



Imperfect Proxies

The Pros and Perils of Partnering with Non-State Actors for CT

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THE ISSUE

- The recent history of the United States and Western allies working “by, with, and through” non-state actors for counterterrorism (CT) operations when unable or unwilling to partner with a host-nation government—such as in Mali, Libya, and Syria—has generated mixed results on the ground.
- Militias can provide a ready-made local ground force willing to fight capable terrorists but lack the legitimacy, effectiveness, and staying power to hold and sustain military gains.
- Conducting CT campaigns by empowering non-state proxies poses unique dilemmas and policy trade-offs for Western policymakers, with limited options to secure swift CT wins without stoking local conflict and generating instability resilient terrorists can exploit.
- The proxy approach will likely remain appealing to Western countries as well as great power rivals as low-cost means to reduce exigent terrorist threats and pursue their security and strategic interests vis-à-vis competitors.
- Simultaneous success in the CT and stability realms will remain a hard if insurmountable challenge without a coherent political strategy for operations to serve and enduring military and diplomatic support to local partners.

INTRODUCTION

The Islamic State’s march across Syria and Iraq in 2014 and ensuing expansion via global affiliates posed a vexing challenge for the United States and key allies. The Islamic State sought not only to seize, govern, and defend territory as part of its so-called caliphate, but also to leverage these safe havens to build transnational terrorist networks. Countering the Islamic State would thus require large-scale ground operations to conquer the Islamic State proto-states and defeat its military forces, but the need to do so urgently and expeditiously to prevent external terrorist attacks. But who would conduct such a ground campaign?

The Islamic State’s expansion coincided with a shift in U.S. and allied military strategy: the adoption of the “by,

with, and through” model for major counterterrorism (CT) operations. Rather than committing large numbers of ground forces, Western strategy would center on training, advising, and assisting host-nation militaries to serve as the main combat element. With small numbers of special operations forces (SOF) and key enablers such as intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) and close air support, Western powers could bolster the battlefield effectiveness of local forces while limiting their own troop commitments. A national army like the Iraqi Security Forces was a natural host-nation partner. But what if there is no state with whom to partner?

This paper will examine the recent history of partnering with non-state actors for CT operations where the United

States and allies were unable or unwilling to work “by, with, and through” the host-nation. It will explore three cases, wherein the host-nation government was too weak, divided, or hostile to partner with:

- **Weak State:** Mali, where France since 2017 has partnered with Malian militias—the Self-Defense Group of Imrad Tuareg and Allies (GATIA) and the Movement for the Salvation of Azawad (MSA)—to fight the Islamic State of the Greater Sahara (ISGS) in the Mali-Niger border region.
- **Divided State:** Libya, where U.S., British, and Italian forces in 2016 enabled militias from the city of Misrata—fighting nominally under the banner of one of Libya’s two warring governments, the Tripoli-based

Government of National Accord (GNA)—to clear the Islamic State from its stronghold in Sirte.

- **Hostile State:** Syria, where the United States since 2015 has partnered with the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG)—by 2016 under umbrella organization the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)—to counter the Islamic State, amidst a civil war where the U.S. and Syrian government were opponents.

The paper will assess opportunities and risks of using non-state actors as proxies for CT operations, identify lessons learned from the Mali, Libya, and Syria cases for policymakers and strategists, and explore the implications of enabling local militias for short- and long-term U.S. and allied interests.

PROXY CT AMIDST COLLAPSED STATES: HOW DID WE GET HERE?

While the wars in Mali, Libya, and Syria have their own unique histories, key drivers and regional developments were common to each conflict and critical in shaping U.S. and allied CT decisions.

DRIVER	STATE COLLAPSE AND FRAGMENTATION: The upheaval of the Arab Spring in 2011 triggered the collapse of Middle East and North African governments and saw popular uprisings descend into armed rebellions and then civil war. The fall of authoritarian states unleashed separatist aspirations and sectarian and ethnic tensions, spawning local militia formation.	TERRORIST EXPANSION: AQ and the Islamic State exploited state fragmentation to expand into chaotic or ungoverned spaces, co-opt Salafi-jihadist militia already fighting in the civil wars and move manpower and arms through dissolved borders to bolster new strongholds.	EXTERNAL OPERATIONS, FOREIGN INTERVENTION: Terrorist groups, particularly the Islamic State, sought to leverage their strongholds and safe havens to destabilize adjoining regions for further expansion and launch terrorist attacks against Western targets. Bold action swelled the terrorists’ ranks but triggered Western intervention.
MALI	The Malian army’s coup d’etat in 2012 led to the collapse of state authority and the military’s withdrawal across large parts of the country. ¹ In northern Mali, a flood of well-armed Tuareg fighters returning from serving the deposed Gaddafi regime in Libya fueled both Tuareg separatist rebels and Tuareg Islamist militias. This set off a multi-sided conflict between Bamako, Tuareg separatists, and violent extremists. ²	An Islamist insurgency swept across northern Mali in 2013, with backing from AQIM. ³ Ensuing years of jihadist group formation, splinters, and mergers ultimately led in 2017 to a new AQ affiliate, Jama’at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), and its expansion into central Mali. ⁴ In the north and east, Islamic State of the Greater Sahara (ISGS) splintered from AQ in 2015, and expanded in 2016 into the Mali-Niger border region. ⁵	As ISGS strengthened in the Mali-Niger border region in 2016, the group attacked French and regional security forces in Mali operating under France’s Operation Barkhane and the G5 Sahel CT force. ⁶ By 2017, under leader Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, ISGS expanded its sights outside of Mali, ambushing U.S. and Nigerien forces in Niger, raiding a military outpost in Burkina Faso, and plotting against western targets across West Africa and the Sahel. ^{7,8}

LIBYA	<p>Libya’s fracturing after Gaddafi’s ouster had by 2014 spawned rival governments and civil war between west and east, pitting the Tripoli government-aligned Libya Dawn coalition against the Tobruk-aligned Operation Dignity led by General Khalifa Haftar.⁹ At the same time, local militias proliferated across Libya, gaining dominance in their home cities and neighborhoods while resisting integration into any national government.¹⁰</p>	<p>Salafi-jihadist groups emerged strong in Libya’s anarchy. Inspired by the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, militias from multiple Libyan cities pledged allegiance to the Islamic State, seizing the eastern city of Derna in 2014. With direction and fighters flowing from core Islamic State, Islamic State-Libya gained steam in 2015, moving west to conquer Sirte and establish a stronghold spanning 200 miles across the Libyan coast.^{11,12}</p>	<p>Rapid gains and spectacular attacks, such as the execution of 21 Egyptian Christians in January 2015, caused jihadists from across North and sub-Saharan Africa to flock to Sirte. As the Islamic State faced growing Western CT pressure in Syria and Iraq, Islamic State leadership directed foreign fighters to Sirte to create a secondary caliphate. Core Islamic State and use it as hub to connect global jihadist networks spanning the Middle East and Africa and served as a launching pad for attacks into Europe.^{13,14}</p>
SYRIA	<p>As Syria descended into civil war in 2011, the Assad regime’s focus on the opposition in western Syria—including a growing number of Salafist militias—provided an opening for Kurdish aspirations in northern Syria. The YPG in 2012 seized the northern, Kurdish cities of Afrin and Kobani. In 2014, the YPG’s parent political organization, Democratic Union Party (PYD), declared the establishment of Rojava, with self-governing but geographically separated enclaves in Afrin, Kobani, and Hasakah spanning the Syrian-Turkish border.¹⁵</p>	<p>AQ saw the war in Syria as a chance to regenerate and expand in the Middle East. By 2012, AQ’s Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) had deployed to Syria and recruited Salafist militia to form new AQ affiliate Jabhat al Nusra (JN). After a dramatic split in 2013, AQ-loyal JN focused on the war against Assad in western Syria, while ISI—now the Islamic State, under leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi—seized swaths of the east, rallying thousands of fighters to its so-called caliphate.^{16,17}</p>	<p>As the Islamic State solidified its territorial control in Syria and Iraq, the group expanded operations into neighboring countries, threatening to destabilize Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey. At the same time, the Islamic State’s external operations cadre exploited safe havens in Raqqa and foreign fighter facilitation hubs such as Manbij to plan, direct, enable, and inspire attacks across the West, including the U.S. homeland.^{18,19}</p>

TWO SIDES OF THE COIN: PROS AND CONS OF THE NON-STATE ACTOR APPROACH

Working “by, with, and through” local militias presents opportunities for outside powers seeking a ground component for CT operations but also poses unique challenges and long-term risks. In weighing the pros and cons, proxy effectiveness can be measured across two broad categories: motivation and capability.

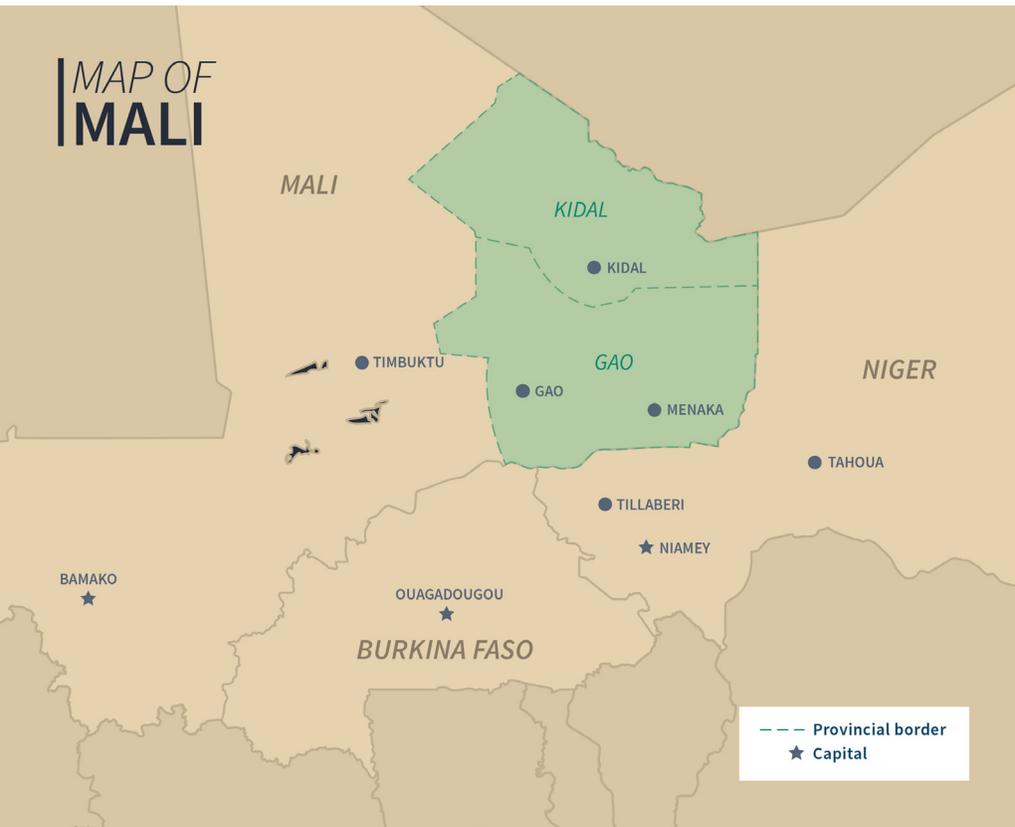
MOTIVATION

PRO: Will to Fight: Lacking the resources and capabilities of a national army, non-state actors may have strong

incentive to partner with foreign powers when terrorist groups pose a military or even existential threat to the militia and its people.

The recurring threat of jihadist expansion in northern Mali has made GATIA and MSA willing partners for French CT efforts. The Tuareg and Arab fighters who formed GATIA in 2014 had battled Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)-backed and other jihadist groups since 2012 to defend their core areas in Mali’s Gao and Kidal regions, while the MSA has been on the frontline against ISGS in Mali’s Menaka region since the group embedded there in 2017.^{20,21}

MAP OF MALI



Members of National Movement for the Salvation of Azawad (MSA) in the streets of Menaka, Mali, May 2018.

Source: SEBASTIEN RIEUSSEC/AFP/Getty Images

- Misrata’s militias viewed the rise of Salafi jihadist groups in Libya with alarm but initially sought to contain rather than degrade them, prioritizing local conflicts and the fight against Haftar instead. The Islamic State’s takeover

of Sirte, however, and the group’s expansion and attacks towards Misrata in 2016, compelled the city’s militias to counter-attack and then join the GNA-backed Bunyan al-Marsous (BAM) coalition to retake Sirte.²²

- Unlike other Syrian opposition groups in 2014, the YPG perceived the Islamic State, not Assad, as its primary foe, and an existential threat to Syrian Kurds. Facing Islamic State onslaught, the YPG displayed strategic will to not fall under Islamic State flag, culminating in their defense of Kobani. The YPG eagerly sought Western backing, while the U.S.-led coalition found a militia willing to lead the ground war.

CON: But Not Just for You: Militia may perceive terrorist groups as one among several enemies amid a multi-faceted civil conflict and shift their attention and arms toward other foes when the terrorist threat ebbs, losing the incentive to press the CT fight to the finish. Non-state actors may also view Western-backed CT campaigns as a means to expand their own spheres of influence at the expense of local rivals and adversaries.

- In addition to targeting ISGS, the GATIA has repeatedly fought rival Tuareg groups in northern Mali, seeking to expand their military power and influence over key trafficking hubs. Along with the GATIA, the MSA has routinely attacked ethnic Fulani communities in the Mali-Niger border region, to gain control over scarce economic resources while also taking punitive action against Fulani villages where ISGS is embedded.^{23,24}

- Key Misratan militias viewed the Sirte campaign as an opportunity to become Libya’s dominant military and political force—not as a purely CT

mission, and not to extend the writ of the recently formed GNA. The BAM coalition collapsed shortly after retaking Sirte over diverging views of serving the GNA and failed to pursue the Islamic State

MAP OF LIBYA



to connect its northern Syria enclaves and then gain control over territory and resources in eastern Syria. The YPG perceives Turkey, not the Islamic State, as its existential foe and at times prioritized defending Rojava against Turkish incursions over counter-Islamic State operations. As the coalition closed in on the last Islamic State strongholds in eastern Syria in 2018, the campaign repeatedly halted as YPG elements withdrew to engage Turkish moves into northern Syria.^{26,27}

CAPABILITIES

PRO: Ready-Made Ground Force:

With existing fighting skills, local area knowledge, and proximity to terrorist-held territory, local militias offer a ready-made infantry force for foreign powers to train, advise, and enable to assault terrorist targets and clear enemy-held terrain.

- With fighting experience from northern Mali's various sub-conflicts since 2012, GATIA and MSA have demonstrated requisite combat skills to serve as French proxies for ground assaults against ISGS targets.^{28,29} Training, logistics, and intelligence support from French and Nigerian forces enabled GATIA and MSA to move against ISGS camps in Niger's Tillaberi region in 2017 and similarly difficult terrain in Mali's Gao, Kidal, and Menaka regions in 2018—complemented by French airstrikes targeting ISGS leaders.^{30,31}

- Misrata's militias had several years of fighting experience in Libya's civil war when the Islamic State seized control of Sirte in 2015 and were thus the most effective fighting force to lead the operation to Sirte, spearheading the BAM

coalition's campaign coastal advance to Sirte and urban combat operations inside the city.³² The insertion of Western SOF to advise the Misratans and direct airstrikes against Islamic State fortifications enabled militia forces to seize Islamic State headquarters by mid-August and fully clear the city of Islamic State forces by year's end.^{33,34}



Militia fighters fighting under the GNA-backed Bunyan al-Marsous (BAM) coalition use a broken mirror to observe the movement of ISIS fighters inside Sirte, October 2016.

Source: FABIO BUCCIARELLI/AFP/Getty Images

cadres who have retrenched and regrouped in the mountainous desert south of the city.²⁵

- While committed to fighting the Islamic State, the YPG also saw the counter-Islamic State campaign as a means to achieve its ultimate goal of expanding the Rojava; by seizing terrain from the Islamic State, the YPG was able



A member of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) walks through the debris in the old city of Raqqah, Syria, September 2017.

Source: BULENT KILIC/AFP/Getty Images

- The YPG had more than a year of experience fighting the Islamic State and the Nusrah Front in northern Syria before the United States began supporting the militia with airstrikes in fall 2014. With developed command-and-control, sophisticated tactics, and intelligence on the Islamic State, the YPG displayed the combat skills

needed to check and reverse Islamic State gains in 2015. With U.S. support, the YPG in 2016 served effectively as the coalition's main infantry force, pushing west from its northeast Syria enclave to seize the ISIS stronghold of Manbij, then south for the capture of Raqqah and the ground campaign down the Euphrates River Valley.

CON: Ineffective Hold Force: Ethnic or sectarian militias may lack legitimacy in the areas they clear and be ill-suited to serve as a holding and stabilization force. Local populations may perceive the militia as outsiders or occupiers, potentially undermining battlefield gains and creating openings for terrorists to re-gain local support.

- In the Mali-Niger border region, the Fulani communities in which ISGS has embedded perceive counter-ISGS operations by the primarily Tuareg fighters of GATIA and MSA as ethnic-driven violence from their historic foe, enabled by Mali, Niger, and France. ISGS has exploited Fulani political and socioeconomic grievances against regional powers and their Tuareg proxies to deepen its influence as defenders of the Fulani.^{35,36}
- Powerful Sirtawi tribes saw the BAM coalition as a guise for a Misratan takeover and the GNA's inability to rebuild the devastated city as evidence of other Libyans' desire to keep Sirte weak—a key narrative the Islamic State used to co-opt the tribes to seize Sirte in the first place. Mutually distrustful, Misratans viewed Sirte as an Islamic State hotbed and have been unwilling to devote resources to police and stabilize the city.^{37,38}
- As the SDF began pushing into mixed or predominantly Arab territory in 2016, many Arab communities saw the YPG-led clearing force as the imposition of Kurdish rule—exacerbated by the YPG's installation of its loyalists over newly formed governing and military councils.³⁹ Moreover, the widely held view of the YPG as pro-regime collaborators

amongst Sunni Arab communities in eastern Syria—most of which revolted against Assad—has intensified their discontent, which the Islamic State first leveraged to gain influence and support.

LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE PROXY APPROACH

The Mali, Libya, and Syria cases highlight several common themes in conducting CT operations with militias in complex conflict environments and provide lessons learned for policymakers and strategists considering the non-state actor approach.

CT versus Stability: From the CT perspective, militias may offer a motivated and experienced local partner ready to be enabled to degrade terrorist safe havens. From a stability lens, militias may lack legitimacy where they deploy, exacerbate sectarian or ethnic tensions, and sow the seeds for more civil conflict—the type of environment in which jihadism thrives and terrorist groups can re-generate.

- The GATIA and MSA have provided the French and regional security forces a ground force capable of targeting ISGS in the difficult, distant terrain of the Mali-Niger border, helping to pre-empt the expansion of another Salafi-jihadist group with transnational aims in Mali.⁴⁰ The proxy militias' violence against the region's Fulani communities, however, has only intensified their political and socioeconomic grievances and a cycle of inter-communal violence that is enabling ISGS to strengthen its support from the Fulani population.⁴¹
 - Misrata's militias with Western support were able to clear Sirte in just several months, eliminating the potential of a secondary or—with setbacks by the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq—a new primary caliphate taking hold in the heart of North Africa and at the doorstep of Europe.⁴² But deep mistrust between the Misratans and Sirtawis created a security vacuum in the devastated city, now being filled by Libya's strengthening Salafist faction, the Madkhalists. Though opposed to the Islamic State, Madkhalists' hardline ideology and anti-Western views could again allow transnational jihadism to thrive in Sirte and beyond.⁴³
 - The YPG stood firm against the Islamic State before Western intervention and inflicted military defeat against a sophisticated terrorist army dug into urban and rural terrain across the expanse of eastern Syria when Western support came. The YPG/SDF's lack of legitimacy among Sunni Arabs in the areas it liberated, however, has created simmering Arab-Kurd tensions in critical cities in eastern Syria such as Raqqah and Dayr az Zawr and rekindled Sunni Arab grievances that the Islamic State could again exploit to resurge.^{44,45}
- Staying Power:** Militias may lack the military capacity or political will for the types of policing and day-to-day security operations needed to hold and sustain battlefield gains against terrorist resurgence. Non-state militia can also lose the incentive to pursue terrorists after the immediate threat is reduced, enabling terrorist groups to recover and rebuild.
- The GATIA and MSA have served primarily as CT strike forces against discrete ISGS targets and have neither the training and resources to maintain stay-behind forces to secure cleared areas in northeast Mali, nor the inclination to work with local Fulani communities against ISGS.⁴⁶ The militia has been unable to do more than temporarily disrupt and displace the jihadists, giving ISGS sufficient freedom of movement to repeatedly retreat, regroup, and rebuild in new areas.^{47,48}
 - The BAM coalition assembled by the GNA and Western backers to recapture Sirte collapsed soon after the city's liberation. Fierce rivalries forged during the preceding years of Libya's civil war undermined their cohesion after the CT objective was met, as well as any prospects of a militia coalition remaining in Sirte to serve as a stabilization force.^{49,50} The inability to secure Sirte and finish off the Islamic State once it retreated has created security seams that are being exploited by the Islamic State to rebuild clandestine networks in and around the city.
 - The YPG forged partnerships with Arab militia in northern Syria to form the SDF, but internal fissures over YPG dominance and competing objectives have jeopardized efforts to maintain a multiethnic coalition.⁵¹ Tensions between Arab and Kurd SDF components in key battlegrounds such as Raqqah and Dayr az Zawr are hindering unified efforts to target clandestine Islamic State cells inside the cities and conduct operations into Islamic State safe havens in outlying rural areas, giving the Islamic State time and space to rebuild attack networks.⁵² Moreover, the redeployment of YPG fighters from Euphrates battlefields to northern Syria to fight Turkish incursions has left remaining SDF forces undermanned for a difficult fight.⁵³
- Policy Trade-Offs:** The complexities of civil wars and the variety of Western objectives for each country in conflict

may result in the proxy approach to CT working at cross-purposes with other policy goals.

- France has played a central role in Mali's peace process since the 2015 Bamako Agreement, which seeks to de-escalate violence and demobilize militias in northern Mali.^{54,55} At the same time, the French have armed the MSA, who are not signatories to the accord, for CT operations, and the GATIA, who are signatories, but routinely violate the agreement in attacking rival Tuareg militia. Moreover, the MSA and GATIA's cycle of inter-communal violence with Fulani communities is likely to spark more militia formation and conflict in northern Mali, further undermining peace prospects.⁵⁶
- Western officials in 2016 sought to use BAM coalition for Sirte as a means to build an inclusive national force under the recently established GNA's banner and extend its writ outside of Tripoli. Instead, Western empowerment emboldened the Misratans' sense of strength and independence, leading key militia to withdraw from stabilization efforts in Sirte; some militia involved in the Sirte campaign have since taken up arms against the GNA, joining Islamist forces in attacking Tripoli in 2018.^{57,58}
- YPG action at times undermined the other main U.S. policy goal for Syria besides the defeat of the Islamic State: supporting a viable Syrian opposition. In 2016, as the United States and like-minded partners sought to prevent a pro-regime capture of Aleppo City, YPG from Afrin in February seized key terrain north of the city from Western-backed opposition forces that cut off a critical line of communication from Turkey; that summer, YPG in Aleppo colluded with pro-regime forces to cut off the last road into East Aleppo, completing the city's encirclement and helping deliver perhaps the war's biggest victory to Assad.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS FOR U.S. AND ALLIED POLICYMAKERS

Western policymakers will continue to face hard choices over the nature and scope of CT operations in the Middle East and Africa, as resilient and adaptable terrorist groups such as the Islamic State and al Qaeda (AQ) exploit endemic state weakness and civil conflicts for growth and expansion. Conducting CT campaigns “by, with, and through” non-state actors are likely to remain an appealing approach when partnering with the host-nation is not a viable option. The proxy approach has several implications for U.S. and allied policymakers to consider:

Operations without Strategy: The objective of U.S. and allied “train, advise, assist” missions traditionally has been not only to reduce immediate terrorist and insurgent threats but to build up the foreign partner's military capacity over the long-term as part of a broader strategy to bolster the effectiveness and legitimacy of the host-nation government. Recent CT campaigns conducted via non-state proxies, however, had a primarily military objective—the defeat of the Islamic State—with no clear or achievable political end-state for which military operations were intended to serve. Policymakers may deem military operations without a political strategy a sub-optimal but necessary option when terrorist threats are exigent and diplomatic solutions are dubious. Sustaining those battlefield gains may be tenuous, however, if there is no political outcome to solidify them over the long-term.

Light but Enduring Footprint: Military defeat of terrorists without the political defeat of the ideology and grievances that underpin their influence and support—an enormous if not insurmountable challenge for foreign powers—will provide favorable conditions for AQ and Islamic State resurgence, already beginning to occur in Syria⁵⁹ and Libya.⁶⁰ With limited or no support from a potentially weak, divided, or hostile host-nation government, non-state proxies will likely demand continued enabler support from foreign partners—particularly ISR and airstrikes—and a residual ground advisory presence to maintain constant, adaptive pressure against terrorist groups.

Political Engagement: Along with military support, non-state partners will likely demand diplomatic support from foreign patrons to help negotiate a political future for the group in the host country and deter attacks from domestic rivals and outside powers. At the same time, Western powers can consider leveraging their proxies' reliance to demand they better integrate other ethnic or sectarian communities into local security and governance structures.

Inter-state Intra-state Competition: Arming and enabling non-state proxies will remain similarly appealing to U.S. rivals such as Iran and Russia as a low-cost means to pursue their own strategic interests, often in the same place as the United States. In determining policy and strategy, Western policymakers will need to balance the desire to compete against state rivals with their CT and stability objectives. Bearing on the achievability of those objectives will be the relative “staying power” and motivation Western forces and local proxies versus those of our competitors and their proxies.

CONCLUSION

Conducting CT campaigns by empowering non-state proxies poses unique challenges and dilemmas for Western policymakers, with limited options to secure swift CT wins without stoking local tensions and conflict. Simply put, policymakers must weigh the need to attack and degrade a terrorist group against the risk of long-term instability and potentially creating the conditions for the next iteration of the terrorist group to emerge. Policymakers may reasonably opt for the proxy approach, particularly if terrorist groups pose an immediate threat of regional chaos or external attacks but should be clear-eyed about the long-term risks and work to mitigate them. ■

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