-state level. In two chapters, Part I sets the groundwork for defining

contemporary proxy conflict through a legal lens and makes the case for the policy relevance of a new understanding of proxy conflict. It includes a useful literature review, a definition of proxy conflict focused on the absence of constitutional controls, and a justification of the utility of this definition for policymakers. It also establishes the historical context for the chapters that follow by defining three eras of proxy conflict: Cold War (Vietnam), post-9/11 (Iraq and Afghanistan), and post-Arab Spring (Libya, Syria, Yemen).

The second chapter of Part I draws lessons from the Syrian civil war for policymakers: they need a clear political strategy and defined goals; they must make an accurate assessment of the proxy’s abilities and limitations; and it is critical to develop a plan to mitigate the challenges inherent in using proxies, including information deficits, coordination of action, and (mis)alignment of objectives. This chapter is a highlight, with a clear thesis and a defined methodology strengthened by the collection of local data to inform the result, namely that the Islamic State failed to maintain control of Aleppo because it lacked administrative and persuasive capabilities to complement its strong coercive capacity.

The five chapters of part II are the heart of *Understanding the New Proxy Wars* and includes lessons from intensive fieldwork as the authors examine the way local dynamics and governance can support or undermine the goals of sponsors and their proxies. The key finding—explored through discussions of the conflicts in Syria, Libya, and Yemen—is that the proxies who can help a sponsor achieve battlefield successes are not necessarily the ones who will be most adept at holding and governing territory afterward. This is not a revelation, but the use of fieldwork and data to support the finding across three conflict zones does show the complexity of local political dynamics and the reasons that there are no easy or

a. Bergen is best known for his books and essays on terrorism and the Middle East. See Hayden Peake’s review of *The United States of Jihad: Investigating America’s Homegrown Terrorists* (*Studies in Intelligence* 61, no. 1, March 2017).

All statements of fact, opinion, or analysis expressed in this article are those of the author. Nothing in the article should be construed as asserting or implying US government endorsement of its factual statements and interpretations.

universally applicable pathways from conquest to governance. Chapter 3, for example, explains the value of existing social and financial networks in producing effective proxies by comparing Qatar's use of Muslim Brotherhood networks (already tightly intertwined) with the US and Saudi proxies who had more need of sponsor dollars (and thus were tightly bound to their sponsors, and less to each other) but possessed less administrative capability.

Part III's three chapters provide more conventionally academic looks at the strategies driving contemporary proxy wars from the level of state actors—Russia through the Wagner Group, Iran through the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Qods Force (IRGC-QF), and the Gulf monarchies through their respective militaries. Chapter 8—“Decoding the Wagner Group”—returns to the legal-constitutional framework laid out in the opening chapter. Candace Rondeaux explains an interesting paradox of Wagner and other Russian private military contractors, which are legally outside the Russian constitutional framework but in practice operate as though they are subject to it. Rondeaux deserves significant credit for her work here, which accurately presages Russia's use of its overt, covert, conventional, and asymmetric tools (including the Wagner Group) in its latest war against Ukraine, which had not yet begun at the time of this volume's writing.

Chapters 9 and 10 look at two very different cases of state-proxy dynamics, with the highly successful and strategic use of proxies by the IRGC-QF to implement a strategy of “forward defense” (270) and the less effective and more reactive development of proxies by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in response to what they perceived as feckless US policy toward the Middle East and North Africa during and after the Arab Spring. These chapters explain Tehran, Riyadh, and Abu Dhabi's thinking at a national level, in contrast to the earlier chapters' focus on field research and local dynamics.

There is much to recommend this volume, but in many regards it does not live up to the promise of the first two chapters. Taken as a whole, it is a hodgepodge

of approaches and not the coherent narrative of modern proxy war that the opening chapters portended. The chapters that make the best use of field research and data—namely chapters 4 and 7—were the most valuable and contribute the most new information to thinking on proxy wars. In contrast, chapter 3—“Social Networks, Class, and the Syrian Proxy War”—relies heavily on an argument based on sociological data but the sourcing is mostly news reports with only a smattering of interviews, which cuts into its credibility.

Comparing these wars to conflicts outside the Middle East—or even to each other—would have made this volume enormously more useful. What, other than the sheer number, makes these proxy wars different from others? Similarly, it would be interesting to read a comparison of IRGC's highly structured proxy strategy in Iraq, where many Qods Force officers are on the ground in both military and diplomatic capacities, with the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar's use of force in Libya, where their contributions came through either their air forces or their pocketbooks.

Understanding the New Proxy Wars is most valuable as a reference or as individual chapters for readers already interested in the specific conflicts they explore. It is less useful as a cohesive framework for understanding proxy wars in general or specific conflicts. Most of part II is so intensely detailed with a maze of individual and organizational names and relationships that it may be very difficult for even readers with considerable knowledge of the region to follow the narrative. A thorough index, however, makes it easy to identify chapters with relevance to one's particular issues or actors of interest.

This book's lasting contribution may be its reminder that breaking things is easier than fixing them. Rare is the proxy that can both take territory and govern it afterward, and policymakers and intelligence officers alike would do well to heed the lesson that few strategic goals will be met through proxy conflicts, despite the allure of the tactical gains they can offer.



The reviewer: Alissa M. is a CIA analyst specializing in Middle East governance.