

WAR AND CONFLICT IN THE MODERN WORLD



# PROXY WARFARE



ANDREW MUMFORD



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polity

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First published in 2013 by Polity Press

Polity Press  
65 Bridge Street  
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press  
350 Main Street  
Malden, MA 02148, USA

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ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-5118-7

ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-5119-4(pb)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset in 10.25 on 13 pt Scala  
by Servis Filmsetting Ltd, Stockport, Cheshire  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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For Hannah





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# Acknowledgements

My first debt of gratitude must go to Louise Knight at Polity for showing faith in a sketchy idea and guiding the book skilfully along with wonderful patience and enthusiasm. David Winters has also been of valuable assistance during the whole process.

I am thankful to my colleagues within the School of Politics and International Relations at the University of Nottingham, especially those within the Centre for Conflict, Security and Terrorism, who have debated the facets of proxy war with me. The arguments in the book are sharper for their insights.

The Plymouth International Studies Centre was kind enough to give me the opportunity to deliver some of the key ideas in the book at an invitational lecture. The probing questions I faced afterwards helped hone my thinking on many issues.

A special thank you must be extended to the students in my Contemporary Warfare class of 2011/12 at Nottingham, who saw straight through my inclusion of proxy wars as a topic on the syllabus and rigorously engaged with the issues covered in this book. Their intellectual curiosity and insights challenged me to think harder about the dynamics of proxy wars in the modern world.

I am especially grateful to three students of mine for providing valuable research assistance. Will Jackson, Chris Anquist and Vladimir Rauta remained vigilant for useful articles, tracked down obscure references for me, and proved valuable sounding boards for my ideas.

Indebted as I am to all of the above people for their contributions and help, I of course remain solely responsible for any opinions or errors contained in the book.

My final thanks go to my wife, Hannah, to whom this book is dedicated. Her love and support enabled me to face the tyranny of the blank Word document as writing commenced. Her incisive comments helped me mould arguments as the project developed. Her warm encouragement pushed the book towards completion. For this, and so much more, I am forever grateful.



# Introduction

## The Rise of Proxy Wars

Proxy conflict represents a perennial strand in the history of warfare. The appeal of ‘warfare on the cheap’ has proved an irresistible strategic allure for nations through the centuries. However, proxy wars remain a missing link in contemporary war and security studies. They are historically ubiquitous yet chronically under-analysed. This book attempts to rectify this situation by assessing the dynamics and lineage of proxy warfare from the Cold War to the War on Terror, and analysing them within a conceptual framework to help us explain their appeal. The following chapters will set the international political and strategic background of proxy warfare in the modern world, tracing its development throughout the last century, and posit it as a highly pertinent factor in the character of contemporary conflict. Also addressed are questions of what defines a proxy war; why they appeal; and who fights in them. Furthermore, the book will emphasize why, given the direction of the War on Terror and the prominence now achieved by non-state actors in the Arab Spring, this is an important time to be studying the phenomenon of proxy warfare.

Proxy wars are defined here as the indirect engagement in a conflict by third parties wishing to influence its strategic outcome. As we will see, this prevents confusion with direct intervention or covert action. Theoretically, it will be argued that recourse to proxy war has been a perpetual element of modern warfare, and will continue to be so, because the attainment of a preferred strategic outcome in a certain conflict is

outweighed by consequences of direct engagement based on an assessment of interest, ideology and risk. This tendency has been particularly prevalent since 1945, as the shadow of nuclear war ensured more acute selectivity in conflict engagement given the consequences of a potential nuclear exchange. Where state or group survival is not at stake but the augmentation of interest can still be achieved, states and sub-state groups have historically proven to be conspicuous users of proxy methods as a means of securing particular conflict outcomes.

The aim of this book is not to give a potted history of every proxy war fought in the modern world. Instead, it will utilize empirical examples to flesh out the concept of war by proxy and offer up explanations for their causes, conduct and consequences in the past, present and future.

Stand-alone analysis of proxy war has largely been overlooked in security studies scholarship.<sup>1</sup> In 1996, K. J. Holsti asserted that ‘war has been the major focus of international relations studies for the past three centuries.’<sup>2</sup> Yet this is only strictly true if we take a meaning of war that specifically covers conventionally fought inter-state conflict. The indirect engagement in violence – of both an inter- and intra-state variety – has been distinctly peripheral in discussions on the shape of modern war. A significant portion of the theoretical, causal and quantitative studies of war in the modern world overlook conflict in its proxy form.<sup>3</sup> Even substantial works, such as Odd Arne Westad’s *The Global Cold War*, do not substantially promulgate a conceptual understanding of proxy war despite presenting a narrative of superpower intervention in the Third World during that era.<sup>4</sup> Arguably, this is because such conflicts form a major part of the background fabric of Cold War historiography. As a concept, proxy war has not been an adept cross-disciplinary traveller. This book is an effort to take the large, but undiscerning, historical literature on proxy

war and lever greater conceptual understanding from it for an international relations and security studies audience.

Clausewitzian strategic thought emphasizes the changing characteristics – or ‘grammar’ – of warfare from era to era. It is this book’s goal to demonstrate how the evolving ‘grammar’ of warfare in the modern world has rendered shifts in the way in which proxy wars have been perceived by states and non-state actors and thus effected their utility as a mode of strategic attainment. In the twentieth century, at the dawn of the era of total war, the mode of proxy intervention took on new resonance as the consequences of engaging in outright war came with heightened risk of high death tolls, infrastructural destruction and political annihilation. The end of the Second World War ushered in the nuclear era, starkly accentuating the risks associated with going to war or challenging the security of a nuclear nation. This nuclear weapon-induced stability/instability paradox arguably caused nations to find alternative outlets for their strategic ambitions, where the consequences were contained yet the rewards tangible. The global reach of the Cold War soon demonstrated, in the mid-twentieth century, that engagement in proxy wars was a convenient means by which the superpower states could exert their influence and attempt to maximize their interests in parts of the Third World, while simultaneously reducing the risk of conflict escalation.

Even after the bipolar system gave way to the New World Order in the 1990s, proxy intervention continued to be a recurrent element in international conflict, as a new age of globalization gave rise to the information revolution and bore witness to the increased prominence of the non-state actor in international relations. During the last decade of the twentieth century, the notion of ‘intervention’ became explicitly tied to the nascent ‘responsibility to protect’ agenda and the debates surrounding humanitarianism.<sup>5</sup> This, to a large

extent, overshadowed the continued presence of proxy interventions undertaken for reasons entirely alien to the liberal foreign policy agenda of that decade in the West.

The appeal of proxy war is undiminished in the post-9/11 world whereby states 'with or against' the United States, in President George W. Bush's dichotomization of world politics, jostled to secure their own strategic interests as the War on Terror came to dominate the discourse of international relations in the early twenty-first century. As state sponsors of terrorism coalesced to form Bush's self-proclaimed 'axis of evil', the mode by which both the 'coalition of the willing' and the constituents of the axis (and, significantly, their allies) could further their strategic aims has manifest itself in large part through the wider employment of proxies.

Yet it is not just superpowers that have shaped the terrain of proxy warfare. Given its lower-cost, often lower-risk, mode of conflict engagement, non-state actors including terrorist groups and more recently private security companies have been utilized as proxies. This book will therefore explore the wide spectrum of actors involved in proxy warfare, historically and contemporaneously, in order to fully analyse not only those states who sponsor proxies in conflicts, but also assess the motivations of those groups who act as the proxies themselves.

So why is proxy war an important issue in the modern world? It is largely because of two major trends in the analysis of war. First, in the words of John Mueller, is the 'obsolescence of major war'.<sup>6</sup> Total warfare, or conventional 'state versus state' conflicts between developed countries, is a form of conflict that has diminished given the changing nature of the system of statehood and the international order in the mid-to-late twentieth century. Second, history tells us that any rigorous academic and military focus upon counter-insurgency (as currently witnessed during the War on Terror)