

**PRINCIPALS AND PROXIES:
HOW FOREIGN INTERVENTIONS PROMOTE
INTERCOMMUNAL VIOLENCE THROUGH
SPONSORSHIP OF NONSTATE MILITIAS**

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INTERCOMMUNAL VIOLENCE THROUGH SPONSORSHIP OF NONSTATE
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Dedication

This work would not have been possible without the constant love and support of my family, especially my mother, father, and wife. If I have arrived, it is because you carried me.

Remembering all those who suffer from the violence of a fallen world, I dedicate this dissertation to the glory of God, in eager anticipation of the day when Righteousness and Peace shall kiss each other.

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Abstract

In this dissertation I explore the link between government sponsorship of nonstate militias in proxy conflicts and increases in intercommunal violence. I develop a theory explaining how nonstate militias experience resource limitations much more acutely than states and how resource inflows from government sponsors provide opportunity for these groups to engage in attacks on rival militias, against the sponsor's desires. I test this theory using a mix of qualitative and quantitative analysis focused on three cases of US sponsorship of nonstate militias: The Ogaden clan militia in Somalia, the Free Syrian Army, and the Syrian Democratic Forces. The results provide evidence for the theory, suggesting that government sponsorship of nonstate militias in proxy conflicts can lead to increases in intercommunal violence unless sponsors make use of a regime of agent selection, contract formation, and punishment or enforcement of their will upon the militia as agent. These findings will be of interest to analysts and policymakers seeking to understand the negative externalities of proxy warfare and foreign intervention.

Chapter 1 – Introduction

War has sometimes been described as the terrorism of the rich, and was once considered the exclusive purview of nations (Ustinov 2004). However, it is certainly no secret that violent conflicts have been fought on all sorts of scales throughout history, waged by both wealthy nations and impoverished groups alike. Yet how might the behavior of those weaker, nonstate militias be altered if they were to suddenly have the wealth of nations at their disposal?

This is a particularly pressing question today, given the rise in prevalence of proxy warfare as a tool of foreign policy. All over the world governments make use of foreign militias to do the fighting for them in regions where they are otherwise disinclined to intervene personally. For example, when the US government identified the extremist group al-Shabaab in Somalia as a target in the Global War on Terror, it found itself with few policy options. By 2006, the US was already committed to two major conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, and there was little public appetite for opening up yet another front in the war on terror. Additionally, the Bush administration was not keen to send a significant American troop presence into Somalia, the same country that had deeply wounded the American psyche following the infamous 1993 Battle of Mogadishu.¹ Instead, the US chose to hire local talent, providing resources and funding to the militias of Somali warlords in exchange for the eradication of al-Shabaab at their hands.

¹ This event has been enshrined in US political culture through the book and later film adaptation *Black Hawk Down*.

While the extensive resources of the US, now made available to nonstate militias, allowed America's proxies to succeed in their mission to oust al-Shabaab from Somalia, they seem to have had an unintended additional consequence. Flush with resources from their sponsor, the Somali warlords turned on each other and began fighting for control over the southern region of Somalia. I refer to this type of fighting between nonstate militias living within the same country or regional community as *intercommunal violence*. This case of fighting amongst warlords in Somalia, then, represents a case of increased intercommunal violence that seems to have been fueled by the sudden arrival of war-making materiel into Somalia from the US and other allied governments.

Inspired by this prospect, I ask and answer two main research questions in this dissertation:

1. Do the resources provided by government sponsors to nonstate militias for use in proxy conflicts lead to local increases in intercommunal violence?
2. What can sponsors do to prevent such increases in intercommunal violence?

In answer to these questions, I propose a theory of resource-enabled intercommunal conflict. I argue that sponsors can dramatically increase the fighting capability of a nonstate militia, such as a group of tribal fighting or a guerrilla force, by providing them with resources necessary for fighting, such as weapons, ammunition, and funding. While these groups are likely to be obedient to the sponsor and fight their designated target in order to keep the relationship going (and ensure the continued flow of resources), they will be tempted to use the surplus of resources remaining to initiate attacks on their local

rivals. Thus, sponsorship allows groups to initiate attacks against rivals on their “wish list,” which they previously did not have the resources necessary to fight with any hope of victory.

However, sponsors have tools at their disposal to rein in this unwanted behavior from their proxies. I argue that the sponsor-proxy relationship can be understood as a form of principal-agent relationship. The principal’s tools of agent selection, contract formation, monitoring, and enforcement or punishment can be employed to prevent increases in intercommunal violence from proxies.

This dissertation makes a unique contribution to the field of subnational conflict studies. Other work, like Althouse (2018) and Berman and Lake (2019), ask how state and nonstate agents may be drawn into general compliance with the principal. I go a step further by providing for the possibility that agents may technically perform the duties assigned to them by the principal, yet do so in a way that privileges their own interests at a cost to the principal. For militia agents, this would mean using sponsor-provided resources for conflicts with personal rivals that are not sponsor-approved. I have dubbed this opportunistic agent behavior Feaverian shirking, after the work of Feaver (2005) analyzing civil-military relations within the US. Thus, this dissertation uniquely seeks to find whether such shirking occurs at the intercommunal level in foreign sponsorships of nonstate militias and how this behavior might be curtailed by the principal.

To accomplish this goal empirically, I analyze the three best recent US cases for which both good event data and qualitative data exist. These are the cases of the US’s Dual-Track Policy in Somalia, Operation Timber Sycamore in Syria, and the Syria Train and Equip program. The data availability and quality vary from case to case, so a direct

comparison between cases is not possible. Rather, my approach focuses on understanding what story the data tell in each case, thoroughly analyzing each case for what may be learned and then comparing results at a much more general level.

The dissertation proceeds as follows. Chapter 2 presents the theory of resource-enabled intercommunal conflict as it pertains to the sponsorship of nonstate militias in foreign interventions. Chapter 3 provides analysis of the first case, sponsorship of the militias of warlords through the US' Dual-Track Policy approach in Somalia. Chapter 4 moves to Syria, analyzing US sponsorship of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), a loose collection of nonstate militias opposed to the Assad regime, through Operation Timber Sycamore. Chapter 5 contrasts the sponsorship of the FSA with US sponsorship of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) through the Syria Train and Equip program. A final chapter discusses the findings and concludes. I turn now to discussion of the theory of resource-enabled intercommunal conflict.

Chapter 2: A Theory of Resource-Enabled Intercommunal Conflict

Scholars have spilled much ink debating the reasons why subnational actors choose to take up arms against their peers or against the government. Seminal works like that of Collier and Hoeffler (1998) have launched significant discussions concerning the role of greed and grievance in motivating the choice of clans, tribes, co-ethnics, and other assorted subnational militias to resort to conflict. However, underlying these debates is the central assumption that subnational actors can simply *choose* to fight when they have a good enough reason to do so.

Yet this assumption presents problems for the study of subnational conflict. For starters, Taydas, Enia, and James (2011) point out that while the motivations underlying conflict are worth studying, group-level grievances are fairly ubiquitous throughout the world. Many is the clan, sect, or tribe that suffers from significant differences with its subnational rivals. Certainly some of these groups choose to take up arms, but what of the others who do not? Are we to understand their non-violence as a choice, or as a *fait accompli* resulting from their relative poverty and lack of materiel for fighting? I argue the latter; subnational groups, including militias and those groups aspiring to be militias, are often given no choice but to remain peaceful due to their lack of resources. Given sufficient grievances, many fragile or failing states may really be tinderboxes waiting for a spark. This logic follows Collier and Hoeffler (2004), who add nuance to the debate on the causes of domestic conflicts by focusing on whether a group has an opportunity for conflict. Resources provide the spark that causes the flames of intercommunal violence to flare up.

Wars, even small ones, require resources to pursue. On the one hand, this is patently obvious. States stockpile large quantities of materiel, including ammunition, weapons, vehicles, and strategic supplies of fuel, food, and other necessities, placing their resources in strategic locations in preparation for violent conflict. Standing armies require upkeep even in peace time, and combat operations tend to have eye-watering price-tags attached.

For many reasons, the state is uniquely positioned to bear these costs. States have access to extensive tax revenues drawn from their populations and from trade. Even when, as frequently happens, defense budgets require large up-front costs in excess of the national income, states have access to considerable lines of credit from wealthy citizens, international financial institutions, and allies. The means of defense (or offense) tend to be readily available for almost any state with the political will to grasp them. True, state differs from state in relative strength, but even the poorest state has some recourse to security resources in an emergency.

It is not so for would-be belligerents below the level of the state. Clan militias, insurgencies, guerillas, and rebellions of all stripes feel the pecuniary costs of conflict much more keenly than a state. Such subnational fighters in most cases lack the wealthy allies, the tax base, and the lines of credit that make war a *choice* for most states with sufficient will to pursue it. Yet, as I will argue in this chapter and explore empirically throughout the rest of this dissertation, violent conflict by subnational actors without the means to pursue it must remain merely an *aspiration*. That is, of course, unless they connect themselves to a state which can provide those means.

Fuel for the Fire: Government Resources for Subnational Proxies

The use of subnational militias as proxy fighters by state governments is not a new strategy, yet with subnational conflicts on the rise globally, the use of proxies continues to grow in popularity in the modern era. Subnational militias present an attractive opportunity for state governments looking to get involved in a conflict without involving their own forces directly. First, these groups provide an invaluable source of intelligence for a government. Whether a state is looking to get involved in a subnational conflict in a foreign territory, or whether a state is facing rebellion in its own territory, local fighters have an immediate advantage over troops shipped in from elsewhere. As Lyall and Wilson (2009) argue, this human intelligence is a precious currency, especially in counterinsurgencies where the local population may be a mystery to outsiders. Indeed, the trust and support of the local population is another boon that local militias can provide to government sponsors. Williamson (2011) points out that in counterinsurgencies and nation-building operations, locals tend to be wary of foreign troops and are rarely persuaded by strategic attempts to win hearts and minds. Locals, Williamson finds, prefer to interact with fellow nationals. Foreign intervenors would do well, in that view, to channel their activities (whether aid-based or violent) through local proxies in order to be seen as legitimate in the eyes of host country nationals.

Of course, perhaps the most attractive feature of subnational militias is their ready-made capacity for violence, already in-place and in-country. In failed or failing states like Afghanistan or Somalia for much of its recent history, clan militias have a significant amount of experience fighting each other and outsiders. This fighting may have been quite pronounced during periods of resource wealth for these militias, or

conflicts may have dragged out in the absence of sufficient resources with belligerents merely taking opportunistic potshots at each other.

Governments will naturally need to supply these subnational proxies with a much greater cache of materiel and resources in order for them to fight effectively. Yet the proxies' presence in the country already makes them a cheaper prospect than sending in foreign troops. Deploying troops across borders requires expensive and complicated transportation logistics, supply lines, and host country arrangements for quartering and storage. Local proxies, on the other hand, do not need to be shipped in, already know the land and the enemy, fight for a fraction of the cost of uniformed troops, and do not inspire citizen protests when they get killed. For all of these reasons, the use of subnational proxies by state governments involved in foreign interventions is very much in the current vogue.

Thus, the use of proxies in counterinsurgency operations represents a clear value-added for governments. But what of the proxies themselves? What incentive do nonstate militias have to fight another person's wars? As with most of the questions posed so far, the answer is resources and wealth. Whatever the goals of a militia may be, it will need resources to accomplish them. This is true even for the more peaceful political aspects of a domestic insurgency. Stewart (2018) notes that center-seeking rebel groups provide services to civilians in their controlled territories as a means of recruitment. Service provision, of course, costs money and resources, as does the campaign which wins a group control of territory in the first place. Reeder et al. (manuscript, 2022) show that a strong portfolio of resources enables rebel groups to fight, while weaker resource holdings discourage direct combat and increase predation of civilians. As this body of

research shows, the ability of a subnational militia to recruit and fight hinges on the group's wealth. Knowing this, governments looking to hire such militias as proxies provide money and resources both to monetarily incentivize their new agents and to provide them the necessary means to fight effectively. Thus, government payouts to nonstate militias serve as both incentive and stipend.

To cash-strapped militias in impoverished conflict zones, these government payouts can be a game-changer. These subnational groups, as discussed above, lack the credit, alliances, and tax bases necessary to finance sustained combat operations. Without sufficient materiel and wealth, subnational actors typically lack the power necessary to decisively defeat their opponents. This limitation is reflected in the way many civil conflicts play out: Long periods of general tension punctuated with brief periods of violence. Grievances exist between groups, but without the means to settle these differences directly many subnational conflicts remain at a low simmer rather than a roiling boil.

One may be tempted to think of this state of affairs as a net positive for global peace. After all, grievances among subnational actors are legion. Ethnic, religious, and political differences inspire subnational conflict the world over and most countries have no lack of aggrieved groups of actors. The puzzle for scholars of subnational conflict is less about why subnational conflicts occur, but why they do not occur *much more often*. I argue that the primary reason is a lack of resources for fighting. In this view, the relative peace of many countries with fragile governance situations rests almost entirely on the dearth of resources and materiel available. If wars were cheaper to conduct or materiel

more widely available to subnational actors, I argue that subnational conflicts would be much more prevalent.

The Negative Externalities of Militia Sponsorship

Thus far, we have established that subnational militias are especially constrained by resource limitations, far more than states are constrained by such limitations. While subnational militias make attractive agents for states looking to get involved in counterinsurgency or nation-building efforts without putting their own boots on the ground, it is first necessary for sponsor governments to provide these militias with resources. These resources serve both to incentivize the militias' cooperation and to raise their combat capabilities to an effective level.

It is this very sponsorship, however, that opens the door to significant negative externalities for local communities. When subnational militias have scarce resources for fighting, their focus will be on gaining wealth and consolidating their power. Once they have sufficient power, these groups are able to act on the numerous grievances they are likely to hold (as discussed above). Where once peace may have prevailed owing to a lack of materiel for fighting, militias flush with resources from their sponsors have a newfound capacity to visit violence upon their list of personal enemies and rivals. In most cases, it is likely that these militias will indeed fulfill the terms of their contract with their sponsor (the pay is quite good, after all). The problem is that these militias are unlikely to stop their fighting once the sponsor's main target is defeated. With a potential major spoiler (the sponsor's target) out of the way and with resources to spare, proxy militias

have an opportunity to settle old scores with their own personal rivals. These rivals may be other ethnic groups, clans, tribes, or opposing political movements.

Of course, being a militia, it is very likely that a sponsored group held the power to hurt its rivals to some degree even before sponsorship began. Yet without sufficient resources, no single militia would be able to guarantee that it could defeat all its rivals, especially considering the swirling milieu of ethnic and clan relations in many countries experiencing civil conflict. That is, until government sponsorship provides enough resources for a single militia to become dominant in the conflict system. When a subnational militia gains such a windfall of resources, attacks on personal rivals become not only feasible but likely to lead to a long-term shift in the communal pecking order. A sponsored militia essentially enjoys the deep pockets of a state government, and will see in this arrangement an opportunity to settle old grievances, stamp out rivals, and establish dominance within its community. This outcome will typically be outside the desires of the sponsoring government, since most governments involved in proxy warfare have a specific target in mind and do not stand to benefit from a general increase in violence in the target country. Indeed, willfully fomenting intercommunal violence within the target country would warrant condemnation from the international community, something a state looking to use proxies and keep a low profile will certainly wish to avoid. For this reason, I label this increase in intercommunal violence resulting from government sponsorship of subnational militias a *negative externality* of this model of intervention. The sponsor's original target will likely be defeated by the proxy militia, but neighboring clans, tribes, or other groups (including civilians) will be the ones to ultimately pay the price in terms of increased communal violence.

Resource-Enabled Intercommunal Violence in Practice

An illustrative narrative may clarify this situation. Consider a failed state populated with many small clans. None of these clans is powerful enough to achieve victory against an alliance of other clans, and so peace prevails. Let Clan A and Clan B be two clans that are slightly larger and better supplied than the rest. Though both clans are strong enough to achieve a pyrrhic victory against other smaller clans, the effort would certainly exhaust them and leave them vulnerable to attack by an alliance of the remaining clans. As such, an equilibrium of peace prevails.

Now let both Clan A and Clan B receive an influx of money and military materiel from separate external sponsors. The level of their respective sponsorships is such that their relative power to each other does not change, but their relative power to the group of smaller clans grows dramatically. Thus empowered, Clan A could easily dominate the entire group of smaller clans and still be powerful enough to withstand a challenge from Clan B, and vice versa. The military potential of Clan A and Clan B is now such that offensive challenges between them become feasible, and thus the onset of conflict becomes more likely. Once the threshold of danger is passed, there no longer exists an equilibrium of peace, as illustrated in Figure 1 below. In other words, as long as the absolute level of the clans' power is below the threshold of danger, an equilibrium situation of peace will prevail, yet once this absolute level of power crosses the threshold of danger conflict becomes more likely, despite the fact that the relative balance of power between clans A and B has not changed.

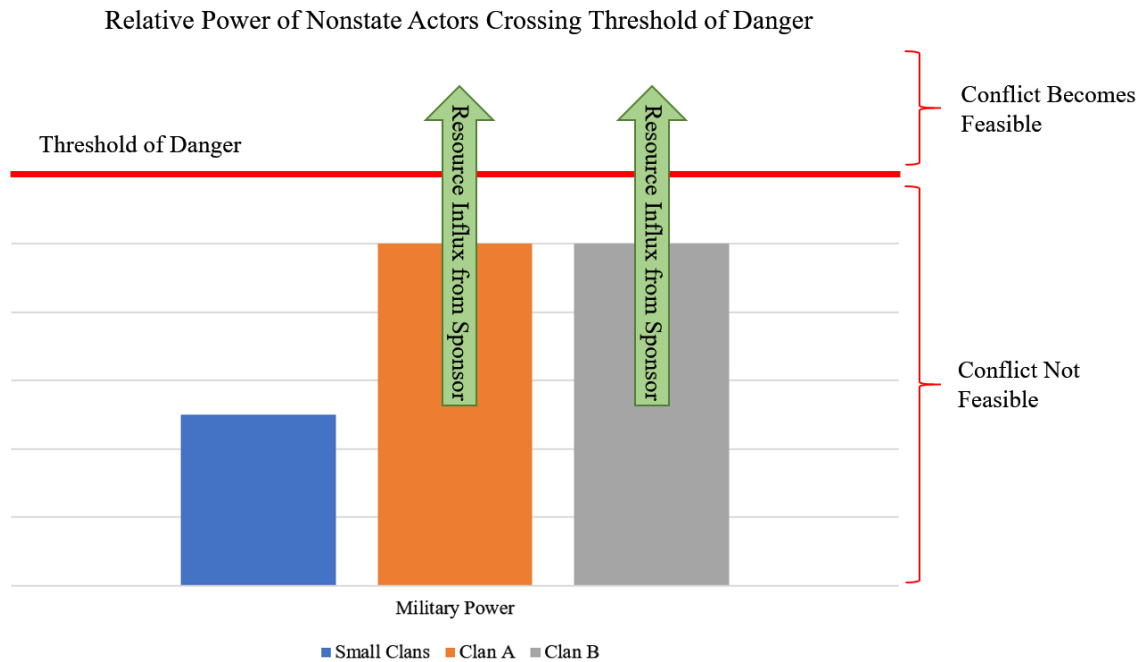


Figure 1: Illustration of Relative Power of Nonstate Actors Crossing Resource Threshold of Danger

To return to the parallels I drew earlier between clans in a failed state and states in an anarchic international system, the theory outlined here bears some resemblance to offense-defense theory. This theory holds that the likelihood of war at any given time period is related to whether conquest or defense are easier. Offense or defense become dominant based on a number of factors at the state level, including changes in military technology, the geography of certain regions, social and political order, and diplomatic factors. One of the key arguments of offense-defense theory is that war becomes more likely when offense is dominant because aggression is less costly to attempt and more likely to succeed (Van Evera 1984).

Within the context of clans in a failed state, offense becomes dominant when the absolute military power of a clan reaches a certain threshold. This threshold may be defined as the point beyond which a clan can defeat the majority of other clans in the system and still be powerful enough to challenge its peer competitors. Returning to the example in Figure 1 above, Clans A and B cannot hope to challenge both the smaller clans and each other until their absolute level of power reaches the threshold of danger.

If we assume that all other factors in the region remain static, the primary way for the absolute level of power of any individual clan to rise is to secure external sponsorship. Such sponsorship would increase the level of power of a particular clan while leaving the smaller clans behind. If Clan A and Clan B manage to secure sponsorship while the other clans do not, then it becomes more likely that Clans A and B will vie for regional hegemony, with each other and with the smaller clans in the system.

It Takes Two: Understanding Intercommunal Violence through a Principal-Agent Framework

So far, this theory has focused primarily on the demand-side of the question of resource-enabled intercommunal violence. Subnational actors like clan militias exist in a kind of equilibrium where most do not have the resources necessary to attack their rivals or beggar their neighbors to improve their own standing. A sudden influx of resources upsets this equilibrium, allowing for the militia to seriously consider engaging in a campaign of violence. I have argued that foreign governments break this equilibrium when they provide resources to such militias to entice and enable them to fight the sponsor's target as proxies. A complete treatment of this arrangement requires both an

appreciation of the proxy's position as well as that of the sponsor. I turn now to address the latter concern.

The relationship between a government sponsor and subnational militia proxy may be modeled through a principal-agent framework. The principal-agent framework is a mainstay of economic literature, and has been very usefully exported throughout the social sciences to explain behaviors within all sorts of hierarchical and transactional relationships. The principal-agent framework designates one actor to be the principal and another the agent. The principal contracts with the agent in order to procure a desired service from the agent. Such a model allows for analysis of the values and goals of each actor, and helps make sense of the strategic interaction taking place between them. For instance, a shop-owner acts as a principal when she hires an employee (the agent). In this case, the principal seeks to obtain the daily work performance of the agent in exchange for some incentive, usually monetary payment. Ideally, the interests of both principal and agent will be aligned, and everyone will get their highest utility out of the interaction.

However, the individual interests of principal and agent often differ in practice. Agents are often tempted to shirk in their duties (avoiding work) while still attempting to receive payment from the principal. Of course, an ideal scenario for the principal would involve receiving the work of the agent without having to pay the agent's wages. Because principal and agent are unlikely to have a complete overlap of values and since each has their own personal interests, it is also useful to analyze the means each actor has at their disposal to attempt to achieve their best outcome.

At the most basic level, a principal will generally try to ensure that agents share their values through pre-employment screening (i.e., resumes and interviews). This is

usually insufficient on its own, however, since such screening creates a moral hazard for agents to misrepresent their own willingness to work rather than shirk. Other mechanisms are thus necessary to verify compliance. For instance, a principal may choose to employ a monitoring scheme to ensure that agents are working as agreed. This would be the case in a situation where a shop-owner installs cameras in her shop to keep an eye on the performance of her employees and spot shirking if it occurs. Lastly, the principal-agent framework allows for the assignment of punishment to the agent when shirking occurs and is detected. In our ongoing example of the shop-owner and employee, this punishment for shirking on the job would most likely come in the form of employment termination, though lesser punishments may also be effective (reduced pay or hours, or assignment to an undesirable task, for example).

Thus, the principal-agent framework provides a useful way to model and assess all aspects of the interaction between principals and agents, and understand the options available to each actor at each stage of the interaction. Crucially for our current purposes, the principal-agent framework may be employed beyond economic interactions to explain political behaviors as well. Miller (2005) reviews several such works; all apply the principal-agent framework to explain interactions between political actors, whether individuals, agencies, states, or other organizations. Of particular interest here, Althouse (2018) applies the principal-agent framework to explain the behavior of states contracting with subnational proxies. Althouse finds that states are able to elicit working rather than shirking from their subnational agents by incorporating them as much as possible into the official state security apparatus.

Yet, a simple work-shirk dynamic fails to capture some important nuances within the principal-agent relationship. For instance, Feaver (2005) crucially problematizes the nature of work itself, arguing that in some cases an agent may manage to work in a manner that promotes the agent's long-term interests at the expense of the principal, subtly shifting the power dynamic between principal and agent over time. Feaver's work analyzes the US military as the agent of civilian policymakers in government (the principals). Feaver argues that the principal in such a relationship desires to elicit work from their agent, but in such a way that the hierarchical relationship is preserved. In many cases, however, the agent has other plans in mind.

Consider that in the US the military is required to obey the orders of its principal, the US government. "Working" in this case means drawing up strategies and cost estimates for civilian policymakers when required, and deploying into combat zones when the time comes. However, Feaver notes that through certain factors like information asymmetry, the military is positioned to exercise some measure of power *over their principal*. If a situation emerges abroad that could require military intervention, US policymakers will task the military with developing strategic solutions and accompanying cost estimates for a selection of policy options. Yet the military, itself the primary expert on matters of war, is in a unique position to manipulate the principal. If the military decides it does not want to risk entering into a particular conflict, it could inflate cost estimates, making the choice of a military response by policymakers politically unsavory. The policymaker, being inexpert in war, relies on the military's advice. But if this advice is specifically tuned to deter the policymaker from choosing a military option, then the power dynamic between principal and agent has shifted. Likewise, the military may drag

its feet before an undesirable deployment. In some cases, this might result in the mission being scrapped entirely if the deployment is forestalled for long enough, or will at least create a precedent for the military not immediately leaping to fulfill the orders of the government principal.

While Feaver stops short of suggesting that the US military acts with open insubordination (it almost never does), this work does suggest that it is possible for an agent to perform the work of a principal while doing it *on the agent's terms and in a manner that suits the agent's interests, over the interests of the principal*. That is, Feaver shows how an agent may technically perform their duties while eroding the authority of the principal. A military that makes a habit of dragging its feet before undesirable deployments may one day develop into a military that has normalized insubordination to the point where it no longer needs to obey any orders of the principal. Because of the long-term dangers of this behavior, Feaver refers to such working on the agent's terms as a form of *shirking*. Thus, shirking may be understood either as the outright refusal of an agent to work as the principal requires or as working but on the agent's own terms, in accordance with the agent's own interests.

This dissertation follows in Feaver's wake, allowing for the possibility that subnational militia proxies may work for their principals, but in a manner that enhances their own long-term interests at the expense of the principal. In the context of subnational conflict, this means defeat of the principal's target by the agent, yet with a significant accompanying increase in intercommunal conflict and subnational unrest, an eventuality that is against the long-term interests of state principals. Much literature has focused on the question of how a subnational agent may be compelled by the principal to work, yet

the potential negative externalities of this principal-agent relationship have been left understudied, with disastrous consequences for local civilians in the host nation. By problematizing the manner of work rather than treating working and shirking dichotomously, this new avenue of research has the potential to provide analysts and policymakers with a more robust understanding of agent behavior and the ways in which agents take advantage of their principals to further their own personal interests.

Yet principals are not without tools of their own. As noted previously, principals may choose to monitor the performance of their agents and can punish shirking if and when it is detected. Given the stakes, principals are likely to make use of punishment when they can. There are two primary reasons for this. The first, and most obvious, is that it is in the principal's interests to see the terms of the original contract with the agent fulfilled. The principal needs something from the agent in the near future, and will use punishment to alter the agent's incentives to make working as directed the equilibrium outcome, the strategy which gives both agent and principal the most utility.

A principal is also likely to make use of punishment to control agent behavior due to the shadow of the future. Following Feaver's argument, it is possible for agents to "work" by the strictest definition of the term, but do so in a way that alters the terms of the relationship between principal and agent. To use Feaver's military example, an army that makes a habit of dragging its feet before undesirable deployments is creating a precedent for future insubordination. If early incidents of recalcitrance are not punished, then the agent learns the lesson that the principal is weak, and shirking may be even more pronounced in the future. The militaries of modern states (in the wealthy and developed West, at least) exist under the weight of their history. Insubordination is unpalatable

because it represents a break not just with today's principal, but also a break with generations of honored traditions. Yet once the seal is broken by an act of insubordination, future shirking becomes easier. The tradition has already been tarnished, and the power relationship between principal and agent has been altered in the agent's favor. Government principals therefore have a major incentive to make use of all the tools at their disposal to keep their military agents in line, lest they find themselves devoid of all credible authority in the future.

Despite having incentives to apply punishment to their recalcitrant agents, principals often fail to do so. One reason for this is that principals sometimes lack the political capital necessary to levy punishments. As an example, Feaver points to the troubled history between President Bill Clinton and the US military. Clinton was sorely lacking in rapport with the military, having earned the epithet of "draft-dodger" early on and pushing too hard too soon with reforms aimed at the military's policies surrounding service by openly gay personnel. Without the respect of the military, even the Commander-in-Chief found that he lacked the political capital to rein his troops in, and so shirking went largely unaddressed. This shirking came in the form of bureaucratic foot-dragging over military interventions in Bosnia and Somalia, and even outright refusal to get involved stabilizing post-coup Haiti until policymakers acquiesced to the military's demands to deploy with a much larger force than initially directed.

On the other hand, the military agent itself has incentive to push its boundaries and test the limits of its principal's authority. The US military would, all else being equal, prefer to go to war on its own terms, choosing the size, location, and timing of their deployments. Of course, this is not always possible in practice, so Feaver contends that

the military occasionally pushes back to get more of what it wants out of the relationship. In a similar way, nonstate militias may attempt to make the sponsor-proxy relationship work more in their favor. If a nonstate militia is sponsored by a foreign government to engage in a proxy war against a certain target, the group will likely attack the target as asked, but will also be likely to divert some resources to suit its own personal desires. As discussed above, these resources will allow the group to engage in conflicts with its own personal rivals, going beyond the desires of the sponsor who only wished to see the militia engage with the designated target. Thus, the nonstate group “shirks” by technically fulfilling the sponsor’s desires by attacking the designated target (ensuring that the relationship and the resource flows continue), but by doing so in a manner that privileges the agent at a cost to the principal.

Yet if the principal-agent framework outlines incentives nonstate groups have for shirking, the framework also outlines tools at the principal’s disposal to prevent or correct such shirking. If government sponsors make use of a regime of agent selection based on interest alignment, formalizing a contract to outline expectations, monitoring agent performance, and punishing or otherwise enforcing desired behavior, then increases in intercommunal violence following sponsorship might be mitigated. If true, then doing so is critical for policymakers, especially if the world’s military interveners are to address the negative externalities that their interventions often foist on target nations.

I now turn to analyze the case of US sponsorship for the militias of Somali warlords through the US Dual Track Policy in Somalia.

Chapter 3: The Negative Externalities of Agent Sponsorship in Somalia: Intercommunal Violence and Civilian Victimization

As a failed state with a history marked by intercommunal strife and weak central governance, Somalia presents fertile ground for exploring the impact of nonstate agent sponsorship in conflict. Other scholars, such as Moe (2018), have pointed out the separatist strife in Somalia's Jubaland region which arrived in the wake of an intense campaign to oust the extremist group Al-Shabaab. This post-2012 period of intercommunal violence in Somalia was chiefly instigated by the rival Marehan and Ogaden clans and their militia. Both clans had been recipients of government sponsorship; the Marehan receiving resources and support from the United States and the Ogaden receiving it from the Somali Federal Government and Ethiopia.

I argue in this chapter that the sponsorship and empowerment of these nonstate rivals by governments poured gasoline on a smoldering conflict zone, causing a great eruption of violence that went far beyond anything either sponsor intended. This conflagration of violence (both intercommunal and against civilians) was the result of resource empowerment in combination with overly permissive sponsors who shirked in their duties as principals to incentivize good behavior on the part of their militia agents and utterly failed to monitor and punish their subsequent bad behavior.

This chapter advances current scholarship on proxy warfare, intercommunal violence, and the relationship between principals and agents in conflict by presenting a quantitative investigation of the specific effects of sponsorship without proper behavioral incentives, traces the resulting violence through the causal mechanism of resources, and

identifies specific failures of the sponsors acting as principals to control the violent behavior of their agents. I conclude that the pragmatism of governments in their turn to the “local state” has placed a tremendous humanitarian burden on the people of Somalia, indicating a cure that was perhaps worse than the initial ailment.

A History of Resource-Enabled Intercommunal Conflict in Somalia

Incidence of intercommunal violence is closely tied to the availability of resources. The effect of resources on the onset, duration, dynamics, and conclusion of subnational conflicts has been the subject of a large body of literature. However, the ways in which resource availability affects intercommunal violence specifically remain poorly understood. This is an especially pressing problem given the rising popularity of third-party interventions in conflict-ridden areas wherein sponsors deliver such resources directly to nonstate actors. In particular, the United States’ pragmatic shift towards simultaneously supporting both state government and local nonstate powerbrokers in Somalia provides an illustrative case.

In 2010, the United States officially put forward a Dual Track policy concerning its overseas state-building and counterinsurgency efforts, wherein it would emphasize both top-down efforts at building modern democratic states as well as making pragmatic deals with local elites in order to stamp out insurgencies (Moe 2018). Previous US efforts, such as the military interventions in Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003, focused primarily on a top-down approach of rebuilding the target government in the fashion of a modern liberal democracy. US policymakers hoped that democracy, rule of

law, and a free market economy would convert the target states from havens for international terrorists into stable partners in the global war on terror.

After nearly a decade of being mired in a seemingly intractable insurgency, the US shifted its strategy away from the establishment of top-down democracies to instead center on providing arms and financial resources to local elites in a pragmatic attempt to stamp out insurgents. Though largely successful in taking territorial control away from insurgent groups, this pragmatic shift had the added consequence of empowering ambitious strongmen who could then turn the resources bestowed on them by their external benefactors against their rivals in a bid for regional hegemony at the subnational level.

This pragmatic turn of US strategy has had some success, such as in efforts to root out Al-Shabaab militants in Somalia. Yet a fundamental question remains as to whether the state of affairs in the region is more peaceful and stable now that the insurgents are routed or if these gains are outweighed by the costs of exacerbated fighting between local warlords flush with US cash and weapons.

Today, Somalia is essentially a failed state. Though a transitional federal government is recognized by the international community, it holds very little power outside the capital and relies almost exclusively on foreign support for all its operations. In order to appreciate the rather unique situation Somalia finds itself in today, it is instructive to review how this state of affairs came about. Somalia has been in a state of civil war between rival clans since 1978. This violent situation was only exacerbated by the overthrow of President Sayid Barre in 1991. Somali society has historically divided itself along clan lines, yet no clan or alliance has been powerful enough to unite the

country and fill the power vacuum left by Barre following Somalia's brief experiment with democracy (Elmi 2010).

Bad neighbors have also contributed to Somalia's predicament. Ethiopia and Kenya have been involved in an ongoing dispute over control of the greater Somali territory granted to them by colonial powers in the 19th century. These tensions have persisted since the granting of Somali independence in 1960, even flaring up into open warfare under Barre's regime (Elmi 2010). Neither Ethiopia nor Kenya has a desire to see a strong and unified Somalia over fears of rekindled territorial competition, yet the realities of Al-Shabaab insurgents crossing the border into their own territories have complicated the situation.

A measure of stability emerged from the chaotic milieu of the post-Barre civil war in the form of the Islamic Courts. Somalia's population is mostly Sunni Muslim, and without a history of central governance Islam was the traditional means of conflict resolution within Somalia prior to European colonization (Elmi 2010). A shared Islamic faith proved to be the only force capable of transcending clan allegiances, and so the Islamic Courts gradually developed out of a necessity to arbitrate violent disputes between clans. Though initially emerging as scattered independent courts across the country, the Islamic Courts eventually allied themselves in the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) and came to be the de facto government of Somalia by 2005. Following 9/11, Ethiopia and rival warlords within Somalia began to claim that the ICU was housing extremists. Ethiopia declared war on Somalia in late 2006, and overthrew the governance of the Islamic Courts with help from the US. Afterwards, Ethiopia and the US sponsored

the creation of a new Somali federal government (Zimmerman et al. 2017). This federal government of Somalia (FGS) persists to this day, albeit largely in name only.

The primary insurgent target of US and allied intervention in Somalia is Al-Shabaab, a militant faction of extremists originating from within the ICU sometime between the late 1990s and early 2002. Heavily influenced by veterans of the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan, Al-Shabaab (“The Youth”) has enjoyed a measure of success and inter-clan appeal within Somalia (Hansen 2013). Al-Shabaab’s rise to prominence was spurred largely by the Ethiopian invasion of 2006. Al-Shabaab seized on the opportunity to frame the conflict as an anti-Muslim movement backed by Western powers, winning many new recruits to its cause (Elmi 2010).

By 2009, Al-Shabaab had caught the attention of the Kenyan government through their incursions into Kenyan territory from the Jubaland border region in Somalia. In response, Kenya began training Somali militias in the border region to push the insurgents back (Moe 2018). This effort was buttressed by the US government’s Dual Track policy shift in 2010, where Track Two of the policy involved pragmatic support for local clan elites in order to stamp out the insurgent threat.

In 2011, the US and Kenya offered their support to a former Al-Shabaab member named Ahmed Mohamed Islam, called Madobe, now head of the prominent Ogaden clan militia. Though outwardly supporting the “locally anchored” approach conducted by the US and Kenya, not everyone in the Somali government was in favor of funding local warlords. Wax and DeYoung (2006) address the topic in light of comments from Somalia’s prime minister:

“Leaders of the transitional government said they have warned U.S. officials that working with the warlords is shortsighted and dangerous. ‘We would prefer that the U.S. work with the transitional government and not with criminals,’ the prime minister, Ali Mohamed Gedi, said in an interview. ‘This is a dangerous game. Somalia is not a stable place and we want the U.S. in Somalia. But in a more constructive way. Clearly we have a common objective to stabilize Somalia, but the U.S. is using the wrong channels.’”

Yet these misgivings were clearly not strong enough to prevent the SFG from backing its own champion in the clash of militias. Shortly after the US and Kenya began supporting the Ogaden clan militia, the FGS and Ethiopia began providing support for the Marehan clan militia under the former warlord Barre Adan Shire, called Hiiraale. Somalia’s de jure government had privately begun to fear the growing power of the Ogaden clan, and so chose Hiiraale and the Marehan clan militia to counterbalance Madobe (Moe 2018).

By empowering local warlords to conduct counterinsurgency on their behalf, the US and its international allies were successful in stamping out Al-Shabaab’s presence in the Juba province, at least for a time. Yet in 2012, a new conflict erupted between the Ogaden and Marehan clans for control of Jubaland. Flush with money and military materiel from external sponsors and riding a wave of success from their ouster of Al-Shabaab, the warlords Madobe and Hiiraale each declared themselves president of Jubaland. After a heated contest, Madobe eventually gained military control and imposed his order over the region, backed by the power of the Ogaden clan militia. Yet Madobe also enjoyed the backing of the international community, notably the United Nations, all in the name of peace. Rather than risk a new separatist war, the international community

supported Madobe's local rule in the Jubaland region, establishing a kind of "ad hoc federalism process" much to the chagrin of the toothless Somali government (Moe 2018, 333).

While the similarities of this process to colonial era policies of pacification and the politics of race have been noted in other work (for instance Moe 2018), there remains the important question of how the Somali community actually fared throughout this tempestuous period in its history. Al-Shabaab was indeed pushed out of the Jubaland region by the efforts of foreign interveners to finance and empower local warlords, but at what cost to the community?

External support from the US and Ethiopia empowered nonstate actors within Somalia to push back Al-Shabaab, yet this support also seems to have enabled them to make war with each other. The conflict between the Marehan and Ogaden clans was never the intention of the interveners; it was a negative externality of the sudden inflow of resources earmarked for use against Al-Shabaab. Though Somalia has long been without strong central governance, such overtly declared conflict between two major clans has not been the norm. As noted above, Somali clans traditionally existed in a sort of equilibrium with no one group strong enough to fight for dominance with any hope of winning. Their shared Islamic faith was the tie that held this community together, and specific claims of hegemony by any particular group were uncommon. The arrival of external support, however, meant that new resources began flowing in to the community. Suddenly flush with the resources to make war, war is exactly what the Ogaden and Marehan clans made: First against the enemies of their sponsors and then against each other.

Did Militia Sponsorship in Somalia Result in a Significant Increase in Intercommunal Violence? The Theory of Resource-Enabled Intercommunal Violence Applied to Somalia

What can explain the outbreak of new violence between the Marehan and Ogaden clan militias in Somalia, and does this outbreak of intercommunal belligerence represent a significant increase of violence within the already war-ravaged state of Somalia? I turn to these questions now, first reiterating the theory of resource-enabled intercommunal violence, then testing the theory both quantitatively and qualitatively.

As discussed in the *Theory* chapter previously, resources ought to be one of the most important ingredients for any conflict (apart, of course, from a grievance to motivate fighting in the first place). Fighting effectively requires weapons, ammunition, food and supplies, vehicles, and other various other materiel. In a sense, government sponsors demonstrate a tacit endorsement of this theory, since every instance of proxy warfare involves some measure of material enrichment of the proxy fighters by the sponsor.

In a state like Somalia that lacks strong central governance, there are many opportunities for individual clans to jockey for position, lashing out at rivals when convenient in order to secure more territory, more resources, or greater prestige among the clans. While every society on earth likely has competing groups within it, most of these latent conflicts are held in check by the power of the state enforcing rule of law. A failed state, however, lacks such governance capacity by definition.

With no central authority to keep them in check, competing groups within a failed state are free to capitalize on any opportunities that come their way to beggar their neighbors, limited only by their own capacity for violence. This capacity for violence is, in turn, determined by how wealthy the group is in the resources necessary for war. When groups are rich in weapons and other materiel, violence becomes a viable option. When groups are poorly resourced, violence is a less viable option, and any conflict the group becomes involved in is unlikely to result in any significant changes to territory or possessions. An exception to this situation arises when a group's rival experiences a sudden resource windfall; at this point a group may have no choice but to strike preemptively before their rivals can fully realize the conflict potential of their resources.

This theory harmonizes with previous theorizing on the nature of ethnic conflict spirals and pre-emptive war (Posen 1993). At the state level, it has been noted that a weak state that suddenly forms an alliance with a stronger state may be tempted to use its newfound (borrowed) power to lash out at its rivals (Benson, Bentley, and Ray 2013). The analogous situation for subnational actors is gaining government sponsorship. Newly enriched with resources from their sponsors, a subnational militia may be tempted to take the opportunity to strike at their rivals, or their rivals may be tempted to strike at them first before they can consolidate their new riches into combat potential. Either way, the result is a tendency towards an increase in violence between subnational actors fueled by the resources coming from the sponsor.

Why would sponsors choose to enrich their proxies with resources? The most obvious answers would be to encourage the proxy to take action on the sponsor's behalf (a *quid pro quo* situation), and to give them the warfighting capacity to achieve victory

against the sponsor's desired target. In the case of Somalia, the US and Kenya backed the Ogaden clan militia, giving them enough resources to both entice and enable them to fight the sponsors' desired target, Al-Shabaab. To be certain, the Ogaden clan had little love for Al-Shabaab before sponsorship occurred, and little prompting would have been necessary to get the Ogaden militia to eliminate Al-Shabaab as another rival in the swirling power game of Somali society.

However, the sponsorship by foreign governments also empowered the Ogaden to lash out at other rivals *beyond* the intention of the sponsors, namely the Marehan clan. Worried about the rising influence of the Ogaden, the Somali Federal Government along with Ethiopia provided their own sponsorship to the Marehan clan. Ostensibly this was to make a further contribution to the fight against Al-Shabaab, but this move was also an attempt to check the power of the Ogaden vis-à-vis the SFG. As noted in the previous section, the result was the relatively quick ousting of Al-Shabaab by 2012, and then a renewed spate of inter-clan fighting between the Marehan and Ogaden clan militias once Al-Shabaab were out of the way.

Stated more generally, sponsorship of a nonstate militia or warlord will tend to cause a general increase in intercommunal violence. The sponsor's target is likely to be attacked, but also the personal rivals of the proxy actor. In some cases, the rivals of the proxy may even be incentivized to strike first in an attempt to pre-empt the proxy's employment of its new riches. I present an initial hypothesis to this effect:

H1: Sponsorship of a militia or warlord will tend to cause a general increase in intercommunal violence within a conflict system as sponsor resources are diverted to fight personal enemies, beyond the targets originally designated by the sponsor.

Though I argue that resources enable and empower subnational militias in their intercommunal rivalries, it is still possible that other factors may act as spoilers to conflict. Such factors include the existence of other strong groups of combatants outside the immediate clan rivalries but still within the larger conflict system. In the case of Somalia, the extremist group Al-Shabaab presented a competitor to all the major clans in question. Indeed, defeating Al-Shabaab was the primary objective of the sponsor governments.

Since resources provided to proxies by sponsors are specifically earmarked for use against the common enemy, we should expect proxy groups to focus at least some of their resources to defeating the sponsors' target, even if only to appease the sponsors and ensure the continued flow of resources. Fighting multiple enemies at once, however, is typically undesirable as forces and resources will be stretched thin, reducing the possibility of concentrating a mass of force where it will do the most good. Thus, the continued existence of the sponsor's target may act as a spoiler to other intercommunal fighting due to the immediate need of destroying the common enemy, both to eliminate another potential rival and to please sponsor governments:

H2: Fighting with the sponsor's intended target will have a dampening effect on intercommunal violence as resources are diverted from fighting other rivals.

The tenets of the theory discussed so far deal mainly with the general increase in violence within a conflict system once resources from external sponsors start pouring in. Yet it is also important to understand *where* these effects are most likely to be felt. Though lacking in central governance, failed or weak states like Somalia tend to be divided into zones of *de facto* control by local warlords and their militias. These zones of warlord governance have been called, with some irony, the “local state” within the statebuilding literature (Kilcullen 2010, Moe 2018). This geographic reality provides a rich source of subnational variation across space. It is possible, therefore, to understand not only when and how violence between subnational militias will spark up, but also *where*.

Most of the resources provided to proxies by sponsors must be hand-delivered; in many cases the materiel being provided cannot be obtained locally, and bags of cash make for a more discreet and untraceable means of empowering proxies. Indeed, these sorts of handoffs typify the relationship between the US government and its proxies in Somalia, with resources coming in on CIA flights to the Baledogle Airport north of Mogadishu (Morgan 2006, Wax and DeYoung 2006). Accordingly, violence ought to increase wherever these resources trickle through clan territory since in most cases the physical presence of the materiel is necessary to realize increases in combat power on the battlefield. These resources are likely to diffuse throughout a subnational militia’s territory, reducing their potential to increase combat power as they spread out further. Thus, intercommunal violence should be greater where resources are concentrated (closer to the center of resource-provision) and should attenuate as the radial distance from this center increases:

H3: Intercommunal violence enabled by sponsor resources will be more prevalent closer to the geographic center of resource distribution. This effect will attenuate with distance from this center.

It is crucial to note at this point that the entire theory so far hinges only on the provision of resources by the sponsor and opportunities for violence on the part of the proxy. Yet what agency does the sponsor wield in this scenario? The expansion of conflict beyond the sponsor's intended target is a negative externality, something the sponsor clearly does not desire. The chaos and confusion of civil conflict harms governance capacity within a state. Since one of the main goals of the US, Ethiopia, Kenya, and (certainly) the Somali Federal Government was to secure a stable Somali state along with the disposal of Al-Shabaab, the spread of intercommunal fighting beyond Al-Shabaab undermines the sponsors' goals.

What then do sponsors do to try to prevent the negative externalities of intercommunal violence, and how are proxies likely to respond? A growing body of literature has attempted to answer questions of proxy control through the application of the principal-agent framework from economics. Work such as Althouse (2018) and Feaver (2005) show that through the use of incentives, monitoring, and punishment, principals (sponsors) can rein in unwanted behaviors of their proxies/agents (whether states or subnational militias). For instance, Althouse (2018) investigates the use of subnational militia proxies by Latin American governments and finds that these proxies tended to follow sponsor directions more closely and avoided civilian victimization when

the principals/governments closely monitored and punished such “shirking.” It follows that this logic may also be true for sponsorship of subnational militias in foreign interventions. Generally speaking, nonstate agents (warlords or subnational militias) will be more likely to engage in intercommunal violence after sponsorship when the sponsor fails to monitor agent behavior, punish shirking, or materially incentivize compliance with sponsor desires. I will explore this logic more fully in the qualitative analysis at the end of this chapter. With the tenets of the theory outlined as they pertain to the Somalia case, I turn now to discussion of the empirical strategy.

Empirical Testing – General Increase in Incidents of Intercommunal Violence following Sponsorship

Though Moe (2018) observed new belligerence between the Somali Ogaden and Marehan clan militias during the GWOT, we must turn to ask whether this interclan fighting stands out as a significant increase in violence in the already war-torn state. If a significant increase in violence is observed, we must also inquire as to the cause. Quantitative analysis of event data tracking incidents of violence in Somalia indicates that intercommunal violence did indeed significantly increase following the arrival of sponsorship and the ousting of Al-Shabaab. The cause of this increase can be illuminated through analysis of the timing of this increase and scrutiny of the actors involved in the violence. The results strongly suggest that the cause of increased intercommunal violence in Somalia during the GWOT was government sponsorship of clan militias from the US, Ethiopia, Kenya, and the Somali Federal Government.

While Moe (2018) points out the declaration of hostilities between the Ogaden and Marehan clans following the ousting of Al-Shabaab in 2012 no quantitative analysis is provided, leaving an open question of whether this conflict really represents anything new in the already chaotic state of Somalia. I will fill that gap here through analysis of event data on intercommunal violence in Somalia from 1999 to 2020, all years for which data are available. This will be followed by spatial analysis of the geographic diffusion of this violence across Somalia as well as a qualitative analysis of sponsorship as the causal mechanism most directly responsible for the increase in intercommunal violence. I will address the testing of each hypothesis in turn, detailing empirical methods and commenting on results.

It is first necessary to ask whether a significant increase in intercommunal violence is observed after government sponsorship for Somali clans begins. To determine this, I rely on event data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Database (ACLED) (Raleigh et al. 2010) from 1997 through 2020, all years for which data are available. The dependent variable is *IIV Count*, a count of the number of incidents of intercommunal violence (IIV) occurring in each year. To count as intercommunal violence, an incident must be initiated by a clan and targeted at a clan. Events which feature military forces, police, civilians, private security, or Al-Shabaab as the target are dropped from the data set.

The main explanatory variable is *Sponsorship*, an indicator taking a value of 1 for years in which government sponsorship was provided to at least one clan in Somalia, and 0 for years without sponsorship. While Moe (2018) details specific sponsorship arrangements between the Ogaden clan and the governments of the US and Ethiopia and

between the Marehan clan and governments of Somalia and Kenya beginning in 2011, other evidence suggests sponsorship began much earlier. A news report from *Reuters* (Morgan, 2006) citing a Somalia expert conferring with groups in the country claims that the US began to provide over \$100,000 per month to Somali warlords battling Islamist militia in 2006. Indeed, these transfers also caught the eye of the United Nations, with a UN team beginning investigations in 2006 as to whether such resource provision constituted a violation of the arms embargo against Somalia. Though no specific clans are named at this point, evidence of sponsorship to any clan in Somalia is sufficient to test *H1* concerning a general increase in intercommunal violence resulting from sponsor resources. Thus, the variable *Sponsorship* takes a value of 0 for years prior to 2006 and 1 for 2006 and each year after. Per *H1*, I expect that the value of *IIV Count* will be significantly higher for years in which *Sponsorship* is present than in years without it.

Of course, an increase in violence against a particular target is the goal of government sponsorship. As discussed above, fighting with the sponsor's target may have a dampening effect on the number of attacks a sponsored clan may launch against their personal rivals. I test for this effect by including the indicator variable *Al-Shabaab*, which takes a value of 1 for years in which Al-Shabaab were active in Somalia and a 0 for years in which they held an insignificant amount of territory or were ousted by the Somali clans. Elmi (2010) indicates that Al-Shabaab rose to prominence following the Ethiopian invasion of 2006, while the alliance of clan militia and armed forces succeeded in pushing Al-Shabaab out of all their significant holdings by 2012. Thus, *Al-Shabaab* takes a value of 1 for each year between 2006 and 2012, inclusive, and takes a value of 0 for years outside this range. Per *H2*, I expect that years with a significant Al-Shabaab

presence should experience fewer instances of inter-clan fighting, since the clans will be pre-occupied fighting the intended target of their sponsors.

I employ a negative-binomial regression to test the significance of government sponsorship for determining the number of incidents of intercommunal violence in Somalia. The results are provided in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Negative Binomial Regression Results for Count of Incidents of Intercommunal Violence in Somalia, 1999-2020

	Estimate
Sponsorship	1.786* (0.505)
Al-Shabaab	-0.544 (0.499)
(Intercept)	2.833* (0.373)

* $p << 0.001$ (Standard errors in parentheses.)

As expected, *Sponsorship* has a highly significant ($p < 0.001$) and positive effect on *IIV Count*, providing support for *HI*. When the US began to inject resources into the Somali conflict zone through sponsorship of unspecified clans, a general increase in intercommunal violence between clans was the result.

This effect can also be demonstrated graphically. Figure 2 shows the number of incidents of intercommunal violence initiated by clans from 1999 through 2020. The first major increase in violence occurs in 2005, with high levels of interclan fighting for most subsequent years as well. The counts of interclan violence climb even higher after 2012, suggesting that civil conflict was exacerbated after Al-Shabaab was successfully ousted. The regression results, however, show that *Al-Shabaab* fails to reach statistical significance in explaining the counts of intercommunal violence, though the effect is in the expected negative direction. Thus, *H2* is rejected in this case.

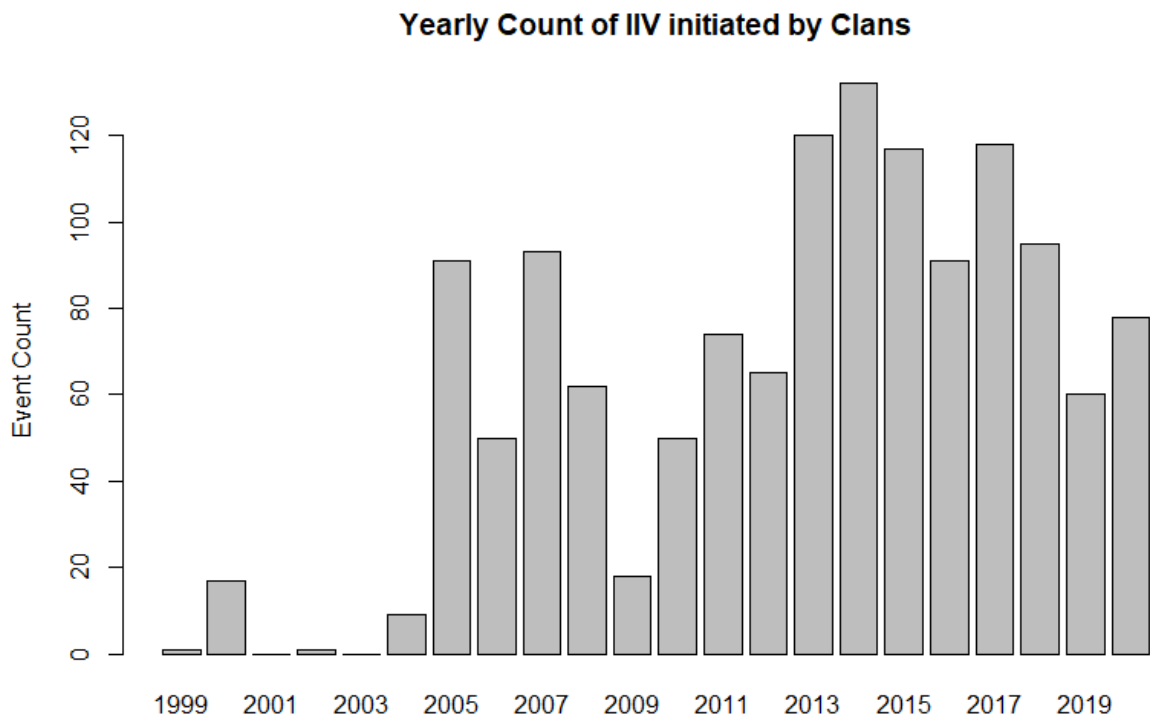


Figure 2: Yearly Count of Incidents of Intercommunal Violence Initiated by Clans in Somalia

*Empirical Testing – Spatial Diffusion of Increase in Incidents of
Intercommunal Violence*

While the previous quantitative test provides some evidence that government sponsorship of clan militia is tied to an increase in violence, they are silent as to where such violence will occur. Though it is not currently possible to assess precisely how much resource support has been provided by external sponsors to clan militia in Somalia, geo-tagged event data allow for analysis of where the effects of sponsor resources are felt most strongly and how this effect diffuses over distance. The spatial element of sponsor-enabled intercommunal violence is important to understand as it sheds light on which civilian population centers may be most at risk of getting caught in the crossfire of warring clan militias. An understanding of the spatial diffusion of sponsor-enabled violence should also be of interest to nation-builders and other foreign interveners, as care could be taken to provide resources to militia proxies only in sparsely populated areas, mitigating the risks of civilian victimization and clan-on-clan violence.

As noted above, news reports indicate that CIA flights loaded with bags of cash for distribution to clan militia proxies began making monthly deliveries in Somalia as early as 2006 (Morgan 2006, Wax and DeYoung 2006). Indeed, reports interviewing local Somali people indicate that both the Baledogle Airport (north of Mogadishu) and the Kismayo Airport (near the southern port city of Kismayo) now have a significant US presence, being used as bases for US special operations and drone activity.

My analysis proceeds from the central assumption that resource support for clan militia from the US will be highest in the vicinity of these bases. These bases are where US personnel are most likely to be stationed and where interests in local security are

likely to be highest. With a standing US presence and functioning airstrips, these airport bases are also the most likely entry point for sponsor resources entering Somalia and the most likely place for resources to be distributed to clan militias. Per *H3*, I expect that incidents of intercommunal violence will be more prevalent closer to the locus of resource provision, since it is at this point that the resources will be most concentrated. Some cash and goods may make their way further out from the airports, yet their effects on clan violence will likely attenuate as the resources themselves become more spread out. For instance, a militia commander stationed fifty miles away from the airport is less likely to get a significant cut of any incoming cash than a commander stationed right next door to where the resources are entering the country since many other militia members will have taken a cut of the resources before they can physically travel out to the distance of the farther commander.

I use geospatial techniques to assess the density of IIV throughout Somalia, and conduct a negative binomial regression to assess the strength of correlation between the density of IIV and distance from US bases. I begin by dividing a map of Somalia up into hexagons in order to assess the density of IIV within each hexagon (see Figure 3 below).

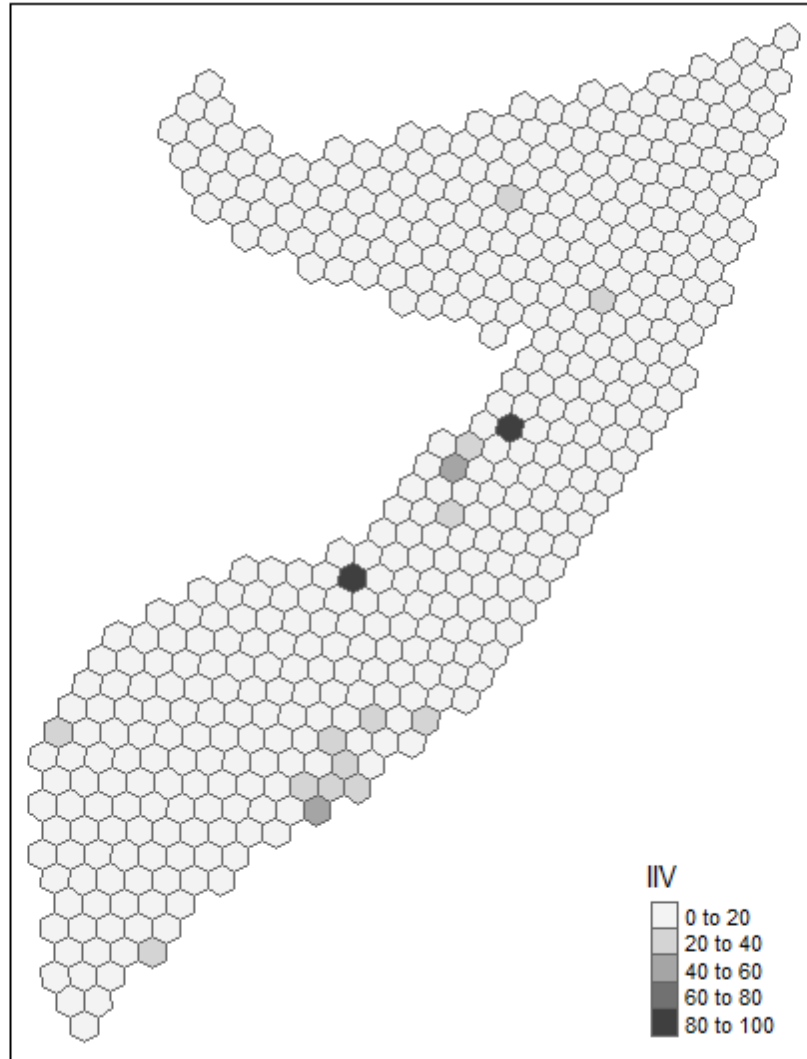


Figure 3: Incidents of Intercommunal Violence per Hexagonal Grid Cell, Somalia, 2000-2020

The dependent variable of this analysis is the *Count of Incidents of Interclan Violence* (*Count of IIV*) within each hexagon. To identify such incidents I again rely on event data from ACLED, covering all years for which data are available, 1997 through 2020. To be

counted as a case of IIV, a violent incident must have clan militia as both aggressor and target. Rather than filtering this data for only violence between the primary Marehan and Ogaden clans, I include all interclan violence. This is because my theoretical expectation is that resources provided by external supporters will gradually diffuse throughout the country as battles are won and lost and losers are looted. Thus, provision of resources even to a single clan may be thought of as an injection of conflict-fueling materiel into the whole conflict system in general.

The main explanatory variables of this analysis are *Distance from US Base at Baledogle* and *Distance from US Base at Kismayo*. These are measured as the distance from the geographic center of the base (Baledogle Airport or Kismayo Airport) to the centroid of each hexagon on the map of Somalia. I expect to find that Density of IIV decreases as a function of distance from each base as the effect of resource provision at the base attenuates over geographic space. Coordinates for the airport bases are taken from Google Maps.

I employ a negative-binomial regression to test the significance of distance from both the Baledogle and Kismayo airports for determining the count of intercommunal violence incidents in each grid cell. The results are provided in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Negative Binomial Regression Results for Incidents of Intercommunal Violence over Distance in Somalia, 2000-2020

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Distance from US Base at Baledogle Airport	-0.00311*** (0.000718)	-0.00177*** (0.000343)	
Distance from US Base at Kismayo Airport	0.00112* (0.000519)		-0.000918*** (0.000249)
(Intercept)	1.605*** (0.232)	1.845*** (0.214)	1.726*** (0.236)

*** p < 0.001 ** p < 0.01 * p < 0.05 (Standard errors in parentheses.)

As expected, *Distance from US Base at Baledogle* has a negative (-0.0031) and highly significant ($p < 0.001$) coefficient. In context, moving 1000 kilometers away from the Baledogle Airport should reduce the number of incidents of intercommunal violence per hexagon by an average of 3 incidents. This finding provides support for Hypothesis 3, that the concentration of incidents of intercommunal violence will be greater closer to the geographic center of sponsor resource provision and that concentration of these incidents will decrease as resources diffuse with increasing distance from this center.

Interestingly, however, *Distance from US Base at Kismayo* has a positive (0.0011) and significant ($p < 0.05$) coefficient. This finding seems to indicate that more violence should be expected as one travels further out from the Kismayo Airport, the opposite of

the expectation laid out in *H3*. This finding, however, may be the result of Kismayo's southerly location in Somalia. Kismayo is located near the southern border of Somalia, and is separated from the rest of Somalia by a fairly narrow corridor passing near Mogadishu and, importantly, the US base at Baledogle Airport. It could be that the positive coefficient of *Distance from US Base at Kismayo* is a reflection of the very high density of violent incidents near Baledogle, since this is the only direction in which resources could flow out from Kismayo without crossing the Somali border. If this is the case, then this unexpected finding may simply reinforce the importance of Baledogle as the geographic center of sponsor-enabled clan violence.

A Principal-Agent Approach to Understanding Proxy Behavior

Why has intercommunal violence from clan militia proxies continued despite being against the interests of sponsors? The analyses presented above lay out the evidence that a significant increase in intercommunal violence and civilian victimization occurred in sync with the advent of sponsorship of Somali clans and in the geographic vicinity of the provision of sponsor resources. However, it is so far unclear as to how sponsor behavior may influence the subsequent behavior of proxy clan militias. I aim to fill that gap in this section by analyzing the relationship between sponsor governments and clan proxies through the lens of the principal-agent framework.

As discussed in Chapter 2 (Theory), the relationship between sponsor governments like the US and proxy warlords and their militias can be understood within the principal-agent framework. Typically, these relationships are understood in terms of interest alignment between principals and agents, with steps taken by the principal to

select agents most in line with their interests, and thus less likely to shirk in their duties. Given that an agent's best outcome is usually to avoid work (shirk) but still get paid, principals have their own tools to ensure that working actually occurs. The first tool is the design of a contract outlining the expectations of the principal-agent relationship. The contract may set terms which the agent must abide by in order to receive their payout. The contract therefore uses the utility of payment to overcome the problems of fundamental interest misalignment between principal and agent. Principals also typically choose to monitor their agents in some way to verify whether the terms of the contract are being met. If monitoring reveals that the agent has indeed shirked in their duties, the principal then has the option to punish the agent. Such punishment may involve the termination of the relationship, or may allow the relationship to continue with some sort of cost imposed upon the agent for their bad behavior (for instance, a reduction in pay). This section will scrutinize the relationship between the US government and Somali warlord/clan-leader proxies along these principal-agent lines.

While the analysis of the sponsor-proxy relationship through the lens of the principal-agent framework is not new (see for instance Althouse 2018; Berman and Lake 2019), prior analyses center on questions of *whether* proxy forces obey their sponsor-principals or not, rather than analyzing the *manner* in which orders are followed and whether or not negative externalities result from agent behavior. This present analysis draws inspiration from Feaver (2005), which problematizes the way agents go about their duties. Traditionally within the principal-agent framework “shirking” refers to the act of avoiding the work required by the principal while still attempting to receive payment for the work. A typical example could be a store employee who neglects to clean the

restrooms at the end of her shift. As long as this worker's employer does not check on the state of the restrooms every day, the worker will likely get away with her shirking; she will be paid in full despite not doing the full job. Feaver (2005), on the other hand, introduces a more nuanced understanding of shirking. An agent may shirk, according to Feaver, if they technically perform the duties required by the principal, but in a manner of their own choosing. Focusing on the civil-military relationship in the US, Feaver suggests that such shirking occurs when military leaders push back against the wishes of civilian policymakers, dragging their feet bureaucratically until they receive some sort of concession from civilians, like deploying with a larger number of troops than civilian leaders initially wanted. In this case, the overarching goal of the principal is met (a deployment), but in a manner preferred by the agent rather than the principal (with more troops than initially authorized).

This is the sort of shirking under scrutiny in this present analysis of Somalia; agents follow the general orders of principals but in a manner designed to suit their own interests, even at the principal's expense. In the Somali case, shirking would mean that the warlord agents achieved the main goal of the sponsor-principals (that is, pushing back Al-Shabaab) but in a manner that is detrimental to the long-term goals of the principal (by fomenting increases in intercommunal violence). As discussed above, principals have a number of tools at their disposal to prevent or correct agent shirking, including contract design, monitoring, and punishment. I proceed by investigating each of these principal tools in sequence, analyzing whether the US made use of these tools to prevent or correct the shirking of its warlord agents.

I have argued through the quantitative analysis above that the warlord proxies of the US did indeed fulfill the wishes of their sponsor by fighting Al-Shabaab, but also used sponsor resources to fuel their own political ambitions and clan rivalries, with significant increases in intercommunal violence as the result. Along the lines of Feaver's (2005) understanding, this behavior by the agents qualifies as a kind of shirking. The question I will tackle in the rest of this section is what the sponsor-principal did in response to this shirking, and the resulting effects. As such, the principal-agent relationship here must be broken down into two phases: An initial phase where the principal employs and empowers the agent to perform a task and the principal either works or shirks, and a subsequent phase where agent performance is evaluated through monitoring and the principal chooses whether to punish any shirking that may have occurred to ensure agent compliance in the future.

I proceed by first discussing the interest alignment between the US sponsor and Somali warlord agents. I also scrutinize the contract design for their relationship. I then analyze whether the US conducted any monitoring of the performance of their warlord agents, and conclude with an investigation of the punishments utilized by the principal (if any) to keep the agent in line. The logic of the principal-agent framework presented in this context along with discussion of the theory in Chapter 2 imply a number of hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1a: When principal and agent interests are closely aligned there should be no shirking observed, either in the interim or in the long term.

Hypothesis 1b: When principal and agent interests are not aligned, shirking is more likely to be observed at the interim point.

Hypothesis 2a: If principal and agent interests are not aligned but principal makes use of a contract-monitoring-punishment regime, there should be no shirking (or intermediate shirking should be corrected in the long-term).

*Hypothesis 2b: If principal and agent interests are not aligned and principal **does not** make use of a contract-monitoring-punishment regime, agent shirking will result (intermediate shirking may occur and go uncorrected, leading to long-term shirking as well).*

To test these hypotheses, I first analyze whether principal and agent interests were aligned at the start of the relationship between the US government and clan militia leaders in Somalia, dating back to 2006 when funding for the clan militias began and 2010 when the US State Department's "Dual-Track" policy on Somalia was publicly announced. I then determine whether the US principal made any use of a contract to bring agent interests more closely into alignment. I then proceed by identifying the intermediate outcome at a number of points between 2006 and the present time, 2021, noting whether agents worked or shirked in the interim. Following this I shift scrutiny to the principal, analyzing whether the US monitored the intermediate behavior of their clan militia agents and whether shirking was punished if and when detected. Lastly, I identify the long-term result of the sponsor-proxy relationship, characterizing the most recent

behavior of clan proxies as either working or shirking in the present day. This analysis will show how principal behavior affects agent behavior and outcomes, and will help explain why the negative externalities of intercommunal violence from clan fighting have continued in Somalia.

Interest Alignment and Contract Design

The first question to tackle in analyzing the relationship between the US and its Somali warlord proxies is whether the interests of principal and agents were fundamentally aligned in the beginning, and whether any contract was put forward to bring divergent interests into alignment. To find the core interests of the principal, it is instructive to look at what the US has publicly stated as its goals in Somalia. There is perhaps no clearer pronouncement of these goals than the speech given by Ambassador Johnnie Carson of the US State Department announcing the “Dual-Track” policy towards Somalia in 2010. Though CIA funding of Somali warlord proxies began a few years prior to the “Dual-Track” policy announcement (see Morgan 2006, Wax and DeYoung 2006), it is reasonable to assume that the key interests of the US in the region did not change significantly in the interim.

Carson’s speech on behalf of the US State Department lays out the means of cooperation between the US and Somali proxies, along with a statement of the US’ goals for Somalia. Regarding the use of proxies/agents, Carson states, “Under this new second track of our strategy we will pursue increased partnerships with the regional governments of Somaliland and Puntland, *as well as with local and regional administrative units throughout South Central Somalia who are opposed to Al-Shabaab but who are not allied*

to the TFG” (Carson 2010, emphasis mine). Though stated in politically cautious language, Carson’s reference to increased partnerships refers to the warlord leaders of influential clan militias, including most notably Madobe of the Ogaden clan and Hiiraale of the rival Marehan clan (see Moe 2018).

Beyond pointing to the agents, Carson’s speech also lays out the intentions and goals of the US government regarding Somalia. Carson discusses the US government’s desire to promote peace and stability in Somalia, responsible governance, and economic development. These are a standard set of goals for most nation-building concerns. Carson goes on to discuss issues unique to Somalia, along with the US’ intentions. These include most notably eradicating Al-Shabaab, the Al-Qaeda-affiliated extremist group holding control over large swaths of Somalia, and ending seaborne piracy to protect international shipping off the Somali coast in the Gulf of Aden, the Red Sea, and the Indian Ocean. Indeed, other sources have since noted the importance of security within Somalia, including the removal of Al-Shabaab, as key for the protection of the US military base in Djibouti (Dahir and Schmitt 2020). Yet these goals also come with certain conditions, including that the US will not recognize the independence of states within Somalia (including controversial cases like the state of Somaliland) and that sanctions will be used to control government corruption. Going beyond government corruption, Carson declares that the US “will continue to use sanctions as a tool to prevent spoilers from further contributing to Somalia’s instability” (Carson 2010).

The interests of the Somali warlord agents are never clearly stated, yet the self-interest of warlords across time and space has been clearly documented (CIGI, Moe 2018, Olson 1993). The overriding concern of warlords is the protection of their self-

defined power and authority from encroachment by the legitimate government (see for instance CIGI). The capacity of governments to govern and the capacity of warlords to enrich themselves both depend upon holding a local monopoly on violence. It follows that the main interest of warlords is to protect and expand their capacity for violence, amassing troops, weapons, and cash necessary to dominate their region. Rather than having an interest in the general welfare of the Somali people, warlords like Madobe and Hiiraale tend to be concerned with extracting whatever they can from society in order to enrich themselves (Olson 1993). To that end, Menkhaus notes that control of the valuable southern seaport of Kismayo was also a goal of these warlords (Menkhaus 2012). These powerful Somali warlords had ambitions to control even larger swaths of territory as well, particularly the state of Jubaland in southern Somalia, with an eye towards local autonomy with the warlord as president of a local independent government (International Crisis Group 2013, Moe 2018).

From the outset of this principal-agent relationship, then, we begin to see serious interest misalignments. Where the US seeks to promote peace, stability, development, and responsible governance, their warlord agents have traditionally sought to enrich themselves, entrench their hold on local power at the cost of legitimate governance, and cement their positions through formal political recognition, without concern to the costs these actions impose upon the Somali people. At this point, it would seem that the warlord proxies identified by the US for sponsorship in 2006 and official partnership in 2010 were exactly the wrong agents for the job.

However, there is one area of solid agreement between US principal and warlord agent interests: The eradication of Al-Shabaab. The extremists who had taken over much

of Somalia in the wake of the destruction of the Islamic Courts Union acted as a spoiler to both the interests of the US and the ambitions of the warlords. Al-Shabaab were firmly in the crosshairs of the US government as part of the Global War on Terror since the early 2000s (Elmi 2010). As a competitor for the limited resources of territory and the obedience of the people, Al-Shabaab was also a spoiler for the ambitions of Somali warlords. This gave the warlords a pragmatic, if not ideological, interest in defeating Al-Shabaab and dominating territories they once held.

Indeed, it is likely this tight alignment of interests around the destruction of Al-Shabaab that prompted the US government to make a pragmatic shift towards supporting the Somali warlords in the first place. The maxim stating “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” has served as the foundation for a number of US partnerships in the past, including support for the Afghan jihad against Soviet forces in the 1980s, and support for dictatorial and corrupt governments in Vietnam, Korea, and several Latin American countries during the Cold War. The US has never been shy about reaching out to those who hold significant capacity for violence when the two sides share a common enemy, and this seems to have held true in Somalia as well. Though stability, economic development, and good governance are always the overtly stated goals of any intervention, it is also accepted among intervention practitioners and theorists that effort towards any goal is wasted if security is not established first (see for instance Dobbins et al. 2007). In light of this fact, the desirability of Somali warlords and their clan militias as proxies in the Global War on Terror is clear.

To recount, the US principal and its Somali warlord agents had almost no interests in common at the time of Carson’s speech in 2010, nor when sponsorship for clan militias

began in 2006. The US was interested in building up Somalia as a stable, peaceful, and prosperous bastion of liberal democracy, while the warlords were mainly concerned with self-aggrandizement and personal power. Yet both principal and agents found common cause in the eradication of Al-Shabaab, and so the relationship began.

However, what sort of contract was established between the parties? Was any attempt made by the US to use one of its tools as principal to bring divergent interests into alignment? In one sense, it is impossible to know what contractual details were hammered out in clandestine agreements between the US and its proxies. Those news reports which shed light on CIA flights providing resources to clan militia leaders in Somalia as early as 2006 are not privy to any specific details of the arrangement (Morgan 2006, Wax and DeYoung 2006). Yet it is possible to analyze those terms of the principal-agent relationship which the US *did* choose to make public: Carson's speech on behalf of the State Department (2010). If this speech is understood as a public pronouncement of principal interests, it can also be viewed as a sort of hand-tying measure, subjecting both principal and agents to the scrutiny of the public. For instance, Carson states that a clear goal of the US is peace and stability in Somalia. By stating this publicly, the US government has set itself up to pay a public cost should peace and stability in Somalia not result from US efforts in the future. In this case the binding power of international public opinion can be understood as ratifying a form of contract between principal and agent.

If Somalia is not peaceful or stable after a few years, it will be clear that the US failed in achieving its publicly stated goals and will pay a cost in prestige and trustworthiness as a result. For its part, the US was essentially banking on warlord agent help in bringing these publicly stated interests to fruition. If the intermediate or long-term

outcomes of this relationship differ, there is a public cost for the principal to bear, and we should expect the principal to use its other tools (monitoring and punishment) to ensure that the agents follow through with the terms of this public “contract.”

Intermediate Outcomes and Monitoring

We then arrive at the interim point of the principal-agent relationship, and must take note of whether shirking or working occurred in the period immediately after the relationship between principal and agents was initiated and the contract spelled out. Recall from Hypothesis 1a that shirking should not be expected if principal and agent interests are in alignment from the outset, and from Hypothesis 1b that shirking is more likely in the interim period of the relationship when interests are not in alignment. Given that the US principal and its warlord agents in Somalia shared only one point of interest in common, the eradication of Al-Shabaab, the theoretical expectation is that shirking should be observed at the interim point.

Note, however, what constitutes as shirking in this case. Feaver (2005) presents an understanding of shirking as an agent completing the task desired by the principal but in a manner that suits its own preferences at the cost of the principal’s interests. Indeed, it is exactly this form of shirking that we observe at the interim point in the relationship between the US government and its Somali warlord agents. The quantitative analysis presented at the beginning of this chapter highlights much of this shirking. Moe (2018) notes that the alliance of clan militia proxies and AMISOM troops was successful in routing Al-Shabaab from most of its holdings by 2012, yet at a very high cost in terms of increases to intercommunal violence. This is shirking in the Feaverian sense. The militias

of powerful warlord agents Madobe and Hiiraale did indeed oust Al-Shabaab in keeping with the desires of their sponsors, yet they also used the resources earmarked for this principal-approved fight to engage in other interclan fighting *not* approved by the principal. This rise in intercommunal violence stemming from sponsor provision of resources to clan militias was in direct opposition to the publicly stated interests of the US government to promote peace, stability, economic development, and good governance in Somalia. Further, Moe (2018) highlights the declaration of the presidency of an independent state of Jubaland for Madobe, another black eye for the US principal which had publicly committed itself to not recognizing the independence of any states within Somalia.

Thus, shirking is clearly observed in the interim period of this principal-agent relationship in Somalia. However, much of this shirking has become clear only in hindsight (particularly the rise in intercommunal violence presented here). A principal can only apply corrective measures to reign in their recalcitrant agents if it is aware of shirking at a point where something can still be done about it. What, then, did the US government know about the situation on the ground in Somalia a few years after the principal-agent relationship with the warlords began?

To answer this question, I turn to reports generated by the US State Department itself. Each year the State Department conducts reports on the human rights practices of every country. The reports for Somalia after the public declaration of the Dual-Track policy are telling. As the Somalia country report for 2010 indicates:

“Hundreds of civilians were killed in inter- or intra-clan militia clashes throughout the country. The killings resulted from clan militias fighting for political power and control of territory and resources, revenge attacks, banditry and other criminal activity, private disputes over property and marriage, and vendettas after incidents such as rape, family disagreements, killings, and abductions.” (Country Report on Human Rights Practices, Somalia, 2010)

This statement squares with quantitative findings of significant increases in incidents of intercommunal violence and civilian victimization after the beginning of sponsorship for warlords in 2006. The country report for 2012 indicates that this was an ongoing problem:

“The TFG and its allied militias, persons in uniform, Puntland and Somaliland forces, Al-Shabaab, pirates, and unknown assailants committed arbitrary killings. Civilians were killed in armed clashes, and humanitarian workers were also targeted and killed. During the year 18 journalists were killed. Impunity remained the norm.” (Country Report on Human Rights Practices, Somalia, 2012)

The picture this report paints is one of widespread chaos within Somalia, a far cry from the stability, peace, development, and good governance outlined in Carson’s 2010 State Department speech. These country reports are clear indication that things were not proceeding according to the stated interests of the US principal, but also serve as evidence that the principal was at least monitoring the situation and was aware of this

shirking by the warlord agents. The question then turns to what, if anything, the principal did to correct this interim shirking.

Punishment and Long-Term Outcomes

Though a clear spike in clan-based intercommunal violence in Somalia followed the advent of foreign sponsorship in 2006 and the temporary defeat of Al-Shabaab in 2012, it is unclear that the US made any attempt to rein in its clan militia agents. The same State Department country reports that note arbitrary and clan-related killings by the Somali TFG and associated militias also point out that few if any investigations were launched internally and no punishments have been meted out:

“No action was taken against security force or militia members who committed killings in 2009 or 2008, and there was little progress in the investigations of killings reported in previous years.” (Country Report on Human Rights Practices, Somalia, 2010)

“Authorities investigated very few cases, and there were no reports any investigations resulted in formal action by local justice authorities.” (Country Report on Human Rights Practices, Somalia, 2012)

Of course, these country reports focus primarily on actions of the Somali government, not the US, though the reports do not otherwise indicate pressure placed on US agents in the wake of increases in intercommunal violence. Neither is it possible to say with certainty whether secret CIA deliveries of cash to sponsored warlords and their militias (though the

quantitative analysis above does indicate increased intercommunal violence in the vicinity of US bases). A lack of evidence in this case is not unexpected; it would be unreasonable to assume the US intelligence community makes public updates on its proxy funding decisions.

Nevertheless, it is possible, and perhaps even likely, that US payments to warlords in Somalia have continued throughout the period in question. From Wax and DeYoung (2006):

“The U.S. relies on buying intelligence from warlords and other participants in the Somali conflict, and hoping that the strongest of the warlords can snatch a live suspect or two if the intelligence identifies their whereabouts,” said John Prendergast, the director for African affairs in the Clinton administration and now a senior adviser at the nongovernmental International Crisis Group. “This strategy might reduce the short-term threat of another terrorist attack in East Africa, but in the long term the conditions which allow terrorist cells to take hold along the Indian Ocean coastline go unaddressed. We ignore these conditions at our peril.

“Are we talking to them and doing some of that? Yes,” said Ted Dagne, the leading Africa analyst for the Congressional Research Service. “We fought some of these warlords in 1993 and now we are dealing with some of them again, perhaps supporting some of them against other groups. Somalia is still considered by some as an attractive location for terrorist groups.”

The experts quoted by Wax and DeYoung point to an arrangement of buying intelligence from warlords along with supporting them against rival groups. Other news reports indicate that as late as 2015 the US maintained the presence of intelligence and counterterrorism personnel in Somalia:

Regional administration official Abdighani Abdi Jama told McCormick that as many as 40 US personnel conduct “intelligence” and “counterterrorism” operations and operate drones from their base at Kismayo airport, about 300 miles south of Mogadishu. Somali officials and sources within the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) also indicated a similar presence at Baledogle, in the Lower Shebelle region.... US Africa Command (AFRICOM) spokesman Chuck Prichard declines to comment on the size or location of their units, saying only that the “small number” of US Special Forces deployed [in] the region was “not tasked with directly engaging enemy forces.” (RT, 2015)

This reporting indicates the presence of US personnel associated with intelligence and counterterrorism stationed in Somalia in a non-combat role. Based on typical US foreign involvement, it is likely that these personnel are engaged in intelligence-gathering, liaising with local forces, and providing training to local security forces. If this is the case, then it is also likely that payments to warlords for intelligence and cooperation in the fight against Al-Shabaab continued, at least through 2015.

These reports, in conjunction with the fact that the US State Department has not made any sort of official public rebuke of the warlords and their militias or the SFG

itself, seem to indicate a lack of punishment from the US principal and a lack of accountability on behalf of sponsored warlords and militias. The results of this arrangement are clearly outlined in the quantitative analysis above: Significant increases in intercommunal violence and civilian victimization, spiking between 2013 and 2017. As Figures 1-3 indicate, such incidents of intercommunal fighting remain higher in 2020 than before sponsorship began in 2006. Thus, Hypothesis 2 receives support: Though the US made a public statement of its “contract” with its Somali agents and monitored their performance, no correctives have been issued and continued shirking has been the result. This abdication of principal authority by the US has contributed to the persistent unrest in Somalia.

Chapter 4: Nonstate Militia Sponsorship in Syria through Operation Timber Sycamore – The Free Syrian Army

While Somalia saw a case of foreign intervention aimed at stamping out terrorism, the Syrian civil war has seen intervention by the United States on both anti-government and anti-terror fronts. The Syrian civil war began to simmer in 2011 as the larger Arab Spring movement swept the world of Arab autocracies. Shortly afterwards in 2012, the US launched Operation Timber Sycamore with the aim of training and equipping Syrian rebels to fight the Syrian government. After five tumultuous years the program was eventually scrapped by the Trump Administration for flooding the black market with US-provided weapons and ironically bolstering the ranks of extremist terrorists.

I argue in this chapter that the spike in illegal weapons sales, terrorism, and intercommunal violence among nonstate militias in Syria resulted directly from Operation Timber Sycamore and the resources it provided rebel militias. I begin by exploring the trail of event data on political violence in Syria during the years of the civil war to show that an increase in intercommunal violence among nonstate militias occurred, and that the shuttering of Operation Timber Sycamore was followed by a reduction in intercommunal fighting, especially from the Free Syrian Army (FSA) who were the main beneficiaries of US support. I then analyze how the relationship between the US as principal and FSA as agent shaped the outcome. Crucially, this case suggests that while sponsorship of nonstate militias in the course of foreign intervention can lead to increases in intercommunal violence, the prompt termination of problematic agents can reduce the extent of such violence, showing that the genie can indeed be put back in the bottle and that the causal mechanism works in both directions.

The Swirling Insurgent Milieu of the Syrian Civil War

The Arab Spring movement pushing back against autocratic regimes across the Arab world reached Syria in March of 2011. Bashar al-Assad had held power in Syria since succeeding his father in 2000, continuing the autocratic grip the family had held over Syria since 1971. With the Arab Spring blooming throughout the region, protesters took to the streets in March of 2011 demanding democratic reforms from Assad's government. Instead, the government responded with a swift and brutal crackdown leading to hundreds of deaths and injuries, on top of mass incarcerations and a sweeping censorship campaign. Massive demonstrations continued in spite of the government's reaction, compelling Assad to unleash the Syrian Army to maintain control. Civil unrest segued into insurgency with the emergence of a militant opposition to the Syrian government coupled with significant defections from the Syrian Army. By the end of July 2011, many of these disparate rebel groups coalesced into the loose alliance known as the Free Syrian Army (FSA).

For its part, the United States saw the civil unrest in Syria as a troubling liability, yet one that was paired with an opportunity to promote democracy and a Western-Friendly regime in the Middle East. Moreover, the Obama administration found itself in an embarrassing position after drawing a "red line" on chemical weapons use. Assad wantonly crossed this line, unleashing chemical weapons against civilians in rebel-held areas of Syria. With US forces stretched thin across Afghanistan, Iraq, and other considerations in the Global War on Terror and the burgeoning Arab Spring, the US needed a method of intervention that kept American boots off the ground while still applying pressure to the Assad regime.

The solution to Obama's Syria problem came in the form of Operation Timber Sycamore. Authorized by the president in the spring of 2013, Operation Timber Sycamore was a CIA-headed project to arm and train rebel fighters with the goal of regime change in Syria (Mazzetti and Apuzzo 2016). The operation was conducted in concert with Saudi Arabia and Qatar; CIA supplied the training while the Arab states bankrolled the operations and provided shipments of weapons, including AK-47s and TOW anti-tank missiles. Initially the CIA was limited to providing nonlethal aid only, yet the Obama administration relaxed this requirement a couple of months into the operation. With Syria itself in turmoil, FSA fighters were trained and equipped by the CIA over the border at the King Faisal Air Base in Jordan (Lin 2016). The rebels were now ready to cut loose in Syria.

And cut loose they did. US officials reported that the FSA gained significant footholds and territory from Assad's forces in the months following the start of Operation Timber Sycamore (Watkins 2017). By 2015 Syrian rebels, the FSA included, were threatening Assad's important stronghold in Latakia with access to the coast (Joscelyn 2017). The collective success of rebels throughout Syria was striking enough to catch the eye of the Kremlin, with Russia mounting a boots-on-the-ground military intervention into Syria to rescue the foundering Assad regime. According to US intelligence officials, it was the rapid progress of the rebels which led directly to the 2015 Russian intervention in Syria (Jaffe and Entous 2017). Russia slammed into the insurgency with tremendous force, reversing rebel progress and marking a shift in fortunes for the Assad regime.

However, the FSA's behavior on the Syrian battlefield had already led to concerns on its own. The *ad hoc* nature of the FSA and the alliance of convenience it

represented between disparate elements turned out to be a tremendous liability for US sponsors. As the *Washington Post* reflected later, "...the CIA-backed fighters were so divided politically, and so interwoven with extremist opposition groups, that the rebels could never offer a viable political future" (Ignatius 2017). Not only was this lack of cohesion worrying on a political level, the FSA also had significant ties to extremist terrorist groups, like Al-Qaeda affiliate Al-Nusra. One fighter interviewed by the *New York Times* reported that al-Nusra "lets groups vetted by the United States keep the appearance of independence, so that they will continue to receive American supplies" (Joscelyn 2017). Such supplies frequently made their way into unauthorized hands.

To be sure, most of the disparate rebel bands had the toppling of the Assad regime as their primary motivation. Disagreements existed, however, between factions as to the form a successor government should take. Islamist extremists added to the confusion when the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (IS) emerged in the midst of the Syrian civil war to not only oppose Assad but also to agitate for an alternative political environment under a theocratic caliphate.

For the sake of clarity, it should be stressed here that the explicit goal of Operation Timber Sycamore was the toppling of the Assad regime, *not* battling IS. The US would engage with ISIS as well, but through a separate program. The Syrian Train and Equip Program was a parallel operation supporting the mostly Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) with the aim of reclaiming IS holdings in Syria, particularly around the Euphrates River valley where they had become entrenched. A comparison of the level of the organizational structure and level of professionalism of the SDF and FSA

will be the subject of the next chapter. Suffice it to say for now that compared to the SDF, the FSA was the most threadbare of alliances.

Indeed, these various elements of the FSA were not even in agreement on a common basic strategy. Lister (2016) describes the FSA as a “branded movement composed of individual, locally-rooted AOGs [Armed Opposition Groups]” (p. 15), suggesting an overall lack of cohesion and organization. While the CIA’s efforts did see some rebels receive US training and equipment, these rebels’ actions when returning to the battlefield were anything but uniform. Some of the rebels fought against Assad’s forces, while others fought against IS, and still others fell victim to internecine fighting, jockeying for resources and territory from other rebel groups. In some cases US-backed rebels even defected to join IS or other extremist groups, putting the US in the unfortunately ironic position of having trained and equipped terrorists (Joscelyn 2017).

With markets flooded by Saudi Arabian weapons and US cash and training serving to prop up terrorists, the US finally decided to shutter Operation Timber Sycamore in 2017. The Trump administration cut funding for the program with plans to redirect those funds into the Syrian Train and Equip Program to arm the SDF to fight IS, which had been showing more promise (more on that in the next chapter). The FSA experienced a large reduction in activity as resources from their sponsor were cut off. While the cessation of Operation Timber Sycamore did not reduce the proportion of time spent on intercommunal violence by the FSA, without resources the FSA were forced to engage in fewer incidents of violence overall, constraints which further splintered the group.

As in the case of sponsorship for warlords in Somalia, Operation Timber Sycamore provided fuel for the fire of intercommunal violence and internecine conflict within the swirling milieu of the Syrian civil war. Flush with US weapons, cash, and training, FSA rebels were empowered to settle old scores and engage in violent extremism far beyond the original intentions of the US principal. Here again, unreflective foreign sponsorship of nonstate militias resulted in local increases in intercommunal violence.

Yet the story did not end there. Unlike in the Somalia case, where the US State Department maintained support for its warlord proxy despite local increases in intercommunal violence, the US did eventually cut support for the FSA. After President Trump's "firing" of the fractious rebels, incidents of intercommunal violence (IIV) perpetrated by the FSA dropped off in a major way, coupled with the accelerated splintering of the group into obscurity. This outcome suggests that while sponsorship of nonstate militia can lead to local increases in intercommunal violence, this effect is dependent upon continued sponsorship. Should the sponsorship and flow of resources cease, the IIV enabled by those resources will also cease. While policymakers would be wise to avoid flooding black markets with advanced weaponry, as unfortunately occurred in the case of FSA and Operation Timber Sycamore, the most immediate and obvious negative externalities of sponsorship, increases in intercommunal violence, appear to be short-lived.

Resource-Enabled Intercommunal Conflict in the Syrian Civil War

The Free Syrian Army, flush with cash, weapons, and training from the US, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar was able to make significant headway against the Assad regime, at least according to US officials (Watkins 2017). However, the FSA's presence in the tumultuous Syrian warzone also meant significant increases in intercommunal violence, including rebel-on-rebel violence along with civilian victimization. One particularly poignant case of intercommunal strife seems to have affected President Trump's decision in the first place. Trump decided to cut Operation Timber Sycamore after being shown a video of FSA-affiliated rebels beheading a child outside of Aleppo. The rebels belonged to the Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement, a member of the FSA holding extreme Islamist ideals. (Joscelyn 2017)

Internal fighting left a trail of chaos behind the FSA, with some groups rising to fight the Islamists and others defending them. Indeed, Al-Nusra, the Al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria, has found both allies and enemies in the FSA at various times.

The result has often meant suffering for civilians. This was the case in Idlib province, which was liberated by the US-sponsored FSA as it lurched across the Syrian landscape in 2015. The opening made by the rebels in Idlib was quickly filled by opportunistic jihadists, who gained *de facto* control of life in the province and established a "Taliban-style state" (Joscelyn 2017). Neither was the slime-trail of extremism hidden from the US, as Green Berets working with FSA rebels in Jordan noted. Reports from these US advisors and trainers indicate that FSA fighters spoke quite openly about having no issues with jihadists like ISIS, stating instead that their fight "was with the Kurds and the Syrian regime" (Lin 2016, pg. 2). The US would go on to work with the Kurds as

well (the topic of the next chapter), but these statements by FSA fighters indicated serious cause for concern that intercommunal violence could be expected once they took to the field.

As in the case of Somalia, I argue that the resources provided by the US as the FSA's sponsor enabled this increased spate of intergroup violence and civilian victimization. Unlike the Somalia case, however, Syria presents a case of the US principal exercising its authority to rein in the agent, with striking effect. After Trump fired the FSA in 2017 the organization cratered. The combination of Russian and Syrian forces pushed the FSA out of most of its holdings once support from the US and its allies dried up. Furthermore, the shuttering of Operation Timber Sycamore seems to have had a ripple effect across the entire landscape of the conflict in Syria. Abrahms and Glaser (2017) opine that the FSA's termination as a US agent caused the local implosion of ISIS as well, since Assad and his allies could turn their full attention to fighting the extremists once the garden variety rebels were out of the way.

The respective decisions of the Obama and Trump administrations during their time as the chief US principal led to dramatic shifts in the landscape of the Syrian conflict. As before, I argue that local increases in intercommunal violence were the result of a foreign sponsor providing resources to an opportunistic agent. In Operation Timber Sycamore the US acted as principal to contract with the FSA as agent. The terms of the contract required the FSA to fight against the Assad regime in Syria, which it did. However, the FSA (or rather, its myriad constituent groups) took advantage of the surfeit of resources to lash out at their own personal enemies, beyond and against the wishes of the principal. In principal-agent terms, they shirked.

How well does the proposed theory explain the case of Operation Timber Sycamore? To begin with, I turn to the hypotheses presented in the last chapter. The first implication of the theory of resource-enabled intercommunal violence is that the resources provided by a foreign sponsor enable a nonstate militia to fight both its primary target (sanctioned by the principal) as well as its own personal enemies. To ensure that support continues from the principal, the agent fights the primary target. However, the surplus of resources left from this primary fight will go on to fuel intercommunal violence, either in the form of this group fighting rival nonstate militias or engaging in opportunistic violence against civilians as new territory is taken and control tightened.

In the previous chapter, I argued that sponsorship of a nonstate militia would lead to a general increase in intercommunal violence within a particular conflict region as proxy forces diverted resources to fight personal enemies. I reiterate this first hypothesis:

H1: Sponsorship of a militia or warlord will tend to cause a general increase in intercommunal violence within a conflict system as sponsor resources are diverted to fight personal enemies, beyond the targets originally designated by the sponsor.

Because the resources provided by the sponsor are finite at any given point in time, these militia agents will have to think strategically about how to use them. Fighting with the sponsor's intended target will divert resources away from fights with personal rivals. Thus, fighting with a sponsor's intended target will have a dampening effect on the levels of intercommunal violence exhibited by the group:

H2: Fighting with the sponsor's intended target will have a dampening effect on intercommunal violence as resources are diverted from fighting other rivals.

Finally, given that the resources provided by sponsors must be physically transported, sponsored groups will engage in more opportunistic intercommunal violence closer to the location where resources are provided:

H3: Intercommunal violence enabled by sponsor resources will be more prevalent closer to the geographic center of resource distribution. This effect will attenuate with distance from this center.

With the theory applied to the case of the FSA and Operation Timber Sycamore, I turn now to discussion of the empirical strategy.

Empirical Testing – Increase in Incidents of Intercommunal Violence Following Sponsorship

Geo-referenced event data on political violence can help provide a good first cut at understanding how foreign sponsorship of nonstate militias has resulted in greater levels of intercommunal violence (and *vice versa*) in the Syrian civil war. For this, I turn to both the UCDP Georeferenced Event Dataset (GED v. 21.1) (Pettersson et al. 2021; Sundberg and Melander 2013) and the Armed Conflict Location and Event Database (ACLED) (Raleigh et al. 2010). These data sets have different strengths, and together provide a richer understanding of events in Syria. GED presents the greatest temporal coverage,

with events recorded from 2011 through 2020; ACLED records events from 2017 to present day. Yet while GED covers the longest stretch of time, ACLED records a higher number of events and covers more of the constituent groups of the FSA than GED does. ACLED records incidents of political violence committed by 30 different groups that fall under the aegis of the FSA, whereas GED records attacks carried out by only 14 groups that can be linked to the FSA. For reference, the FSA is comprised of 75 unique rebel groups vetted by the CIA.² Thus, GED is useful for analyzing the aggregate change in the incidence of intercommunal violence in Syria across almost the entire period of the civil war. I then turn to ACLED for a more nuanced look at the patterns of violence perpetrated by the FSA in the period just before and after it lost sponsorship and resources from the US. This approach provides a means to test the general effect of foreign sponsorship on a conflict system and also illuminates the manner in which sponsorship affects rebel decision-making at the level of individual groups, tracing the process of resource-enabled conflict year by year as individual group behavior shifts.

For analysis of the general increase in intercommunal violence, I proceed first using data from GED. The dependent variable is *IIV Count*, a count of the number of incidents of intercommunal violence (IIV) occurring in each year. To count as intercommunal violence, an incident must be initiated by a nonstate militia and targeted at a nonstate militia. Events which feature state military forces, police, or civilians as the target or the initiator are dropped from the data set. What remains is a list of incidents of violence between rebel groups, though some extremist groups are present as well (such as IS and al-Nusra). Since part of the charge against Operation Timber Sycamore was that it

² For the full list of vetted constituent groups or factions of the Free Syrian Army, see Lister (2016, pp. 34-38).

inadvertently put weapons in the hands of terrorists, it is reasonable to assume that US sponsorship of the FSA also affected the behavior of extremists operating within the same conflict zone.

The main explanatory variable is *Sponsorship*. This indicator takes a value of 1 for years in which Operation Timber Sycamore was providing money, weapons, and training to Syrian rebels in the FSA. The Obama administration initially authorized the operation in 2013, and the Trump administration phased the operation out throughout 2017 (Mazzetti and Apuzzo 2016; Jaffe and Entous 2017). Given the secret nature of the operation and the limited transparency provided by US officials, it is not possible to pinpoint exact times when resources first began to reach the FSA or when they stopped. Thus, I proceed with analysis of the operation at the yearly level, counting sponsorship from 2013 through 2017. While less precise than a monthly approach, yearly aggregations of violence still capture clear patterns in rebel behavior and have the advantage of smoothing out the noise present in monthly aggregations as particular battles rage or recede. Per *H1*, I expect that the value of *IIV Count* will be significantly higher in years with sponsorship than in years without.

In order to control for the effect of fighting with the Syrian government, I include the variable *Government Activity*. This variable counts the number of attacks initiated by the Syrian government's military against rebels each year. Attacks against purely civilian targets are not counted. As discussed above in *H1b*, fighting with the sponsor's intended target may have a dampening effect on the amount of violence the proxy militia can initiate, so I expect this variable will have a negative impact on *IIV Count*. In the previous chapter covering the Somalia case, I used an indicator to control for the presence of the

US sponsor's intended target on the battlefield. This made sense in that particular case to account for the distinct phases of that conflict: An initial push against al-Shabaab followed by a period of intercommunal fighting to fill the resulting power vacuum. However, the Syrian civil war presents a much denser cluster of overlapping conflicts which does not divide up as neatly. A count of government-initiated attacks against rebels serves to control for the amount of pressure placed on rebels by the sponsor's intended target and the resulting shift in targeting priorities for the rebels, away from personal targets and towards the government as the sponsor intended.

Another potential dampener for FSA violence is the sudden Russian intervention. As noted above, the arrival of Russia's military forces in 2015 shifted momentum in the conflict in Assad's favor. A military intervention like that has the potential to suppress sponsored militias as the rebels suddenly find themselves fighting a much stronger foe. The need to shift resources to this new fight and ensure group survival may lead to a reduction in the levels of intercommunal violence groups can engage in outside of their sponsor-designated targets. I control for such a possibility by including *Russian Intervention*, an indicator taking a value of 1 for years of Russian intervention in Syria (2015 to the present), 0 otherwise. GED does not record individual events of violence initiated by Russian forces operating in Syria, so it is not possible to account for Russian activity with greater precision. I expect that *Russian Intervention* will have a negative impact on levels of intercommunal violence in Syria.

I employ negative binomial regression to test the significance of government sponsorship for determining the number of incidents of intercommunal violence in Syria. The results are provided in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Negative Binomial Regression Results for Count of Incidents of Intercommunal Violence in Syria (Operation Timber Sycamore), 2011-2020

	Estimate
Sponsorship	1.78* (0.94)
Government Activity	8.34x10 ⁻⁵ (1.06x10 ⁻⁴)
Russian Intervention	2.57** (1.02)
(Intercept)	3.42*** (1.00)

* p < 0.1, ** p < 0.05, *** p < 0.001 (Standard errors in parentheses.)

Sponsorship has the expected positive effect on *IIV Count*, with years of US sponsorship accounting for additional incidents of intercommunal violence in Syria when compared with non-sponsored years. The effect is weakly significant, with a p-value of 0.058, but this is likely more of a reflection of the complexity and density of the conflict in Syria. The fact that US sponsorship of a particular group had a discernible effect at all in such a

crowded battlefield deserves attention and further investigation. *H1* therefore receives support.

The effect of *Government Activity* on levels of intercommunal violence was in an unexpected positive direction, but failed to achieve statistical significance. In this case, *H2* has no evidence in its favor. Actions initiated by the Syrian government seem to have had no effect on how often rebel and extremist groups fought each other.

Finally, the effect of the Russian military intervention appears to have not dampened the militias' enthusiasm for intercommunal violence either. *Russian Intervention* has an unexpected positive effect on level of intercommunal violence that is highly significant.

Seen at this aggregate level, the Syrian civil war provides evidence that US sponsorship of the rebel groups comprising the FSA had a marked impact on regional violence by enabling those groups to not only fight the government but also fight with fellow rebels and with extremists (targets *not* designated by the sponsor-principal). Before this sponsorship began in 2013 and after this sponsorship dried up in 2017, average levels of intercommunal fighting in Syria were much lower, with around 1000 fewer incidents per year. This effect can also be demonstrated graphically. Figure 4 below shows the number of incidents of intercommunal violence in Syria for each year.

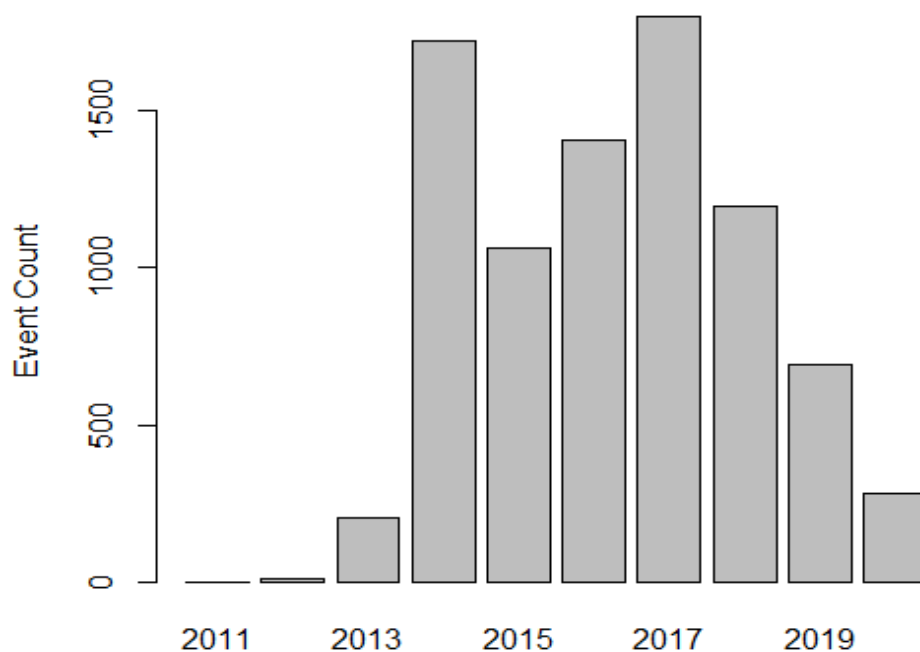


Figure 4: Yearly Count of Incidents of Intercommunal Violence Initiated by Nonstate Militias in Syria (2011 – 2020)

Operation Timber Sycamore sponsoring the FSA began in 2013. While that particular year was rather quiet (probably owing to the need for training and shipments of weapons and materiel to be transported), the following year saw an explosion of intercommunal violence. In 2014, nonstate militia initiated 1718 individual incidents of violence against each other, compared with only 208 the year prior.

Of particular interest is the period following 2017, when sponsorship of the FSA through Operation Timber Sycamore ended. The year 2017 itself saw the highest recorded number of incidents of intercommunal fighting, reaching to 1796. This is probably no surprise, given that this was the year the Trump administration decided to cut

the unruly fighters off. Following 2017, however, the level of intercommunal violence steadily drops, all the way down to pre-sponsorship levels (there were 283 incidents recorded in the GED in 2019).

This reverse-trend in intercommunal violence following the shuttering of Operation Timber Sycamore is noteworthy. Yes, the finding is more evidence that government sponsorship is closely correlated with levels of intercommunal violence in cases of foreign intervention, but it also suggests that these increases in intercommunal fighting can be reversed once the sponsorship ends. Such a finding should resonate with policymakers, as it indicates an opportunity to fine-tune the principal's relationship with the proxy, punishing when necessary to draw the agent back into line (more discussion on this further on). Sponsorship does not necessarily mean that intercommunal violence will always be higher. Instead, the effect seems to be localized in time, indicating that a sponsor might be able to put the genie back in the bottle if it acts decisively to cut the flow of resources to an unruly proxy militia.

To get a greater understanding of how the cessation of sponsorship affected FSA rebel behavior I turn to ACLED. As discussed above, ACLED provides a higher number of recorded events for a larger pool of FSA-affiliated militias than does GED, though the temporal coverage is limited from 2017 to 2021.³ This data allows for a deeper analysis of how the FSA was forced to change its behaviors and strategic decisions to account for the sudden drop in resources from US sponsorship. Figure 5 below presents all violent events initiated by FSA member groups in Syria, broken down by year and target.

³ ACLED provides frequently updated coverage extending up to the present day. Since this analysis compares years of sponsorship to years without sponsorship, I only include data through the last full year of recorded events, 2021.

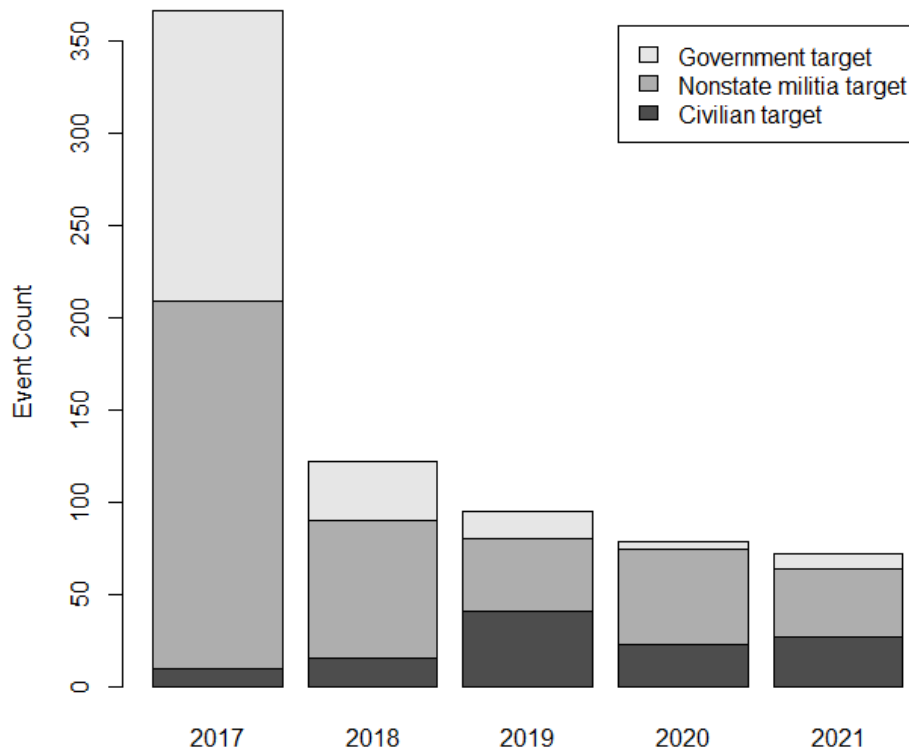


Figure 5: Yearly Incidents of Violence Initiated by Free Syria Army, 2017-2021

After the Trump administration cut funding for the FSA through Operation Timber Sycamore in 2017, significant changes began to occur in the patterns of violence initiated by the FSA. Most strikingly, they lose almost all interest or capability in attacking the government. Figure 5 includes attacks on the militaries of Syria, Russia, and Turkey, along with attacks on Syrian police. Faced with the end of US support, the FSA disengaged from its former principal’s designated target to engage with other nonstate militia in acts of intercommunal violence.

It should be noted here that this shift cannot be the sole result of the Russian intervention, impactful though that was. The Russian military arrived in Syria in 2015,

and while ACLED does not cover that particular year, it does cover 2017, a year featuring both Russian military intervention *and* US sponsorship for the FSA, at least for a few months. Given the magnitude of the change in violence initiated by the FSA between 2017 and 2018, something substantial must have occurred to change the FSA's behavior so starkly. From available data, the cessation of US sponsorship for FSA as part of the Trump administration's shifting posture on Syria stands out as the primary candidate cause.

Analyzing this intercommunal violence, it is noteworthy that intercommunal violence actually becomes a much *larger* proportion of the FSA's list of activities once funding stops. However, the total number of attacks drops, from 199 attacks on militia targets (of 366 total attacks) in 2017 down to 74 attacks on militia targets (of 122 total attacks) in 2018. The problem of intercommunal violence remains, but its intensity is reduced.

Also of interest here is the increase in attacks on civilians committed by the FSA. After the US stops providing them with resources, the groups comprising the FSA begin to ramp up their victimization of civilians, moving from 10 attacks on civilians in 2017, to 16 in 2018, and reaching a high of 41 in 2019. The intensity of violence against civilians subsides for 2020 and 2021, though both those years have more than double the number of attacks seen in 2017 when some sponsorship was still flowing in. This finding falls in line with Wood (2014; see also 2010) who show that insurgent groups are likely to turn on civilians as they grow more desperate and resource-starved. The civilian

population represents an easy source of income when times are tight, though groups are typically unlikely to engage in civilian predation unless absolutely necessary.⁴

The picture presented by event data on the FSA is indeed one of rebels on the run. The end of Operation Timber Sycamore coincides with a fundamental shift in the pattern and location of violence initiated by the FSA. Figures 6-10 below provide yearly snapshots of this violence. Each figure presents a map of Syria divided into hexagonal cells 50 kilometers across, with incidents of intercommunal violence (militia-on-militia) occurring in a particular year counted for each cell. Taken together, Figures 6-10 document the flight of FSA away from the conflict center, the Syrian capital of Damascus, attempting to grab valuable coastal territory before being pushed across the Turkish border.

⁴ For discussion of the reliance of guerrilla militias on civilians for both passive and active support, see O'Neill (2005).

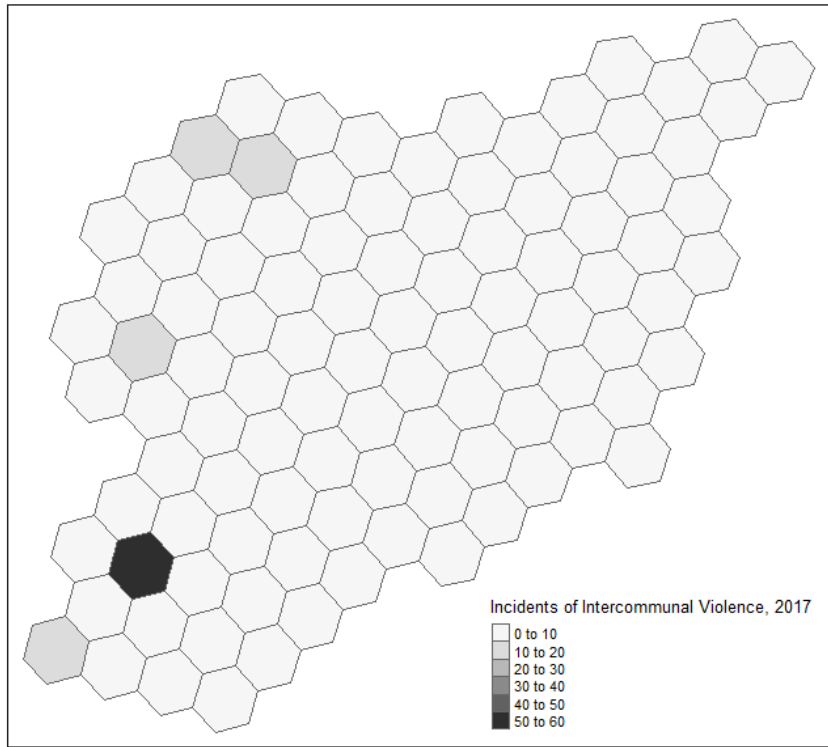


Figure 6: Incidents of Intercommunal Violence by the FSA, Syria (2017)

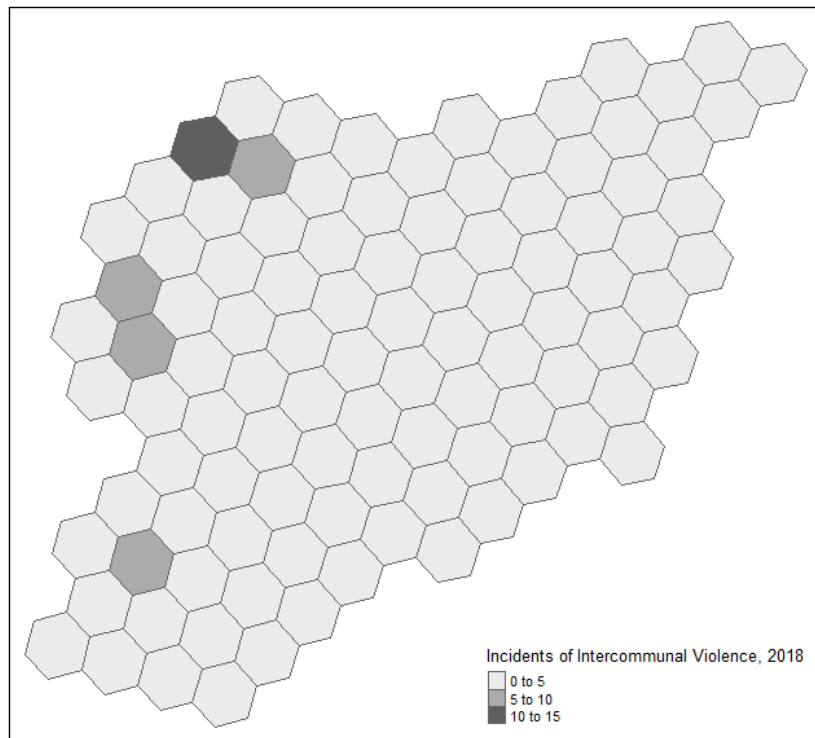


Figure 7: Incidents of Intercommunal Violence by the FSA, Syria (2018)

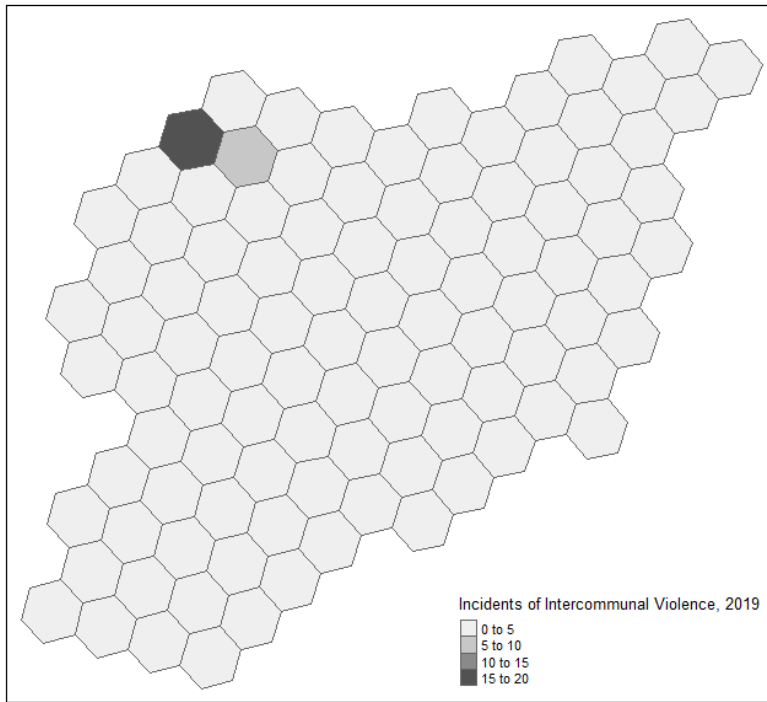


Figure 8: Incidents of Intercommunal Violence by the FSA, Syria (2019)

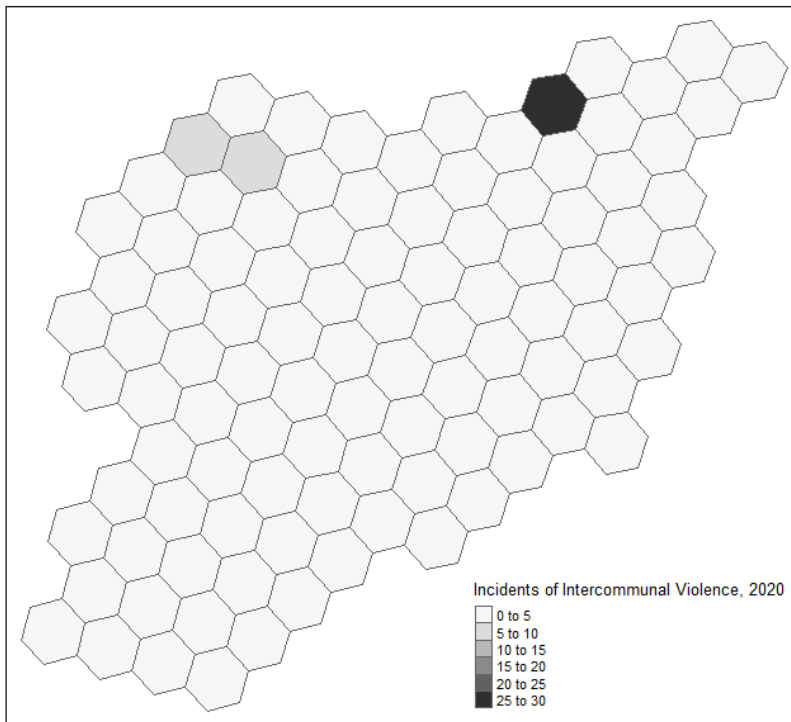


Figure 9: Incidents of Intercommunal Violence by the FSA, Syria (2020)

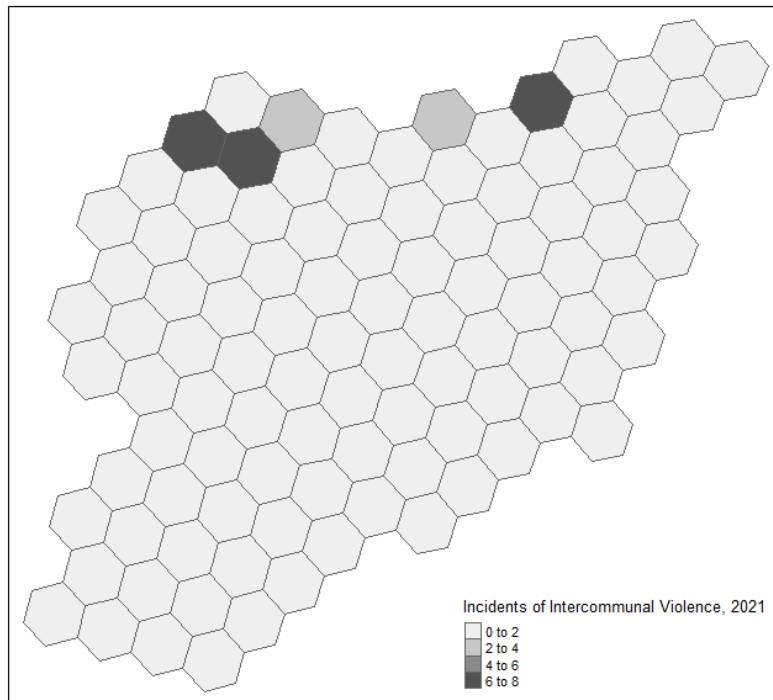


Figure 10: Incidents of Intercommunal Violence by the FSA, Syria (2021)

After Timber Sycamore was cut in 2017, the FSA seems to have been kicked out of Damascus by Assad’s forces. This makes sense, given that fighting is likely to be concentrated towards the administrative center in a civil war, and where Assad would likely concentrate his strength. The concentration of fighting in the southern region of Syria in 2017 also provides some limited support for *H3*, since resources provided as part of Operation Timber Sycamore came largely through the King Faisal Air Base across the border in Jordan (Lin 2016). Intercommunal fighting reached further north only after resource flows from this southerly base were cut, becoming more scattered and diffused across space as time went on.

Without US sponsorship for the FSA, the number of militia-on-militia incidents happening in Damascus fell dramatically. The FSA left Damascus after 2017 and pressed

north, attempting to grab important holdings like Latakia on the western coast in 2018, with fighting spilling into Islamist-controlled Idlib further north into 2019.

As the FSA continued to weaken, these constituent groups eventually retreated towards the border with Turkey in the northeast, seeking to cross over into a safer haven. By 2020 the fighting in Idlib in the northwest was starting to wane as the FSA remnants started fleeing over the Turkish border. The year 2021 saw sporadic fighting along the northern border, though with fewer total attacks over the year.

The image presented here is one of a group on the run, fighting other groups in a bid to secure territory and resources. It is interesting that one of the most pronounced effects of ending sponsorship was the massive reduction in attacks initiated by FSA against the Syrian government. Once the funding stream dried up, the FSA groups lost almost all interest in fighting the government and instead turned on other nonstate militia. These nonstate militia, facing the threat of elimination, turn on each other (weaker opponents than the government) in a last-ditch effort to survive and hold onto important territory. When this fails, they retreat to the border in an attempt to reach safety, harassing and being harassed by their rivals along the way.

The behavior on display when the FSA's funding was cut follows a familiar logic. Rather than risking a fight with the much stronger government, they shift into survival mode, picking off weaker rivals to gather resources and capture or hold territory. While their odds of turning the tables on the now vastly superior government forces (and foreign allies) is low, their best bet at achieving it is to turn on their weaker rivals for resources, filling their bellies to fight another day when their fortunes might change.

If this is indeed the decision-making process of these nonstate militias, then they would fall in line with the game theoretic concept of “gambling for resurrection” (see Downs and Rocke 1994; also Goemans 2000). Rather than back down from a losing fight in an environment that would certainly result in their destruction, these groups choose to prolong the conflict (though against weaker targets of their choosing) in hopes that eventually their odds of victory might change. Though initially proposed to explain the behavior of political leaders prolonging losing wars to avoid immediate removal from office, this logic can be applied here to explain the sheer tenacity of the myriad small militias involved in the Syrian civil war. Pincered between a web of intercommunal violence on one side and powerful government forces on the other, such militias face certain destruction if they back down and so continue the conflict against their rivals, the point of least resistance.

While this logic presages bitter conflict as these rival militias fight for survival, the good news for principal-sponsors is that this period of intercommunal violence does draw to a close. When the militias stopped receiving resources from their sponsor, they left the center and dispersed. They fought each other along the way as they first tried a desperate grab for precious coastal territory before squirting across the Turkish border. Yet the number of incidents of intercommunal violence drops steadily nearly every year after funding for the militias is cut. This intercommunal fight disperses and dies down in intensity once the sponsor-provided money and weapons that were fueling it are no longer being provided. This is a hopeful finding, as it indicates that increases in intercommunal violence due to foreign government sponsorship are relatively short-lived and tied to the amount of resources available. This is particularly true when cessation of

support also leaves the proxy militia naked before a much stronger foe, like the Syrian government and Russian allies. Consequently, policymakers may be able to rein in the behavior of their proxies by controlling the amount of resources that are provided. Or, if all else fails, funding can be completely cut, resulting in levels of intercommunal violence falling back to the low simmer they were at before sponsor resources entered the equation. Sponsor resources do *not* seem to result in lasting increases in intercommunal violence.

A Principal-Agent Approach to Understanding the Outcomes of Operation

Timber Sycamore

What lessons are to be learned here for principals, then? To answer this, I turn to a qualitative analysis of the decisions made by the US as principal and the resulting behavior of the FSA as agent. As discussed above, one of the lessons of the FSA case is that sponsors in these sorts of proxy relationships do have the power to curtail intercommunal violence. While the resources like weapons and cash that foreign sponsors provide are indeed associated with increases in intercommunal militia-on-militia fighting, the *cessation* of these resource flows is associated with a *reduction* in such violence. This section will trace how the US principal vetted and monitored its FSA agent, and how it successfully ended the sponsorship when it became clear that the FSA was shirking by using sponsor resources to attack unapproved targets. An important conclusion here is that potential sponsor governments have an opportunity to rein in the negative externalities of intercommunal violence by making use of the principal's strategic toolkit, monitoring and punishing.

As in the previous chapter, I highlight and analyze three key points in the principal-agent relationship between sponsor government and nonstate militia proxy. The first key point is the moment of contract initiation between the principal and agent. Ensuring that the interests of both the sponsor government and militia proxy are aligned before the sponsor relationship begins will help ensure that the agent performs the tasks required by the principal and has little initial incentive to shirk in their duties. Recall that “shirking” in this context can include the technical fulfillment of sponsor desires, though in a manner that suits the desires of the agent over those of the principal, even incurring negative costs for the principal in some cases.⁵ In the present case, such shirking would be observed if the FSA fought against the Syrian government as the US sponsor required of them but also diverted some of the sponsor’s resources to fund a side campaign against the group’s personal rivals or targets.

In theory, a principal-agent relationship with a large degree of interest alignment is unlikely to result in shirking, since both principal and agent are essentially after the same goal. But if shirking does occur, the principal has an opportunity to rein in this violent behavior from its agent by making use of monitoring and punishment. If the principal monitors the agent and detects shirking, the principal has an opportunity to levy some punishment against the agent to draw their behavior back into line (or terminate the relationship, if the shirking is too severe). Thus, punishment for shirking at some mid-point in the relationship will likely lead to a reduction in the severity of such shirking in the future. As in previous chapters, this logic suggests a series of hypotheses:

⁵ For more discussion on this style of shirking, see Feaver (2005).

Hypothesis 1a: When principal and agent interests are closely aligned there should be no shirking observed, either in the interim or in the long term.

Hypothesis 1b: When principal and agent interests are not aligned, shirking is more likely to be observed at the interim point.

Hypothesis 2a: If principal and agent interests are not aligned but principal makes use of a contract-monitoring-punishment regime, there should be no shirking (or intermediate shirking should be corrected in the long-term).

*Hypothesis 2b: If principal and agent interests are not aligned and principal **does not** make use of a contract-monitoring-punishment regime, agent shirking will result (intermediate shirking may occur and go uncorrected, leading to long-term shirking as well).*

To test these hypotheses, I first analyze whether principal and agent interests were aligned at the start of the relationship between the US government and the FSA, tracing the relationship back to its initial authorization by the Obama administration in 2013. I then determine whether the US principal made any use of a contract to bring agent interests more closely into alignment with the sponsor. I then analyze the period between 2013 and 2017, determining whether the FSA worked or shirked during the years of its relationship with the US. After this, I turn to scrutinize the principal again, analyzing whether the US monitored the intermediate behavior of the FSA and whether shirking

was punished when it was detected. Finally, I identify the long-term result of the sponsor-proxy relationship, highlighting how the termination of the principal-agent relationship by the Trump administration in 2017 affected the FSA's behaviors and capabilities, and what lasting effects on intercommunal violence in the region remain. This analysis will show how principal behavior affects agent behavior and outcomes, underscoring the ultimate reliance of the agent upon continued support from the principal.

Interest Alignment and Contract Design

The first question to ask in this analysis is what the specific interests of the principal and the agent were in this case. The US was mainly interested in taking control of the “free-for-all” going on in Syria, with money and weapons from other regional states being handed out indiscriminately. In fact, Mazzetti and Apuzzo (2016) cite two former senior American officials that then-CIA director David Petraeus delivered a harsh reprimand to intelligence officers of many Gulf states in a meeting in Jordan in late 2012, angry at their support for rebels in Syria without proper vetting. Operation Timber Sycamore began partly as a means to bring order to the situation and prevent resources from winding up in extremist hands. Of course, as had been the case with US airstrikes in Libya in 2011, the US was also interested in regime change (Tisdall 2015). With the Arab Spring in bloom across the region, the US had a chance to plant democracies, a major foreign policy goal since at least the 2003 invasion of Iraq. So, the main interests of the US as principal in Operation Timber Sycamore were *regime change in Syria*, with a secondary interest in establishing a *region free of extremism* (in line with the DCIA's

comments to Gulf state intelligence officers and the larger goals of the Global War on Terror).

What, then, were the interests and goals of the US's agents, the FSA member groups? The primary interest, shared with the principal, was clearly also *regime change in Syria*. Many of the fighters involved in the FSA had not even been interested in fighting until the brutality of Assad's crackdown on protesters throughout Syria made it clear that something drastic had to be done. According to the leader of a FSA group operating in northern Syria (Lister 2016, p. 4):

“Picking up guns was not what we had in mind when we first took to the streets. But we were being slaughtered like lambs simply for peacefully protesting, what choice did we have? I myself saw two children no older than six die in front of my eyes. First, we had to protect our people and second, we realized the regime was not backing down. We had to commit to the next step.”

That “next step” was direct action against the Syrian government and military. The CIA initiated contact with the member groups of the FSA over this shared interest in seeing the Assad regime fall. The vetting process for these groups began long before active sponsorship, with the CIA seeking to screen out the “most reliable and capable FSA groups to lend support” (Lister 2016, p. 7).

However, many FSA members made no secret of the fact that the Syrian government was not their only target. Lin (2016) reports comments to that effect from US Special Forces personnel assigned to train FSA fighters in Jordan. These Green Berets

spoke out about the ethnic and extremist goals of some FSA members after an ISIS infiltrator killed three US personnel at the King Faisal Airbase where they had been training in November 2016. One of the Green Berets commented that “we are just training the next generation of jihadis... the FSA is little more than a cover for the al-Qaeda affiliated al-Nusra.” When asked about the allegiance and goals of FSA fighters, the Green Beret added that “a good majority of them admitted that they had no issues with ISIS and that their issue was with the Kurds and the Syrian regime” (Lin 2016, p. 2). Thus, there is evidence here that the FSA’s goals included *ethnic violence* and *Islamist extremism*, at least for some members, and that the US was aware of this by at least 2016, and perhaps as early as 2012.

So, there was some overlap in interests between the US principal and FSA agent when it came to regime change in Syria, though substantial nonalignment over issues of ethnic violence and extremism. This suggests (per *H1b*) that the likelihood of Feaverian shirking occurring during this contractual relationship is higher than in a case of perfect interest alignment. The theory suggests that this shirking will come in the form of more frequent militia-on-militia intercommunal violence after the sponsorship begins. As detailed in the quantitative empirics above, this was indeed the case with the FSA. *H1b* thus receives support.

Yet the question remains as to whether an explicit contract existed between the US and the FSA attempting to bring interests between principal and agent into closer alignment. From the outset, it does not seem like such a contract was in place. The US tip-toed into its relationship with the FSA from the beginning, withholding substantial material support until late-2013 (Lister 2016). Some FSA members expressed open

frustration with the lack of reliable US support, even after Assad crossed the “red line” of using chemical weapons when he launched artillery rockets loaded with Sarin nerve agent to kill over 1400 people in August 2013. As one senior FSA member confided to Lister (2016, p. 11):

“It was a stab in the collective heart of the revolution.... The regime taught us as children that America was evil, but I’d raised my children to see the United States of America as the representation of freedom, liberty and justice. For me, that ended in September [2013].”

Yet later in 2013 more concrete support from the US *did* materialize, helping the FSA coalesce into a more unified force (Lister 2016, p. 14). Given the secretive nature of the program, it is difficult to say whether any firm contract was established between the CIA and the FSA groups it vetted and supplied. Comments from FSA members interviewed by Lister, however, suggest that FSA members were very aware that the US did not want them mixed up with extremist groups. Given the numerous ties of the FSA’s constituent groups to extremists, the FSA’s membership seems to have had a sense that the US could withdraw support, or even turn on them, at a moment’s notice. After all, the US had begun airstrikes in Syria against ISIS and some extremist affiliates already in September 2013. There seems to have been no uncertainty over the fact that the FSA had always been on thin ice with its US sponsor. As one FSA commander put it (Lister 2016, p. 15):

“When al-Nusra declared their allegiance to al-Qaida [in April 2013], the Free Army began to change its vision of the group, but we did not have the strength to do more than that. But we were suspicious. After the American strikes, we became even more suspicious, but at the same time, we were trapped—how could we do anything but protest? We are always asked why we accept al-Qaida within our midst. It’s simple: We wouldn’t if we had more support and were confident in our allies in the international community.”

This particular FSA commander paints a picture of a strained relationship between the FSA and its US sponsor. This is indication that, whether an explicit contract ever existed, there was a common understanding between principal and agent that extremism and associated intercommunal fighting would not be tolerated, and that support could be withdrawn at any time. Per *H2a* above, the theory suggests that this understanding between principal and agent will result in less shirking, or that shirking will be controllable should the principal follow through on threats to withdraw sponsorship if the agent steps out of line.

Intermediate Outcomes and Monitoring

As the preceding analysis of event data shows, the FSA did indeed step out of line by engaging in heightened intercommunal violence following US sponsorship. The US was aware of this, as evidence indicates continued active monitoring of the situation in Syria and the progress of the FSA.

The US was closely monitoring the entire situation in Syria, including major initial territorial gains made by the sponsored rebels. According to Watkins (2017), US officials have said that Operation Timber Sycamore directly helped rebel groups gain “significant footholds and territory in Syria.” Another US official has estimated that the FSA killed or wounded 100,000 Syrian soldiers or allies during Operation Timber Sycamore. Rebels managed to threaten the important coastal city Latakia, the Assad family’s historic home base, and had also been pressing towards the Syrian capital, Damascus (Ignatius 2017). US intelligence officials have even pointed to the FSA’s territorial gains in Syria as being a major catalyst for the Russian intervention (Jaffe and Entous 2017).

So, Operation Timber Sycamore had clearly given the FSA teeth in its fight against Assad, and the US was aware of it. Yet the US was also aware of divisions within the FSA. Ignatius (2017) quotes a former State Department official who acknowledges that the US program to provide resources to the FSA led to “massive divisions and rivalries instead of being used as a tool to unite disparate factions.” Not only were splits evident within the FSA, but the US was aware that the FSA had ties to Islamist extremism and associated conflicts through al-Nusra, the local al-Qaida affiliate. Lin (2016) points out that there was no secret among Green Berets training FSA fighters in Jordan that the fighters intended to strike at sectarian and ethnic targets, like the Kurds, once they were unleashed in Syria.

In fact, it may have been a particular act of extremism that led to President Trump firing the FSA militia-agents. Joscelyn (2017) reports that Trump made the decision to stop sponsoring the FSA after being shown a video of Syrian rebels beheading a child

near Aleppo. The rebels were members of the FSA-affiliated Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement. According to sources familiar with the incident, the president asked why the US had been supplying resources to extremists and, apparently unsatisfied with the answers, immediately decided to end Operation Timber Sycamore (Joscelyn 2017). Thus, key US decisionmakers were actively monitoring the performance of the FSA, and exercised their authority as principal to respond.

Punishment and Long-Term Outcomes

Punishment for the FSA came in the form of the total cessation of sponsorship from the US. The group's ties to intercommunal violence in Syria made them a liability, and the Trump administration decided to cut off Operation Timber Sycamore as a result. It is clear from the event data analyzed above that the FSA's activities were severely reduced after sponsorship ended. They were also scattered across Syria as they made their way to the Turkish border.

The move to punish the FSA for its shirking had ripple effects throughout Syria. As Abrahms and Glaser (2017) note, ISIS "imploded" as soon as support for the FSA ended. Assad was able to divert more of his forces to stamping out the extremists now that the rebel movement had lost its principal backers. The FSA was no longer as much of a threat, and its fortunes were on the wane.

Thus, *H2a* receives strong support; the US principal was able to punish its agent by ending the sponsorship, resulting in significantly lower levels of intercommunal fighting in the end. While this finding provides evidence for the theory, it is significant in itself. The case of Operation Timber Sycamore shows that while sponsorship of nonstate

militias can indeed lead to higher levels of unintended intercommunal violence, proper monitoring of the situation and application of punishment (or ending the contract entirely) can effectively curtail these increases in violence.

This finding will be of special interest to policymakers, as it suggests that the principal in a proxy relationship has a number of effective policy tools at their disposal. Proper monitoring of the outcomes of a sponsorship creates opportunities for the principal to apply correctives to the behavior of its agents. This means that if a proxy partner turns out to be ineffective or unruly, this relationship can be ended and the resulting intercommunal violence starved out. Increases to intercommunal violence through foreign sponsorship are short-lived and seem to be tied to continued access to sponsor resources. If the sponsor chooses to withdraw these resources, the agent's capacity to engage in intercommunal violence dries up as well. This is good news for policymakers: Agents can be controlled, and short-term policy missteps do not necessarily have to spell long-term disaster through regional instability.

Chapter 5: Nonstate Militia Sponsorship in Syria through the Train and Equip Program – The Syrian Democratic Forces

The civil war in Syria may best be thought of as a mass of overlapping conflicts. While the civil element of the war began with various rebel groups and defecting military units taking up arms to defend themselves from government oppression, an interrelated conflict began when the extremist group known as Islamic State (IS) came on the scene. By 2014 IS was making major territorial gains in Iraq and Syria, complicating an already chaotic situation. While the US began Operation Timber Sycamore as a means to fund, train, and equip rebel forces to help topple Assad's government, the US began a parallel program in Syria with the goal of eradicating IS: the Syria Train and Equip program.

The parallel US sponsorships in Syria present a unique opportunity for comparison and analysis. Operation Timber Sycamore provided sponsorship for the Free Syrian Army (FSA) to fight the Assad government and the Syria Train and Equip program provided sponsorship primarily for the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to fight IS. Where sponsorship for the disorganized and fragmented FSA led to increases in intercommunal violence in Syria (and ultimately the closure of the operation), sponsorship for the SDF has so far been a success in pressuring IS without enabling further unwanted inter-group fighting. I seek to explain this difference in outcomes in this chapter by analyzing the case of the SDF through event data and qualitative process tracing. Analysis reveals that intercommunal violence from sponsored militias can be controlled through proper contract establishment, monitoring, and enforcement on behalf of the principal, and that this is especially true for agent militias that have a high degree of organizational structure and sophistication. Policymakers

would do well to seek out the most professional and organized proxies, making use of all the tools at their disposal as principal in order to sponsor nonstate groups without fomenting unwanted surges in intercommunal violence.

Battling Islamic State in Syria: A War within a War

The Syria Train and Equip program began under the Obama administration as a means to field nonstate militia fighters to push IS out of its holdings in Syria, beginning sometime in 2014. By September 2015, US officials announced that little progress had yet been made. Then-leader of US Central Command General Lloyd Austin admitted in testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee that the Syria Train and Equip program was behind schedule (Miklaszewski and Kube 2015). Only small numbers of fighters had been trained by the program in its first year, despite the hefty \$500 million earmark for the program. Yet efforts were ongoing to expand the pool of fighters aided by the program, with Austin noting in his testimony that the US had begun working with the Kurdish People's Defense Units (YPG) to bolster their capacity to fight IS in Iraq and Syria. Austin's testimony was part of a review of the Syria Train and Equip program meant to assess the viability of continued support for local militias against IS in Syria.

It seems that changes were made to the program. By October 2015 the *BBC* reported that the US had abandoned its original plan for the broader Train and Equip program, and instead seemed to be doubling down on support for the Kurdish YPG in particular. In mid-October a US C-17 transport aircraft delivered one of the first major shipments of resources to its Kurdish proxies: Forty-five tons of ammunition for use against IS (*BBC* 2015). This move indicated a shift in priorities for the US. Rather than

engage with numerous rebel bands as Operation Timber Sycamore was attempting, the Syria Train and Equip program would focus on a primary partner force with a high degree of organization and professionalism.

In 2016, the US gave formal public confirmation that the Syria Train and Equip program was continuing with Kurdish militias as the primary beneficiaries. The focus for sponsorship would now be on the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), an alliance of Kurd and Arab militias with the Kurdish YPG in control. Though the SDF opposes the Assad government and are primarily concerned with the protection of the historically oppressed Kurdish people within Syria, they are also bitterly opposed to extremist groups like IS. A spokesperson for the US-led coalition against IS confirmed the sponsorship of the SDF to the press:

“The SDF, which is our partner organization of vetted forces in Syria, have been stalwart partners and have done a very good job in taking the fight to Daesh [IS]. We continue to work with them and we intend to keep doing so.” (Wilgenburg 2016)

While the Syria Train and Equip program was waxing, Operation Timber Sycamore was on the wane. As discussed in the previous chapter, President Trump formally ended Operation Timber Sycamore and its support for the FSA in response to growing complaints of intercommunal violence, ties to extremism, and violence against civilians. Yet the FSA’s loss appears to have been the SDF’s gain, as resources from Operation Timber Sycamore were redirected to the Train and Equip program in 2017 (Jaffe and Entous 2017).

News reports throughout 2017 confirm the quickly increasing support from the US for the SDF in the fight against IS in Syria. A January 2017 article recorded the first delivery of armored vehicles to the SDF from the US, an indication of a much stronger partnership and sponsorship. The ramp up in resource provision was not lost on the SDF, whose spokesperson Talal Sello commented:

“This is evidence that there are signs of new support.... Previously we didn’t get support in this form, we would get light weapons and ammunition. There are signs of full support from the new American leadership—more than before—for our forces.” (Middle East Eye 2017)

For its part, the US seems to have been pleased with the performance its resources were purchasing. A Pentagon spokesperson confirmed in May 2017 that the SDF was its “most effective battlefield partner against IS in northern and eastern Syria” (Burns and Baldor 2017). The Pentagon also confirmed that sponsorship of the SDF against IS was geographically concentrated on the city of Raqqa. The US saw the SDF as the only force on the ground capable of seizing Raqqa back from the grip of IS. To achieve that end, the US would lend its support to the SDF in the form of valuable materiel: 120mm mortars, machine guns, ammunition, and light armored vehicles (Burns and Baldor 2017).

The US continued to openly announce its high levels of support for the SDF through the summer of 2017. In July, Brigadier General Dave Anderson announced that the US had trained over 8,500 members of the SDF, delivered over 400 vehicles, and provided enough equipment to outfit 40,000 SDF fighters in total, reiterating that the

SDF were America's "main coalition partner in the fight against Islamic State's extremists in northern Syria" (Wilgenburg 2017). And, as before, the US publicly praised the SDF for its performance:

"The SDF has done some extraordinary work. They really have. And they've done it very, very well. They've done it quickly. They've done it with a high degree of inventiveness."
(Wilgenburg 2017)

The amount of support from the US continued to increase over the summer. By August 2017 the US had delivered a total of 800 trucks of military supplies to the SDF fighting around Raqqa. These supplies included vehicles, weapons, and even cranes. The US also continued to voice its approval of its proxy agent, with another spokesperson noting "consistent gains" in Raqqa against IS (Sulaivany 2017).

The US was apparently pleased enough with the SDF to continue paying the bills through 2019. The Pentagon budget for fiscal year 2019 set aside \$300 million in support specifically for the SDF (Detsch 2018). The US would get its money's worth; the happy partnership between the US and SDF bore real fruit in 2019. Two years after the US had begun outfitting its proxy in earnest to retake Raqqa and other IS holdings, the Trump administration announced that the SDF had captured the final IS stronghold in Syria (BBC 2019). With the eastern border city of Baghuz back in allied hands, IS had lost its formal territorial holdings in Syria.

(The Lack of) Resource-Enabled Intercommunal Conflict in the Syria Train and Equip Program

On the surface, then, the case of the Syria Train and Equip program, especially US sponsorship of the SDF, seems to be a case of agent obedience. Unlike Operation Timber Sycamore, the Syria Train and Equip program was not riddled with embarrassing reports of resources being redirected to fund extremist groups or fueling violent flare-ups between rival militias.

That is not to say, however, that no one expected such violence out of the SDF. The US's formal announcement of sponsorship of the SDF was met with howls of disapproval from the north. Turkey's President Erdogan flatly stated, "By giving them [Kurdish fighters] weapons, you're endangering our future" (Wilgenburg 2016). Turkey feels threatened by the prospect of a Kurdish autonomous region on its southern border with Syria, especially considering historic tensions with its own large Kurdish minority and their struggle for cultural and political recognition (Shorash 2019).

Indeed, fighting between Turkish forces and the Kurd-led SDF has been a steady feature of the past decade, especially since the chaotic outbreak of the Syrian civil war. The US entered into sponsorship of the SDF fully aware of this, and has made public statements openly acknowledging the tension as well as steps they have taken to assuage Erdogan's fears that US resources would fuel an SDF campaign against Turkey. A spokesperson for the Pentagon gave assurances in 2017 that safeguards would be in place to ensure US weaponry and equipment did not end up getting used by the SDF against Turkey:

“The intent is to restrict the distribution and use of the weaponry by permitting its use for specific battlefield missions and then requiring the Kurds to return it to US control.”

(Burns and Baldor 2017)

But were these measures effective? Given the results of the preceding analyses of sponsorship for nonstate militias in Somalia and Operation Timber Sycamore, one might be skeptical. These cases show that US sponsorship of unruly local agents tends to result in local increases in intercommunal violence as sponsored militias use their new wealth to wage war on personal rivals. Thus, the expectation is that a similar increase in intercommunal violence will have resulted from the Syria Train and Equip program as well. For convenience, I reiterate the first hypothesis:

H1: Sponsorship of a militia or warlord will tend to cause a general increase in intercommunal violence within a conflict system as sponsor resources are diverted to fight personal enemies, beyond the targets originally designated by the sponsor.

As before, I expect that fighting between the proxy agent and the sponsor-designated target will cause a reduction in this intercommunal violence. As resources are directed towards their sponsor-intended use, fewer resources are left over to fuel conflicts with other nonstate groups:

H2: Fighting with the sponsor’s intended target will have a dampening effect on intercommunal violence as resources are diverted from fighting other rivals.

Since sponsor resources will attenuate and disperse as they move across space, areas closer to the point of arrival for resources will tend to experience more of this intercommunal violence:

H3: Intercommunal violence enabled by sponsor resources will be more prevalent closer to the geographic center of resource distribution. This effect will attenuate with distance from this center.

How specifically did US sponsorship of the SDF affect the overall Syrian battlefield, and how did it shift SDF targeting decisions? Were Turkey's fears of heightened intercommunal violence from US sponsorship of the SDF realized? To answer this I turn to the analysis of event data in the Syrian civil war.

Empirical Testing – Increase in Incidents of Intercommunal Violence

Following Sponsorship

Georeferenced event data will again be the first point of analysis here. As in the previous chapter on the FSA, I rely on both the UCDP Georeferenced Event Dataset (GED v. 21.1) (Pettersson et al. 2021; Sundberg and Melander 2013) and the Armed Conflict Location and Event Database (ACLED) (Raleigh et al. 2010). The GED offers coverage of a longer period of time, while ACLED records more events from 2017 to the present and allows more precise identification of individual actors, like the SDF or YPG. I therefore employ event data from GED to test the effect of US sponsorship of the SDF on the Syrian conflict in general. I then shift to ACLED for a more in-depth analysis of the

period beginning in 2017, when the US redirected resources from the FSA to the SDF. Taken together, these two approaches paint a richer picture of the SDF's battlefield behavior in the Syrian conflict.

I proceed first with the general analysis. The dependent variable is *IIV Count*, a count of the number of incidents of intercommunal violence (IIV) occurring in each year. To count as intercommunal violence, an incident must be initiated by a nonstate militia and targeted at a nonstate militia. If state military forces, police, or civilians are the target or the initiator, an event is dropped from the data set. What remains is a list of incidents of intercommunal violence, fighting between nonstate militias.

The main explanatory variable in this case is US sponsorship, denoting years in which the Syria Train and Equip program was providing, money, training, and equipment to the SDF (or associated YPG). Two dates stand out as key moments in relationship between the US and the SDF. US officials first began to discuss arming local militias in Syria to fight back against IS advancement in 2014. However, as a spokesperson for the SDF itself noted, substantial support really only began in 2017, when resources were redirected from the defunct Operation Timber Sycamore to the SDF (Middle East Eye 2017; Jaffe and Entous 2017). Thus, I treat sponsorship as beginning in 2017 (*Sponsorship*). Per *H1*, I expect that the value of *IIV Count* will be significantly higher in years with sponsorship than in years without.

I control for the effect of IS on the Syrian conflict with the variable *IS Activity*. This variable counts the total number of incidents initiated by IS fighters each year. As discussed above in *H2*, fighting with the sponsor's intended target may have a dampening

effect on the amount of violence a proxy militia can initiate, so I expect this variable will have a negative impact on *IIV Count*.

I again control for the effect of fighting with the Syrian government with the variable *Government Activity*. This variable counts the total attacks initiated by Syrian government forces against nonstate militias each year. It is reasonable to assume that high levels of violence initiated by the government might bog down fighting between nonstate rivals. I expect that higher levels of *Government Activity* will result in lower levels of intercommunal violence among nonstate militias. Also as before, I control for the impact of the Russian intervention into Syria in 2015. The indicator *Russian Intervention* takes a value of 1 for years of Russian intervention in Syria (2015 to the present), 0 otherwise. The need to shift resources in order to survive the arrival of the Russian military may have a dampening effect on levels of fighting between nonstate militias, so I expect that *Russian Intervention* will negatively impact *IIV Count*.

I employ negative binomial regression to test the significance of government sponsorship for determining the number of incidents of intercommunal violence in Syria. The results are provided in Table 4 below.

Table 4: Negative Binomial Regression Results for Count of Incidents of Intercommunal Violence in Syria (Train and Equip Program), 2011-2020

	Estimate
Sponsorship	-0.0392* (0.071)
IS Activity	0.0015* (2.56e-05)
Government Activity	4.81 x 10 ⁻⁵ * (5.39x10 ⁻⁶)
Russian Intervention	1.17* (0.043)
(Intercept)	4.73 (0.071)

* p < 0.001 (Standard errors in parentheses.)

Interestingly, *Sponsorship* has a negative influence on levels of intercommunal violence. The period from 2017 to 2020 shows significantly lower levels of intercommunal violence events per year. *H1* thus receives no support in this case. This is

an unexpected result, and goes against previous findings with the FSA and Somali warlords where US sponsorship resulted in *more* intercommunal violence. Such a finding suggests that the case of US sponsorship of the SDF contains an important difference, which will be illuminated through further analysis below.

In the meantime, I note that *IS Activity* has a significant, though substantively small, positive effect. *Government Activity* also has an unexpected positive effect on intercommunal violence, though it is a small effect. Lastly, *Russian Intervention* has a large positive and significant impact on levels of intercommunal violence. Years after the Russian intervention began in Syria experienced an average of about 448 more incidents of militia-on-militia violence than before. This could reflect a scramble to survive as rebel groups compete over scarce resources in the face of territorial losses.

At the aggregate level, then, event data from GED suggests that US sponsorship of the SDF through the Syria Train and Equip program had an unexpected negative impact on levels of intercommunal violence in Syria. Of course, given the results of the previous chapter, this finding is due in part to the cessation of sponsorship for the unruly FSA in 2017. The closure of Operation Timber Sycamore was associated with a significant reduction in levels of militia-on-militia fighting in Syria after 2017. This coincides with the date for enhanced sponsorship of the SDF, which was receiving supplies redirected from the FSA. It is notable, however, that levels of intercommunal violence continued to decrease year after year from 2017 (as can be seen in Figure 4 from Chapter 4). Such a result suggests that sponsorship in the SDF case did not result in resource-enabled intercommunal fighting, yet further analysis is required.

Event data from ACLED covering 2017 through 2021 provide a richer understanding of how sponsorship affected the behavior of the SDF. I organize the event data by identifying targets and counting incidents per year. Events initiated by groups other than the SDF or YPG (the leading Kurdish force within the SDF) are dropped. I also drop incidents of attacks on civilians by the SDF under certain circumstances. There is a pattern of complaints of violence against civilians in territory held by the SDF, yet these may be the result of some politicization. Naturally, the SDF must act as the police force in territories it holds in Syria (territories which would lack oversight from anyone but jihadists in the SDF's absence). Indeed, the US publicly signed off on the notion that the SDF would police the areas it liberated from IS. US General Anderson, mentioned above in discussion of the growing extent of US support for the SDF in 2017, anticipated SDF leadership in local policing in places like Raqqa:

“But this is a great idea that the SDF has come up with, and we’ll assist them in the training and preparation work for what’s known as the RISF, or the Raqqa Internal Security Force.” (Wilgenburg 2017)

A closer inspection of events counted as violence against civilians by the SDF reveals they are actually reporting legitimate security operations in liberated territories. I drop any such events from the analysis. Figure 11 below presents all remaining violent events initiated by the SDF in Syria, broken down by year and target.

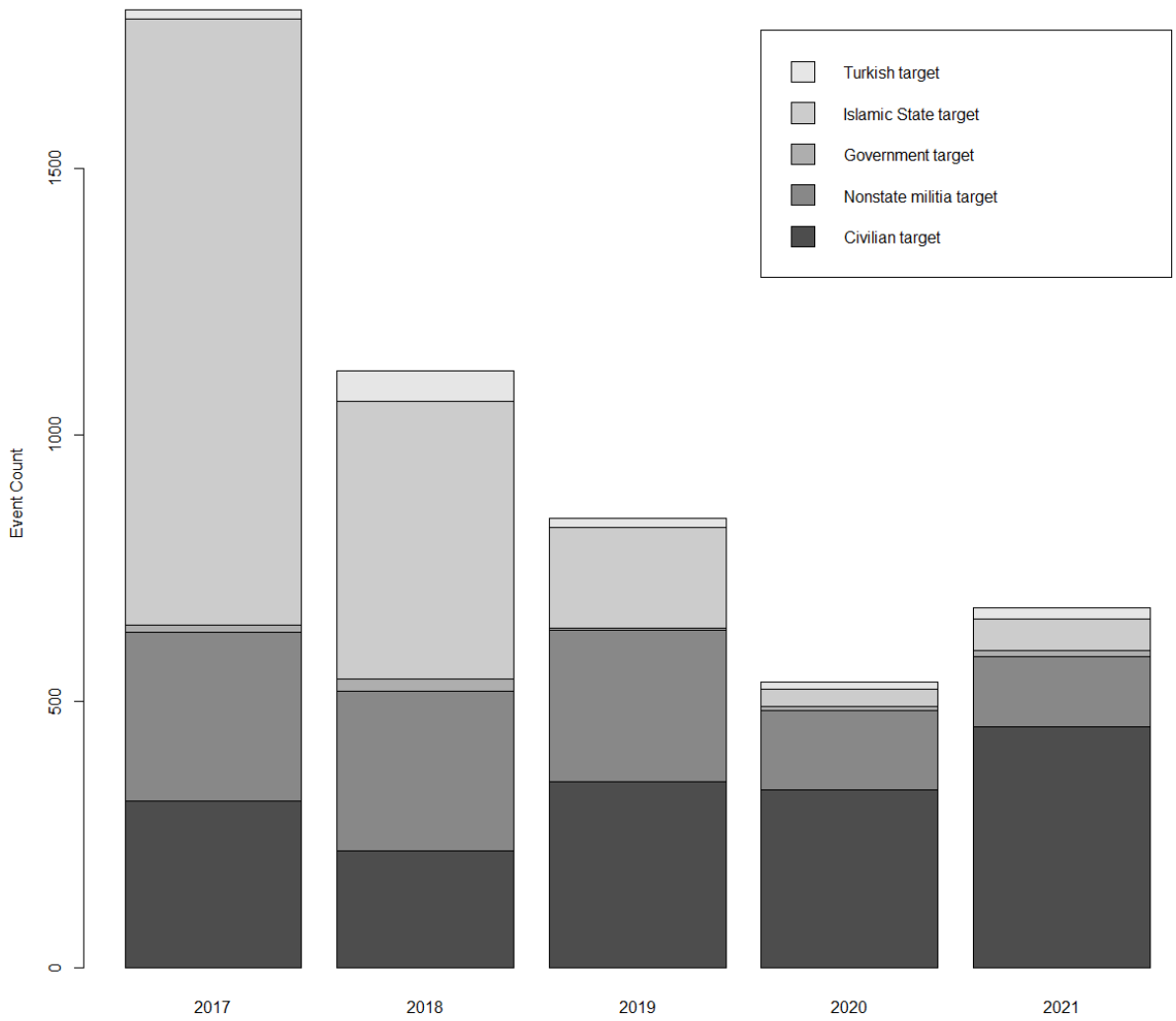


Figure 11: Yearly Incidents of Violence Initiated by Syrian Democratic Forces, 2017-2021

In 2017, the resources that had fueled Operation Timber Sycamore were re-routed to the SDF following the former operation’s shuttering. What had previously been a benign relationship with the Kurdish-led force against Islamic State was now kicked into high gear. The year 2017 itself saw the SDF spending by far the majority of its time fighting the Islamic State. The attacks against IS by SDF drop off steeply after 2017

(from 1,137 in 2017 to 531 in 2018) before petering out further. It must be carefully noted here that this reduction in attacks against IS after 2017 reflects the *success* of the SDF in stamping the extremists out, rather than reflecting a shift in the SDF's attention towards other targets. Indeed, the relative number of attacks initiated by the SDF against government, civilian, and other nonstate militia targets is remarkably stable across the entire period of event reporting (2017-2021). News reports and public statements by US officials also make it clear that the SDF really was successful in their goal of pushing IS out of Syria, with the last major stronghold falling in 2019 (*BBC* 2019).

This finding suggests that funding from the US sponsor did not in this case result in major changes to the proxy group's behavior. Numbers of attacks initiated by the SDF against other nonstate militias hover around 300 per year for 2017 through 2019, before falling to less than half of that in 2020 and 2021. Thus, neither the influx of a wealth of sponsor resources nor fighting with the sponsor's intended target seem to have changed the behavior of the SDF, so neither *H1* nor *H2* are supported in this case.

The SDF does not seem to have taken advantage of sponsor resource surpluses to initiate attacks against personal enemies, despite ongoing tensions with Turkey and Erdogan's own publicly stated fears that the SDF would do just that (Wilgenburg 2016; Burns and Baldor 2017). There is a short-lived spike in attacks on Turkey in 2018 (up to 58 from 17 in the previous year), yet further geospatial investigation shows that *none* of these attacks on Turkish forces occurred in the vicinity of Raqqa or Baghuz. These cities were where the US had specifically sanctioned the SDF to operate and had enacted safeguards to ensure that US weapons and equipment were only used against IS and only in that vicinity (Burns and Baldor 2017).

Geospatial analysis of the event data reveals the degree to which the SDF stuck to its sponsor's desires. Figures 12-22 present a map of Syria divided into hexagonal cells 50 kilometers across, with incidents of a particular type of violence occurring in a given year counted for each cell (data are again drawn from ACLED). First, Figure 12 shows the geographic distribution of attacks on Turkey's armed forces by the SDF from 2017-2021.

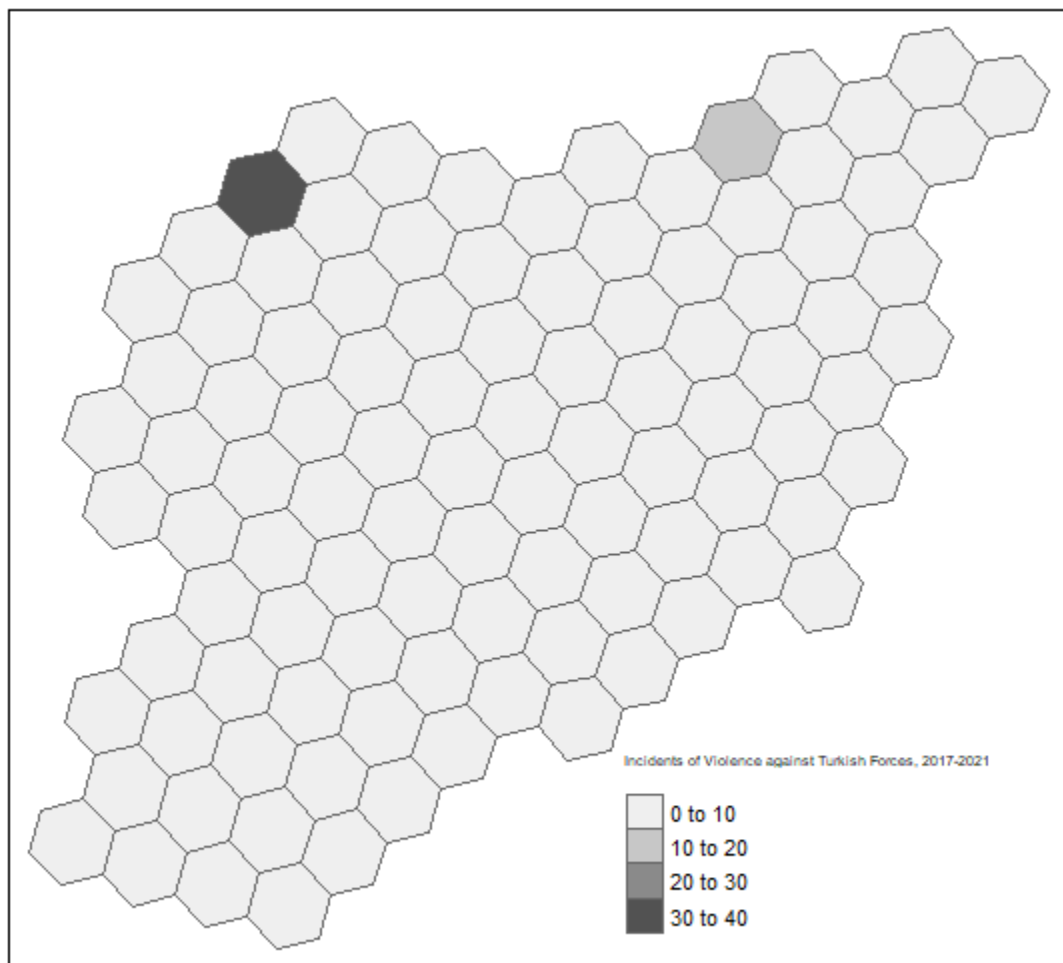


Figure 12: Attacks on Turkish Forces by the SDF, Syria (2017-2021)

As noted above, the data do indeed show that the SDF engaged in violence as part of its ongoing conflict with Turkey during the period of US sponsorship. However, except for a short-lived blip in 2018 which was quickly corrected by 2019, the SDF does not appear to change its behavior towards Turkey as a result of US resource inflows. It must also be stressed that none of the attacks initiated by the SDF against Turkey happen near Raqqa or Baghuz, where the US had intended its sponsored proxy to use resources to fight IS against protests from Turkey.

And fight IS they did. Figures 13-17 show the geographic distribution of attacks initiated by the SDF on IS for each year from 2017 through 2021.

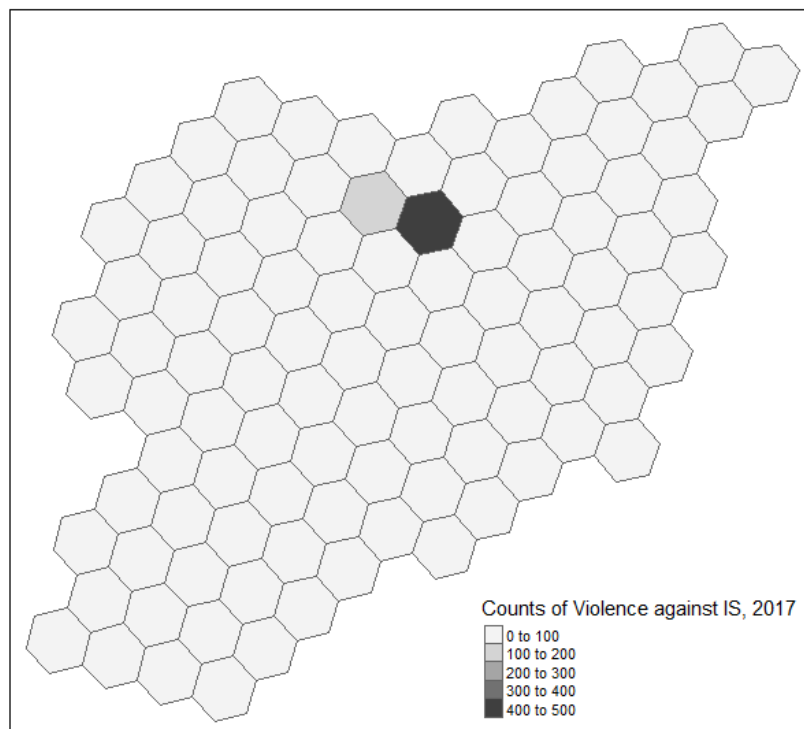


Figure 13: Attacks on Islamic State by the SDF, Syria (2017)

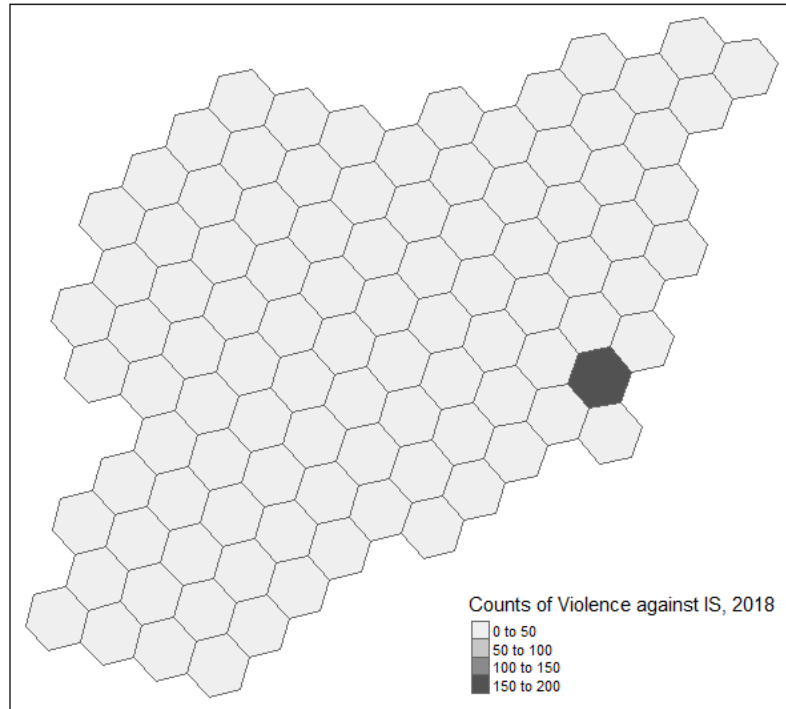


Figure 14: Attacks on Islamic State by the SDF, Syria (2018)

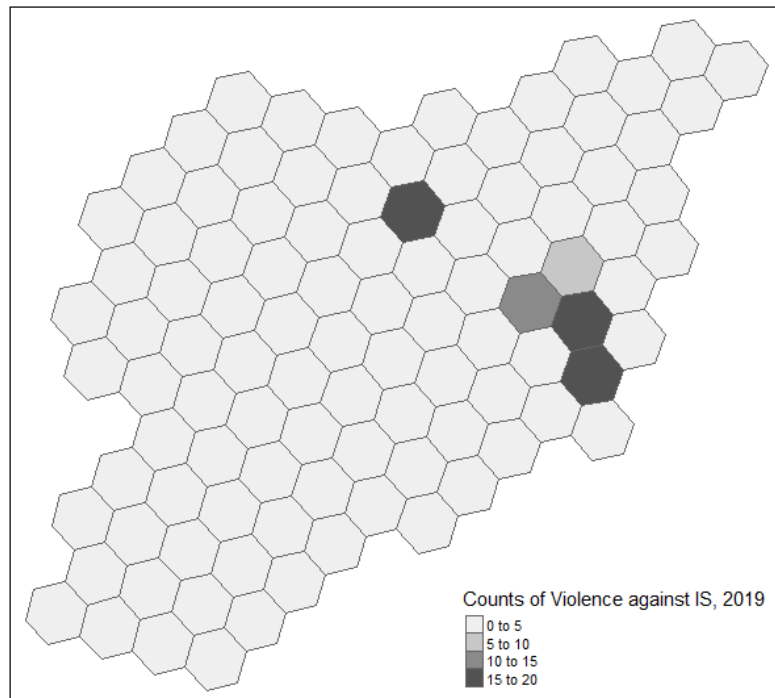


Figure 15: Attacks on Islamic State by the SDF, Syria (2019)

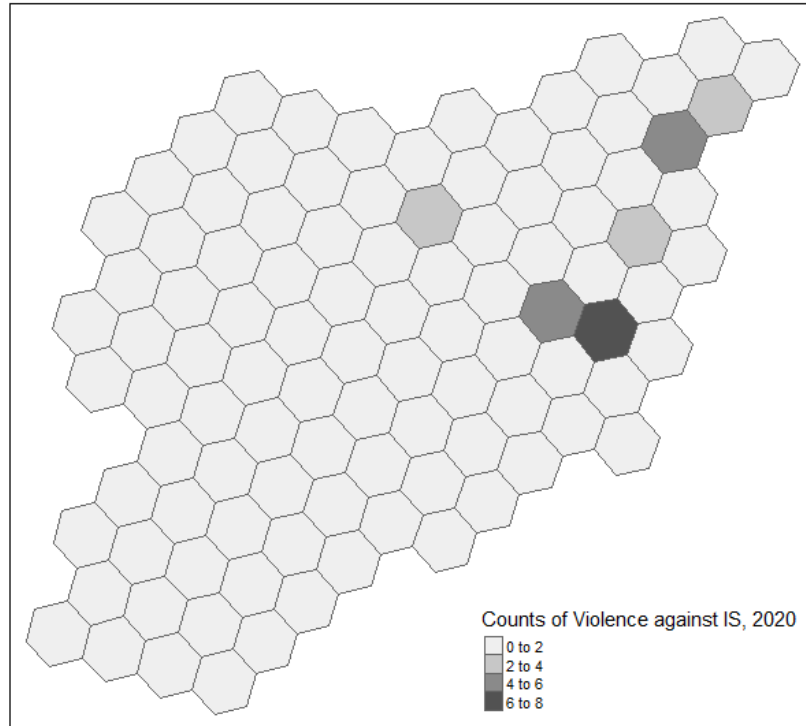


Figure 16: Attacks on Islamic State by the SDF, Syria (2020)

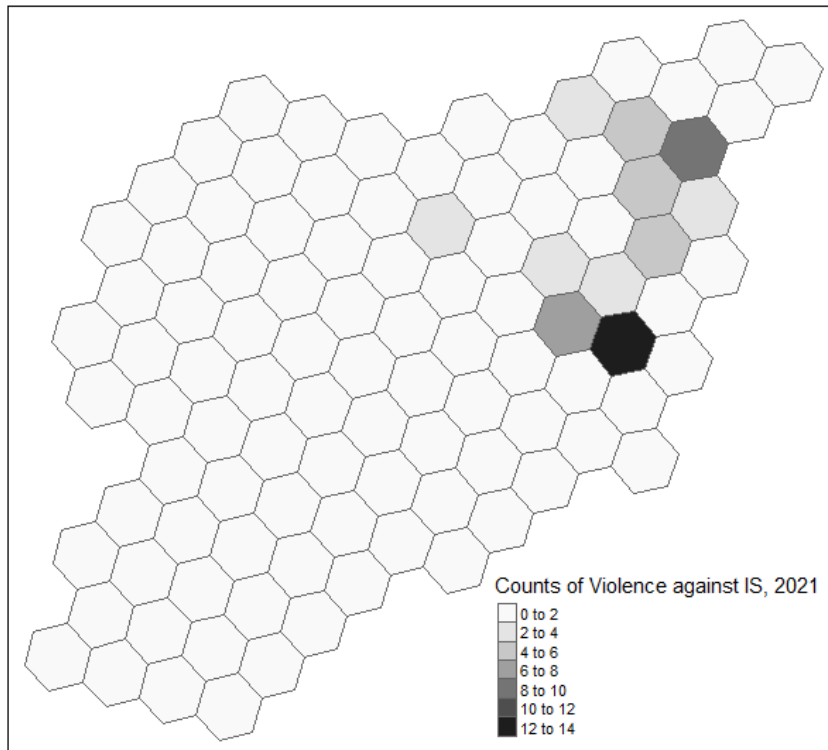


Figure 17: Attacks on Islamic State by the SDF, Syria (2021)

The picture Figures 13-17 present is one of agent obedience on the part of the SDF. After the 2016 authorization for the SDF to use US-provided weapons, ammunition, vehicles, and other equipment against IS in Raqqa, Raqqa becomes the center of attacks on IS. This persists through 2018, when attacks on IS by the SDF also spread towards Baghuz to the southeast along the Iraqi border. In 2020 and 2021 the SDF initiates some attacks against IS towards the northeast corridor of Syria as the broken IS units flee, though the most fighting is concentrated near the last IS stronghold Baghuz (see *BBC* 2019).

So the SDF fought IS as its sponsor intended, but did increases in intercommunal violence against other nonstate militias follow in the SDF's wake? Figures 18-22 suggest an answer by showing the geographic distribution of attacks initiated by the SDF against other nonstate militias (excluding IS).

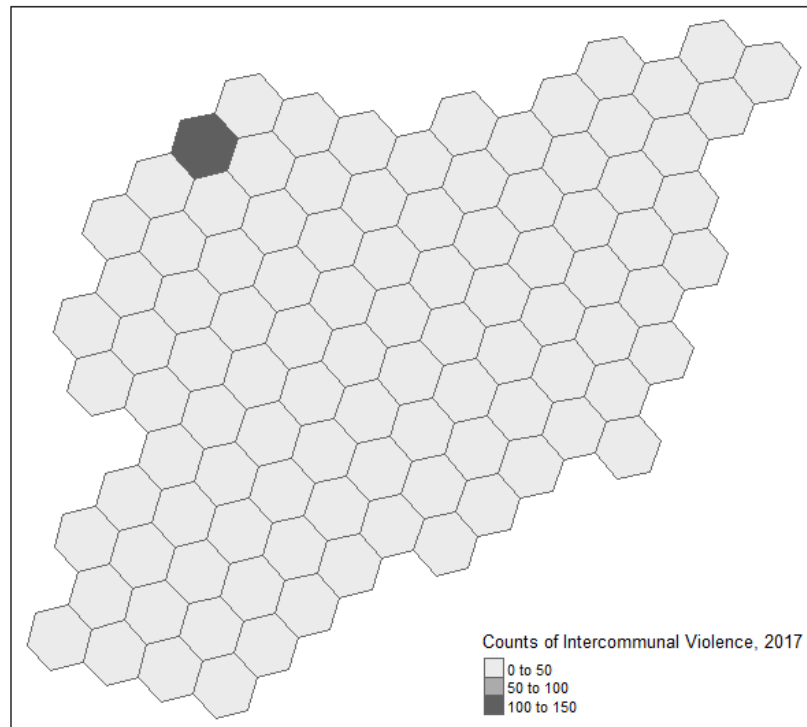


Figure 18: Incidents of Intercommunal Violence by the SDF, Syria (2017)

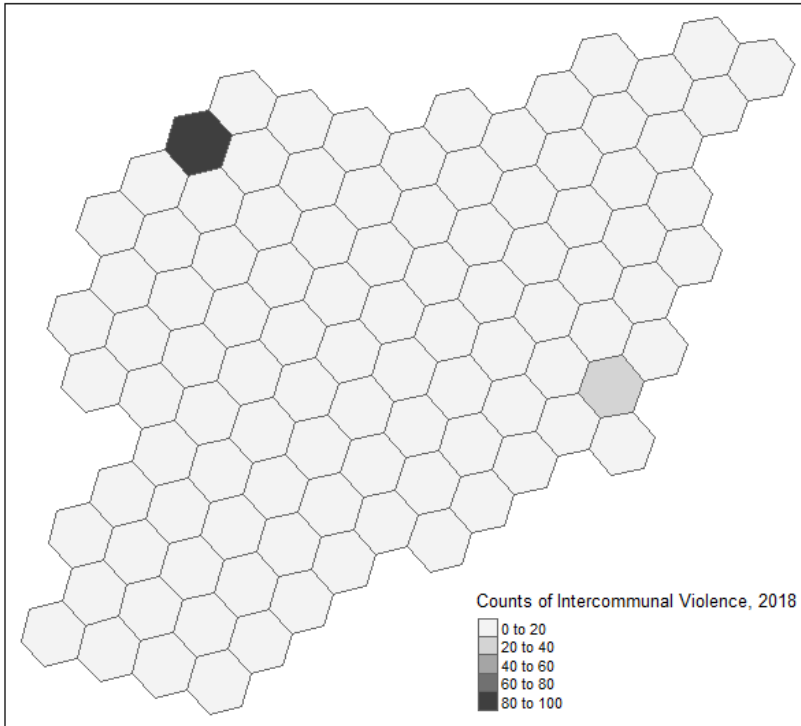


Figure 19: Incidents of Intercommunal Violence by the SDF, Syria (2018)

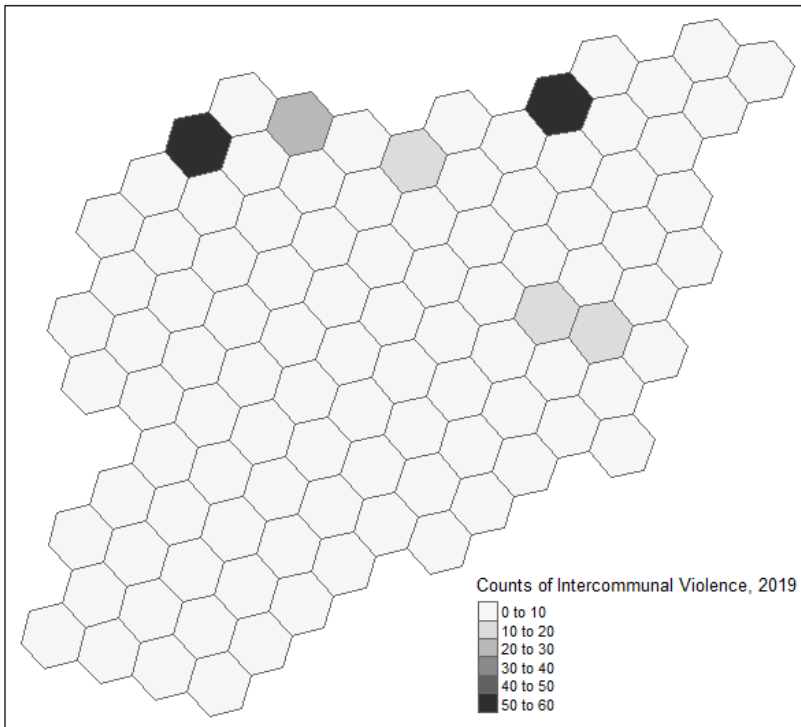


Figure 20: Incidents of Intercommunal Violence by the SDF, Syria (2019)

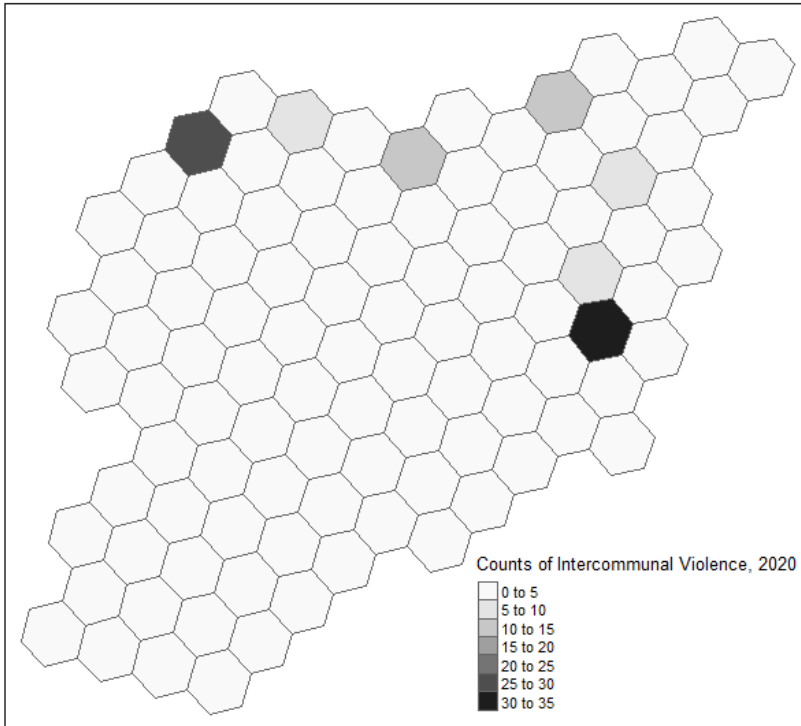


Figure 21: Incidents of Intercommunal Violence by the SDF, Syria (2020)

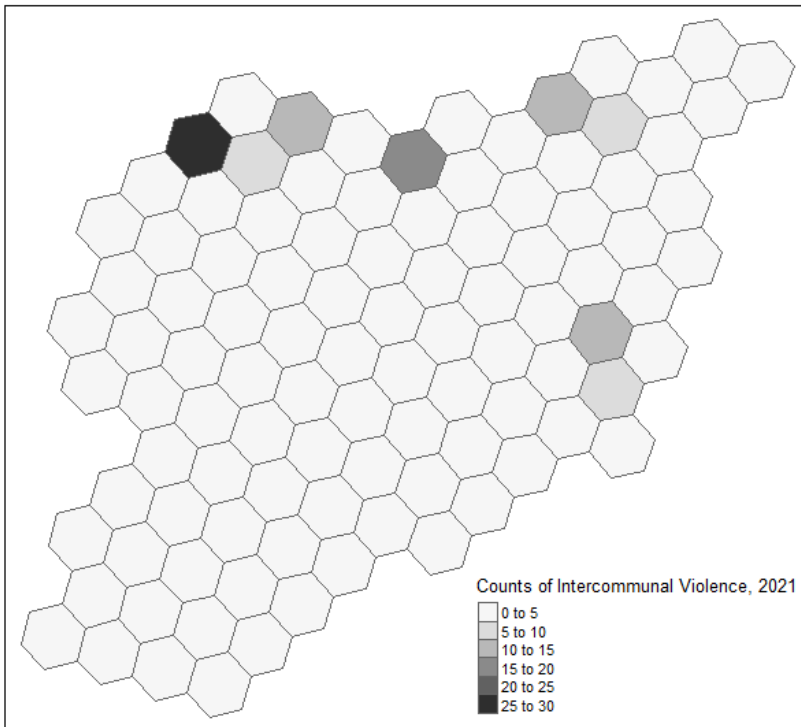


Figure 22: Incidents of Intercommunal Violence by the SDF, Syria (2021)

There does indeed appear to be sporadic fighting with other nonstate militias along the Turkish border throughout the period of 2017-2021. Additionally, the period beginning in 2018 and 2019 shows cases of such intercommunal violence in the vicinity of Raqqa and Baghuz, where news reporting and US officials have confirmed the SDF had the US's blessing to operate against IS (and only IS).

However, referring back to Figure 11, it must be stressed that the total number of yearly attacks on other nonstate militia by the SDF actually *decreased* from year to year during the period of sponsorship. Fighting with other nonstate militias necessarily occurred in the same locations as where the SDF was operating, but this most likely represents the base level of intercommunal violence in which the group tended to engage. Sponsorship from the US occurred in tandem with a decrease in these levels, from around 300 initiated attacks per year for 2017-2019, down to half that in 2020 and beyond. At no point during the sponsored period between 2017 and 2021 did the SDF exhibit a year-on-year increase in their yearly counts of attacks on other nonstate groups.

While the intercommunal fighting exhibited by the SDF is not ideal, the year-on-year reduction in levels of this violence strongly point to US sponsorship as having a dampening effect on the SDF's behavior. As noted above, the US was aware of the possibility of intercommunal violence from the SDF (or at least fears of it from Turkey) and took concrete steps to address this possibility. Since no *increase* in intercommunal violence occurred, it seems that the US's measures worked as intended. One may criticize the US for choosing to work with a militia that has a record of intercommunal violence, but there is no indication here that the relationship with the US caused anything but a decrease in such violence.

This is a heartening finding, given that US sponsorship successfully aided the SDF in stamping out a particular branch of extremism in Syria and all without causing an increase in intercommunal violence. Yet this finding presents a puzzle: In the cases of sponsorship for Somali warlords and Syria's FSA, US sponsorship was linked to a significant increase in intercommunal violence as the influx of resources enabled greater levels of violence. Why did US sponsorship of the SDF not also result in increases in intercommunal violence?

Answering this requires qualitative analysis of the case, particularly as pertains to interest alignments between the US and SDF as principal and agent. Interestingly, this case also highlights an unexpected yet important factor in determining agent behaviors: the level of professionalization of the nonstate militia organization. Coherent organizations with more complex and robust organizational structures may be more responsive to feedback and anticipated consequences from the principal. Such professionally structured organizations may also be more likely to keep all of their members in line with principal desires, since their sophisticated hierarchies command greater internal cohesion and unity of action than less organized groups.

A highly structured para-military organization like the SDF may thus be much less likely to shirk, either outright or in the Feaverian sense, than a more loosely organized group like the FSA. This suggests an important point for policymakers: More professional and organized groups make better and more obedient proxies. Groups lacking in cohesion and organizational structure may be more inclined to shirk, redirecting sponsor resources to suit their own personal interests with disastrous local consequences. I now turn to explore this through the qualitative analysis of the case.

A Principal-Agent Approach to Understanding the Outcomes of the Syria Train and Equip Program

While analysis of event data paints a picture of the SDF's behavior on the Syrian battlefield, qualitative analysis can provide explanations for why this outcome occurred and suggests how principals might select the best agents and what can be done to keep them in line. Overall, the case of the Syria Train and Equip program is a case of agent obedience. The US sponsored the Kurdish-led SDF for the specific goal of eradicating the IS presence in Syria. The SDF accomplished this goal, and managed to do so without engaging in significantly increased levels of intercommunal violence. This makes the SDF unique among the three cases of sponsorship reviewed in this project. The other two cases of Somali warlords and the FSA showed that sponsorship was associated with increases in intercommunal violence, unwanted by the principal. Only with the SDF did US sponsorship result in recorded decreases in intercommunal violence over time. In the case of FSA, these decreases only occurred after sponsorship ceased. Thus, the SDF was the only proxy militia to successfully defeat the sponsor's target without bringing negative externalities of resource-enabled intercommunal violence to their region.

What explains the success of the US-SDF relationship in Syria? I argue that US sponsorship did not result in increases in intercommunal violence in the SDF case because the US made use of its toolkit for eliciting agent compliance: contracting that explicitly states the principal's values and interests, monitoring of agent performance, and an enforcement mechanism. The US was able to use punishment (canceling support) in the case of the FSA to rein in out-of-control intercommunal violence. Yet in the SDF

case, proper use of the toolkit of the principal from the very beginning of the principal-agent relationship resulted in a more controlled outcome.

As before, I proceed by highlighting and analyzing three key points in the principal-agent relationship between the US sponsor and the SDF as proxy. The first key point is the drawing up of a contract between the principal and agent to ensure interest alignment between the parties. From the outset, the principal can choose the most interest-aligned agents and then explicitly state their own interests and expectations publicly, creating an expectation that deviation from these expectations will result in the cancelation of the contract or some other punishment. I have referred to such deviations from the principal desires as shirking, allowing for the possibility that an agent might technically fulfill the duties assigned them by the principal but in a way that benefits themselves at the cost of the principal (Feaverian shirking). The theory presented in this project holds that agents will be tempted to shirk in their duties by using sponsor-provided resources to attack their own personal enemies, outside the wishes of their sponsor and at potentially great cost to the sponsor's reputation and to the people living in the conflict zone.

An agent sharing many interests and goals with the principal, however, is less likely to shirk in this manner. If shirking does occur at some midpoint in the relationship, then the principal has the opportunity to rein in its agent through the use of monitoring and punishment. If agent performance is monitored and shirking is detected, the principal can punish the agent to draw their behavior back into line or can simply terminate the contract. Thus, corrective actions taken by the principal will likely lead to less shirking in

the form of intercommunal violence from the agent at the end point of the relationship. I restate the hypotheses suggested by this logic:

Hypothesis 1a: When principal and agent interests are closely aligned there should be no shirking observed, either in the interim or in the long term.

Hypothesis 1b: When principal and agent interests are not aligned, shirking is more likely to be observed at the interim point.

Hypothesis 2a: If principal and agent interests are not aligned but principal makes use of a contract-monitoring-punishment regime, there should be no shirking (or intermediate shirking should be corrected in the long-term).

*Hypothesis 2b: If principal and agent interests are not aligned and principal **does not** make use of a contract-monitoring-punishment regime, agent shirking will result (intermediate shirking may occur and go uncorrected, leading to long-term shirking as well).*

To test these hypotheses, I first analyze whether principal and agent interests were aligned at the start of the relationship between the US government and the SDF, tracing the relationship back to initial public statements made by US officials. I then determine whether the US principal made any use of a contract to bring agent interests more closely into alignment with the sponsor, paying special attention to enforcement mechanisms

noted in this contractual relationship. Following this I determine whether the US was actively monitoring the behavior of the SDF and whether shirking was punished if and when detected.

Finally, I identify the long-term result of this sponsor-proxy relationship, noting whether principal goals were met and whether increases in intercommunal violence were present at the endpoint. This analysis highlights how specific, publicly stated enforcement mechanisms may effectively circumscribe agent behavior. Interestingly, this case also suggests an unexpected finding: The level of professionalism of the agent's militia organization may have an interactive effect, ensuring that cues from the principal are communicated and obeyed throughout the organization.

Interest Alignment and Contract Design

What were the specific interests of both the principal and the agent in the case of the Syria Train and Equip program? From the very beginning of the program, the explicit goal of the US was to bolster local forces as part of a larger strategy to eradicate IS. Along with an air campaign and special forces personnel on the ground, the US saw the training and sponsorship of local Syrian forces as a “critical and complex part” of the fight against IS, as Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter stated in 2015 (Miklaszewski and Kube 2015). While Assad's oppressive and murderous regime presented problems of its own, the destabilizing nature of extremism and the US's prior goals in the Global War on Terror made the presence of IS in Syria and Iraq intolerable for the US. Thus, eradication of IS was as a unique US goal apart from the toppling of the Assad regime.

The SDF, and the Kurds in general, shared the US's goal of eradication of IS. For them, however, it was a matter of survival. The Kurds have always held outsider status in the Middle East: While having a significant presence in Turkey, Syria, and Iraq, they have full legal recognition only in Iraq, thanks to the US intervention against Saddam Hussein's government. They have carved out a home for themselves where they maintain *de facto* control in Iraq, and have established a for-now-independent quasi-state on the Syrian side of the Turkish border. In Turkey itself, the Kurds face discriminatory laws against their right to the use of their own language and their participation in Turkish civil life. (Robins-Early 2014)

The Kurds' plight is complicated by the presence of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey. The PKK is a militant group using terrorist violence to agitate for an end to the oppression of Kurds in Turkey. The US is officially opposed to the PKK, and supports Turkey in efforts to suppress the insurgent group in Turkey (Almukhtar and Wallace 2015).

While the SDF and PKK are different organizations, their shared Kurdish heritage is enough to raise suspicions in the region, particularly in the Turkish government. This fact has not been lost on the US, which took pains to assuage President Erdogan's fears when sponsorship of the SDF began in earnest in 2017. The result was a strong public contract established between the US as principal and the SDF as agent, with clear expectations of behavior and a specific mechanism for monitoring and enforcement.

When the Trump administration announced in 2017 that it was going to intensify its provision of equipment and other resources to Syria's Kurds in order to recapture territory from IS, it took great pains to outline measures it was taking to ensure that its

resources would not end up fueling a fight between the SDF and Turkey. The Pentagon's chief spokeswoman Dana White provided an official written statement in May 2017 stating the US's intention to "equip Kurdish elements of the Syrian Democratic Forces [SDF] as necessary to ensure a clear victory over ISIS" (Burns and Baldor 2017).

Yet the US also sought to ensure Turkey that it was keeping its agent on a tight leash. White made explicit that the US did not envision any long-term presence by the SDF in Raqqa; their participation was meant to help liberate, not possess, the city. Not only would there be temporal limitations on the SDF, but the use of US equipment and other resources would be limited to the specific mission of fighting IS and limited geographically to areas approved by the US. Other US officials specified to the press that the distribution of weaponry and equipment would be restricted and that the SDF would be required to return them to the US once the mission was accomplished. According to White, the equipment provided to the SDF by the US would be "limited, mission specific and metered out incrementally as objectives are reached" (Burns and Baldor 2017).

I argue that these public statements from the Pentagon amount to a clear contract established between the US (as principal) and the SDF (as agent). The contract highlighted the shared goal of the US and SDF to eradicate the IS presence in Syria. To prevent shirking, the contract also established a mechanism for enforcement and monitoring: Weapons, equipment, and resources provided to the SDF would be doled out only as necessary for the mission at hand, and would be expected to be returned upon mission completion. Requiring materiel to be received from the sponsor in a specific place and time and only for a specific use sets up a number of points at which the

principal and agent must come into contact, ensuring active monitoring of the agent's performance.

Provision of resources on an as-needed basis and only for the mission at hand directly addresses one of the core features of this project's central theory. The US shows a clear recognition here that sponsor resources could potentially lead to increases in unwanted fighting by the agent. By restricting the provision of resources to a particular time, place, and use (and tying their hands by stating all this publicly), the US established a clear contract and enforcement mechanism with their agent, the SDF.

Intermediate Outcomes and Monitoring

The record of the SDF's performance in Syria against IS speaks to the effectiveness of this particular principal-agent relationship. Figure 11 above details how levels of intercommunal violence fell each year that the US provided intensive sponsorship to the SDF. The SDF seems to have even exhibited restraint against Turkey: The increase in attacks on Turkish forces by the SDF in 2018 is short-lived, falling back to previous levels and starting a decline in 2019. It must be stressed also that none of these attacks on Turkish forces occurred in the vicinity of cities which the SDF had the US's blessing to operate in, suggesting that these attacks may not be linked directly to sponsor resources.

Recall from the theory that increases in intercommunal violence will most likely be felt in areas closer to the point of resource provision. While the data do not currently indicate where the US delivered resources to the SDF (or if a central point of contact existed), it may be assumed that these resources certainly made their way to Raqqa, at least. This can be inferred from the US's statement that resources would be provided as

needed and only for use in a specific area. Since no significant increases to intercommunal violence occurred in these areas, it is unlikely that sponsorship was linked to unwanted violence in this case, a positive outcome for the US.

Enforcement and Long-Term Outcomes

Such a positive outcome in light of the monitoring and enforcement mechanisms outlined above suggests that the principal-agent relationship worked as intended in the case of the SDF. In 2021, the last full year for which data are available, the SDF initiated its lowest number of attacks on other nonstate militias, the result of a steady decline each year from 2017. At the same time, there is clear indication that the SDF were successful in their sponsor's mission to eradicate IS. The last IS stronghold of Baghuz fell to the SDF in 2019, a victory celebrated by the Trump administration as a positive result for the ongoing sponsorship of the SDF (*BBC* 2019). I maintain that the cause of this outcome can be traced through the US principal's explicit outlining of a contract to ensure interest alignment with their agent and a mechanism of monitoring and enforcement through as-needed provision of resources to the SDF and requirements for their return.

Clear statements of interest alignment were notably absent in the cases of Somali warlords and the FSA, where the US had been aware of stark incompatibilities from the early stages of the relationship. In the Somali case, there was also a clear reluctance on the part of the US to punish their agent for misusing resources to engage in fighting with their rivals, with increases in intercommunal violence as a result. With the FSA, the US finally made the decision to cut off sponsorship for their agent when shirking in the form of intercommunal fighting became too severe to ignore any longer. In that case, the

cessation of sponsorship was closely associated with a sharp reduction in agent capability and levels of intercommunal violence.

Yet the SDF stands out as unique. Unlike in the case of Somali warlords or the FSA, there was no need for punishment of the SDF at any point. The US was clearly aware of the possibility of increases in intercommunal violence out of the SDF, particularly directed at Turkey, yet never felt the need to punish any infractions. Indeed, from the analysis above, it seems that no infractions were recorded. A US general working with the SDF in 2017 spoke effusively of their compliance with the requirement to only use sponsor resources for approved missions and to return them afterward:

“We understand the follow-on requirements. And I know that the SDF is aware of those requirements. And we’ll continue to work that. This is a trusted partner force and it’s trusted for a reason. They’ve done exactly—every single time, they’ve done exactly what they said they would do.” (Brigadier General Dave Anderson, quoted in Wilgenburg 2017)

Why was the SDF such an effective and obedient agent for the US? Certainly, the above analysis highlights what the US as principal did correctly to maximize its chances for the best outcome of agent obedience without shirking. Additionally, it could be said that the US exercised good judgement in choosing an obedient agent with a good track record. But what is it about the SDF as an agent that made them so desirable?

Upon further investigation into the case, it seems that the level of professionalism and organizational complexity of the SDF helped ensure that the principal’s desires were

understood and respected at every level of the force. Unlike the FSA, which is better characterized as a loose affiliation of guerrilla bands, the SDF is structured like a modern military. Though it is not affiliated with any internationally recognized state, the SDF looks and acts much like a state military. As one analyst of nonstate conflict has noted:

“The problem of unity is a particularly acute one for guerrilla forces. Technological powers, in possession of regular armed forces which boast long traditions of discipline and loyalty, rarely, if ever, experience open conflict within their military establishments; unity of command in wartime is no problem for them. But guerrilla movements, especially those in technologically less advanced societies, invariably are rent by factionalism.”

(O’Neill 2005)

The FSA with its lack of cohesive organization lapsed into just this sort of factionalism, engaging in acts of intercommunal violence or splintering off into extremist-supporting cells. On the other hand, the SDF, with a more organized military structure, seems to have been the picture of obedience and effectiveness.

Investigation into the structure of the SDF, and its Kurdish core the People’s Defense Units (YPG), reveals the nature of its military professionalism. An analyst profiling the YPG for *Jane’s Defence Weekly* described them as an “archetypal guerilla army” (Stephens 2014). Though not formally aligned with a recognized state, the YPG is backed by the Democratic Administration of Rojava, a *de facto* autonomous zone carved out by the Kurds in the northeast of Syria after the civil war broke out in 2011. The YPG is backed by a well-established underground Kurdish political apparatus stretching across

Turkey, Syria, and Iraq. Additionally, the *Jane's* report notes that YPG brigades are bound together under an overarching tactical rubric. While individual brigades have a high degree of autonomy while in the field, their tactics and targets are carefully circumscribed by central leadership.

This strong political core and Kurdish ethnic cohesion are both indications of a well-organized and unified nonstate militia. As O'Neill (2005) argues, for nonstate militias "a general headquarters that exercises authoritative control over policy, discipline, ethics, and ideology is indispensable" (p. 123). Without this central leadership and a highly structured organization to communicate and enforce the leadership's will, fighters can become directionless and splinter off into hostile factions. O'Neill points to movements with strong political cores, such as Communist insurgencies in Greece and Yugoslavia during World War 2 and the Viet Cong insurgency in the Vietnam War, as being the ones with the most operational success. While the Kurdish forces are not an insurgency *per se*, they do operate outside of the traditional realm of state militaries. The YPG/SDF can rely upon the shared plight of the Kurdish people to ensure a high level of cohesion, and an overarching political apparatus to provide central planning and leadership.

An agent like the SDF represents an important opportunity for principals. I have argued in this dissertation that sponsorship of nonstate militias can result in increases in intercommunal violence as sponsor resources fuel conflicts among rivals. This effect can be controlled or mitigated if the sponsor makes use of the toolkit of contracts, monitoring, and punishment/enforcement to ensure interest alignment and agent compliance with sponsor intentions. The case of the SDF highlights a key finding that the level of

cohesion and unity of the agent militia influences how likely the group is to comply with sponsor directives. In the case of the FSA, a loose affiliation of rebel bands made no secret of their intention to use sponsor resources and training to fight both the Syrian government as well as their own personal, unsanctioned enemies. Recorded increases in intercommunal violence were the result.

With the SDF, however, the US found a much more obedient and professional agent. The SDF/YPG's high levels of cohesion and central authority helped ensure that all units would obey the directives coming from the principal at the top. True, the US also made use of a system of enforcement that was notably absent in the FSA case, so it is difficult to say whether the contracting and enforcement mechanism or the cohesion and unity of the SDF had more of an impact on the outcome. Yet given the arguments of a number of analysts that cohesion and unity are centrally important factors for the success of nonstate militias, it is reasonable to suggest that the SDF's cohesion and unity acted to enhance the signals coming from the principal. The US clearly stated its goals and expectations as principal, and the SDF's unity of command ensured that these directives were carried out at every level, something the loosely organized FSA could never offer.

The FSA was fractious, and some might claim it should count as many different groups rather than one. Yet this highlights a larger point that *any* group could be considered just a collection of myriad subgroups or individuals. What matters is that groups deserving the name have reached some minimum level of cohesion and unity, typically reflected in their organizational hierarchy. Thus, we can surmise that more organized, cohesive militias like the SDF/YPG make for better agents, since the principal is essentially dealing with one monolithic entity instead of a plethora of smaller

competing interests. This finding will surely be of interest to policymakers, who, in addition to making use of contracts, monitoring, and enforcement mechanisms, are advised to seek out only the most cohesive and unified militias if proxies must be employed in a foreign intervention.

Chapter 6 – Conclusion

This dissertation set out to answer two primary questions: First, do the resources provided by government sponsors to nonstate militias for use in proxy conflicts lead to local increases in intercommunal violence? Second, what can sponsors do to prevent such increases in intercommunal violence?

In answer to these questions, I proposed a theory of resource-enabled intercommunal conflict. I argue that sponsors can dramatically increase the fighting capability of a nonstate militia such as a group of tribal fighters or a guerrilla force by providing them with resources necessary for fighting, such as weapons, ammunition, and funding. While these groups are likely to be obedient to the sponsor and fight their designated target in order to keep the relationship going (and ensure the continued flow of resources), they will be tempted to use the surplus of resources remaining to initiate attacks on their local rivals. Essentially, sponsor resources enable these groups to “go loud” with the conflicts that had only been simmering quietly before, due to a lack of resources for fighting. When sponsor resources start flowing in, attacks on rival militias will increase, even though the resources were earmarked for a different fight.

That said, sponsors are not without options for preventing this sort of behavior from their proxies. I argue that the sponsor-proxy relationship can be understood as a form of principal-agent relationship. The principal’s tools of agent selection, contract formation, monitoring, and enforcement or punishment can be employed to prevent increases in intercommunal violence from proxies.

This dissertation makes a unique contribution to the field of subnational conflict studies. Other work, like Althouse (2018) and Berman and Lake (2019), ask how state and nonstate agents may be drawn into general compliance with the principal. I go a step further by providing for the possibility that agents may technically perform the duties assigned to them by the principal, yet do so in a way that privileges their own interests at a cost to the principal. For militia agents, this would mean using sponsor-provided resources for conflicts with personal rivals that are not sponsor-approved. I have dubbed this opportunistic agent behavior Feaverian shirking, after the work of Feaver (2005) analyzing civil-military relations within the US. Thus, this dissertation uniquely seeks to find whether such shirking occurs at the intercommunal level in foreign sponsorships of nonstate militias and how this behavior might be curtailed by the principal.

To accomplish this goal empirically, I analyzed the three best recent US cases for which we have both good event data and good qualitative data. These are the cases of the US's Dual-Track Policy in Somalia (sponsoring Somali warlord militias), Operation Timber Sycamore in Syria (sponsoring the Free Syrian Army), and the Syria Train and Equip program (sponsoring the Syrian Democratic Forces). The data availability and quality vary from case to case, so a direct comparison between cases is not possible. Rather, my approach focuses on understanding what story the data tell in each case, thoroughly analyzing each case for what may be learned and then comparing results at a much more general level. The results of the analysis of event data are presented in Figure 23 below, while results of the qualitative exploration of each case are summed up in Figure 24 below.

Hypothesis	Case Outcome		
	Somali Warlords	Free Syrian Army	Syrian Democratic Forces
H1: General increase in intercommunal violence from sponsorship	✓	✓	✗
H2: Fighting with sponsor's target has dampening effect on intercommunal violence	✗	✗	✗
H3: Intercommunal violence increases will be greater nearer the point of resource delivery	✓	✓	✗

Figure 23: Summary of Results of Event Data Analysis

Case	Interest Alignment	Intermediate Outcome	Did principal make use of contract, monitoring, and punishment or enforcement tools?	Long-term Outcome
Somali Warlord Militias	Mixed (shared interest in eradication of Al-Shabaab, but warlords were also self-interested)	Sponsor target eradicated, but increases to intercommunal violence	Contract and monitoring, but no enforcement or punishment	Sustained increases in intercommunal violence and fighting over administrative control, threatening Somali federal government
Free Syrian Army	Mixed (shared interest of regime change in Syria, but FSA fighters also interested in ethnic and sectarian rivalries)	Significant attacks on sponsor target (Syrian government), but increases to intercommunal violence, especially extremism	Contract (or understanding) existed between principal and agent, sponsorship was cut in response to increases in violence	Levels of intercommunal violence drop sharply as FSA loses power after sponsorship ends
Syrian Democratic Forces	Mixed (shared interest of eradication of IS, but SDF also interested in promotion of Kurdish people)	Significant attacks on sponsor target (IS in Syria), no significant increases to intercommunal violence	Contract, monitoring, and enforcement mechanism (requirement to return equipment and only use in designated areas)	IS pushed out of Syria with significant help from SDF, no associated increases to intercommunal violence from SDF

Figure 24: Summary of Results of Qualitative Analysis

Evidence suggests that sponsor resources can indeed lead to local increases in intercommunal violence in the vicinity of the agent. However, the evidence also suggests that these increases in intercommunal violence can be stopped by cutting off the flow of resources to the agent (as in the case of the FSA). Additionally, the evidence suggests

that principals can take actions to prevent increases in intercommunal violence in the first place (as in the case of the SDF). Principals can achieve this by selecting agents most in line with their interests, enshrining a statement of these shared interests and expectations in a public contract, monitoring performance of the agent, and applying punishment or enforcement measures as necessary. When the principal made use of these tools (in the cases of the FSA and SDF), increases in intercommunal violence were reversed or prevented. When the principal did not make use of these tools and let the agent run amok (in the case of the Somali warlords and clan militias), increases in intercommunal violence appeared and persisted.

This seems to be especially true in the case of agents with a high level of cohesion and unity through a professional military organizational structure. Loosely organized agent militias with low levels of unity, like the FSA, prove to be difficult to control. On the other hand, more professionally organized militia forces like the Kurdish YPG and SDF appear to be more responsive to principal expectations.

The results presented here have significant relevance for policymakers. First, the findings here suggest that caution is warranted among policymakers when considering whether to use local nonstate militias as proxy forces in foreign interventions. By providing arms, equipment, and other resources to enable these groups to fight a designated target, sponsors may inadvertently end up providing them enough surplus resources to start attacking their personal rivals, leading to unsanctioned increases in regional intercommunal violence.

Given the high reputational and strategic costs this outcome could incur for the sponsor, policymakers are urged to consider how their actions as the principal in the

relationship with their proxy might affect outcomes. These cases present positive evidence that principals can increase the likelihood of agent compliance by selecting agents with the highest levels of interest overlap with the principal, drawing up a public contract outlining expectations of behavior, monitoring agent behavior, and providing some means of enforcement or punishment. Additionally, enforcement measures limiting the use of weapons and equipment to a particular designated combat zone can be effective at preventing increases to intercommunal violence from sponsorship. By fully leveraging their superior position in the principal-agent relationship, sponsors can prevent increases to intercommunal violence and help ensure that their actions do not unintentionally fan the flames of war higher.

This is a positive finding, yet more work remains to be done. While the cases here have been analyzed in some depth, there is a greater breadth of cases of foreign intervention and proxy sponsorship to be analyzed. Afghanistan, Libya, Yemen, and a host of other cases, both public knowledge and secret, could provide greater understanding of this phenomenon of resource-enabled intercommunal violence. Uneven data availability and quality make direct comparison of these cases, or a general analysis of the universe of cases, very difficult. Future work might profitably focus on developing a uniform method for analyzing cases to allow for direct comparison.

Future analysts might also take time to comb through currently available event data to determine whether current classifications are appropriate. As noted in Chapter 5 on the SDF, many events recorded as attacks on civilians are more accurately described as routine police actions taken by the area's acting security force. While care must be taken not to censor verified cases of attacks on civilians, uneven classification of events

could be obscuring the larger picture of militia behavior. I leave the untangling of the skein of event data to future scholars.

To sum up, resources matter. For small militias, access to resources can mean the difference between taking down one's rivals or laying low in fear. Governments that choose to sponsor such militias as proxy forces in foreign interventions risk enabling them to increase their level of violence against their neighbors, even if they are also successful at fighting the sponsor's designated target. Yet government sponsors also have a range of tools at their disposal that can rein in their proxies, if only they will put them to use.

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