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Proxy Wars and the Role of Intelligence Services in the Current Middle-East

Zástupné války a role zpravodajských služeb v současnosti na Středním východě

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Abstract

The paper deals with the concept of proxy wars in the region of the Middle-East and the role of intelligence services in it. In the current conflicts in Syria, Iraq and Yemen, many external actors and powers interfere using (not only) their intelligence services for the defence of their national interests in afflicted states, often even combating each other on a territory of a different state. The main goal of the paper is to introduce the concept of proxy war and analyse the role of intelligence services in the ongoing conflicts in the defined area.

Abstrakt

Tento text se zaměřuje na koncept tzv. zástupných válek v současnosti v oblasti Blízkého a Středního východu a na roli zpravodajských služeb v něm. Pro současné konflikty v Sýrii, Iráku a Jemenu je typické vměšování velkého množství vnějších aktérů, kteří k tomu často (ne výlučně) využívají své zpravodajské služby či speciální síly, aby tak chránily své národní zájmy na postiženém území, případně aby bojovaly proti sobě navzájem na cizím teritoriu. Hlavním cílem tohoto článku je představení konceptu zástupných válek a analýza role zpravodajských služeb v aktuálně probíhajících konfliktech ve vytyčeném regionu.

Keywords:

Syria; Yemen; Proxy War; Middle-East; Conflict; Intelligence; Civil War.

Klíčová slova:

Sýrie; Jemen; zástupné války; Střední východ; konflikt; zpravodajské služby; občanská válka.

INTRODUCTION

The topic of proxy wars is currently very hot in the Middle-East region, especially on the background of the conflicts in Syria and Yemen. The role of local powers interfering in those conflicts has become very important with direct impact on the conflict dynamics. One of the basic tools for a state to participate in a proxy war is an intelligence service doing covert or black operations, direct or indirect support of one side of the conflict, providing intelligence or consulting, etc. The main goal of this article and contribution is to define and introduce the development of the proxy war concept after the end of the Cold War and apply it to the current events in the Middle-East with special attention to civil wars in Syria and Yemen and the role of external intelligence services within these conflicts.¹

1 DEFINING THE PROXY WAR IN THE 21ST CENTURY

From a historical perspective, the golden era of proxy wars was during the Cold War period. It was defined as a confrontation between two powers through substitute actors to avoid a direct and armed confrontation. Logically, the most active powers during the Cold War were the United States and USSR. The direct confrontation between those two could have easily developed into a nuclear war, which both sides wanted to avoid. For such a purpose, mainly minor states were used, but in some cases also non-state actors served as proxies for superpowers. Also, the great powers tried to increase their sphere of influence as they competed with each other for allies by supporting proxies by means of arms supply, intelligence, training, and finance.² The interest of lesser powers was to alter the regional balance in their favour, but without offsetting the superpower balance and resulting in unwanted international attention. The Cold War era is also mirrored in the definition of proxy wars by Karl Deutsch characterizing it as an international conflict between two foreign powers, fought out on the soil of the third country.³ This definition is generally criticized as too “state-centric” for reflecting state actors only and ignoring non-state ones, which is understandable in the context of the Cold War era.

As Dandan⁴ argues, the use of proxies was a virtual war as a cheap alternative as the expenses on arms, finances and political standing were minimal in contrast to waging

¹ This paper was written under the project Optimization of Intelligence Activities and Intelligence Institutions in the Changing Environment (OPTIZ9070204510), funded by the Ministry of Defence of the Czech Republic as part of the “Development of the Armed Forces of the Czech Republic” (907 020) defence research program.

² SCHELLING, Thomas. 1966. *Arms and Influence*, Yale University Press.

³ DEUTSCH, Karl. 1964. External Involvement in Internal War, in Eckstein Harry (ed.). *Internal War, Problems and Approaches*. New York: NY Free Press of Glencoe.

⁴ DANDAN, Salem. *On Proxy War*. Department of Political Science University of Copenhagen. Available at: <http://dpsa.dk/papers/On%20Proxy%20War.pdf>

a full-scale war. According to his definition of proxy war, the most basic attribute refers to the employment of a third party to engage in war on one's behalf. Another basic assumption is that there is a patron-client relationship in play while both parties find the relation beneficial. Due to the involvement of external actors, it is difficult to classify this type of conflict from the traditional perspective. It is situated somewhere between inter-state and intra-state conflict and can be labelled as hybrid - an inter-state conflict fought through intra-state means.

One of the most popular and cited definitions of proxy warfare is by Andrew Mumford,⁵ who defines this phenomenon as the product of a relationship between a benefactor, who is a state or non-state actor external to the dynamic of an existing conflict, and the chosen proxies who are the conduit for the benefactor's weapons, training and funding. In short, proxy wars are the logical replacement for states seeking to further their own strategic goals, yet, at the same time, to avoid engaging in direct, costly and bloody warfare. Mumford also argues why proxy wars remain an important issue after the end of the Cold War. First, total warfare or conventional inter-state conflicts have been diminished, but superpowers still defend their national interests or ideological positioning. They use different methods for reaching a strategic advantage. Second, counter-insurgency lasts only as long as the deployment of troops. The willingness of citizens to join the ever-shrinking national armies voluntarily is declining and the costs of war are rising. So, low military-recruitment rates, public aversion to casualties and squeezed defence budgets forced states to change their strategy towards more indirect involvement in armed conflicts. Plus, the trend of privatization of goods and services helped establish PMCs and let them act as foreign policy proxies for governments, unable or unwilling to play a direct and open role. Mumford thinks PMCs are poised to become key proxy war-wagers in the future. They can minimize risk for states eager to protect their interests or ideology and to provide additional economic benefits to other participants. Still, there is a need for boots "on the ground" and proxies can do it for their patrons.

Not only the presence of PMCs and the change of attitude of superpowers are typical for the post-Cold War era, but also an increasing role of local actors. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union and withdrawal of the Russian influence in the third world, the power vacuum helped regional powers to increase their strength in their surroundings, usually by using cross-border militia. Another effect of the rise of regional powers is the growing complexity and numbers of external actors interfering into intrastate conflicts. While during the Cold War there were usually only two superpowers engaging in a local conflict, each supporting one party, in the 21st century, often not only global powers such as US, Russia, China or European states are involved, but also local states with their own limited national interests in their neighbourhood. Each actor or sponsor can provide support for a different insider - government, rebels, pro-government militias, terrorist organizations, insurgent groups, etc., and even alliances or coalitions can be created. The involvement in a conflict does not have to be indirect and distant only.

⁵ MUMFORD, Andrew. 2013. Proxy Warfare and the Future of Conflict, *The RUSI Journal*, 158:2, 40-46, DOI: 10.1080/03071847.2013.787733

According to Pfaff,⁶ even a direct action is compatible with a proxy relationship. That is why a direct action against the Libyan government forces by international alliance while at the same time providing rebel forces with weapons and funding are completely in line with the proxy war concept. Pfaff adds that the indirect nature of proxy war suggests two models of proxy relationships: 1) where the proxy fights the benefactor's war on benefactor's behalf, and 2) where the benefactor enables the proxy to fight to achieve some other goal that meets some other of their interests. Plus, the proxy relationship must be intentional, meaning the benefactor must intend to assist the proxy and the proxy must, in turn, intend to take advantage of this assistance. Dylan Craig points out that there is also a complicating factor related to the partnership between the weak and the strong when it is not always easy to identify "who is fighting as whose proxy".⁷

So, a wide scale of actors and their involvement can be found today, from direct Saudi participation in the conflict in Yemen as an influential regional power in competing (not only) another regional power Iran to complete the chaos in Syria with the interference of local actors, neighbouring states, regional powers and global superpowers.

2 CURRENT MIDDLE-EAST PROXY WARS BETWEEN SAUDI ARABIA AND IRAN

If we have a look at the events in the Middle-East during the second decade of the 21st century, there are examples which the concept of proxy wars can be applied to. The most important are the above-mentioned conflicts in Libya, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. The Libyan conflict is excluded from the scope of this article, and we stay focused on the interconnected conflicts in Iraq and Syria and the civil war in Yemen. It is impossible to separate the conflicts in Syria and Iraq one from the other, while Yemen, due to its geographic distance, can be considered as a special and autonomous conflict, even though both of these conflicts are affected by the same regional powers and proxy sponsors Iran and Saudi Arabia. The animosity between those two states comes from the regional political rivalry, religious and cultural differences. Saudi Arabia, as an important state with the Islamic role due to its control of the holy places of Mecca and Medina and with its radical version of Sunni Islam as a state religion (Wahhabism), aspires to exercise the leadership of the Sunni world. On the other side, there is Iran, the most powerful Shia state, with confidence over its political regime to be the best one for all Muslim states and duty to face oppressors such as the "despotic kingdom" of Saudi Arabia. Iran, isolated for decades with only a few true allies in the international relations, on one side and Saudi Arabia, the leading state of the Gulf Cooperation Council with its strong ties to the United States, on the other. The partnership between Iran and its old ally Syria creates an axis affecting the whole region with the influence in Lebanon (via the Shia or-

⁶ PFAFF, Anthony. 2017. Proxy War Ethics, in *Journal of National Security Law & Policy*, Vol. 9: 305.

⁷ For more, read CRAIG, Dylen. State Security Policy and Proxy Wars in Africa, in *Strategic Insights*, Vol. 9 (1) Spring/Summer 2010.

ganization Hezbollah) and even Palestine (via the Palestinian Islamic Jihad). The Iranian “export of the Islamic revolution” abroad during the 1980s, especially to the Persian Gulf states, caused a reaction of Sunni monarchies in the way of systematic effort to weaken the hostile Iranian regime.⁸

Over the past decade, the Saudis and Iranians have supported opposing political parties, funded opposing armies, and directly waged war against one another’s proxies in Lebanon, Bahrain, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. Driven by power politics and fuelled by Sunni or Shia sectarianism, the conflict between the two powers - often called the Middle East’s cold war - has become one of the most dangerous elements defining the Middle Eastern politics today. As the 2003 Iraq invasion and the uprisings of the Arab Spring have upended the status quos across the region, both Saudi Arabia and Iran have rushed to shape events to their benefit.⁹

3 CIVIL WAR IN SYRIA AND IRAQ

Historically, together with Qatar, Saudi Arabia has exercised effort to weaken the Iranian-Syrian axis. The two nations, for example, cooperated to suspend Syria’s membership in the Arab League and continue to provide financial and military support to various elements within the Syrian opposition.¹⁰ The Syrian civil war has brought new chances for Saudis to dismantle the so-called Shia crescent.¹¹ While Riyadh’s previous attempts at distancing Assad from the Iranian axis were unsuccessful, the rebellion against him gave the Saudis a new opportunity to attempt to weaken the Iranian influence in the area by his ouster. Then, Saudi Arabia alongside with the United Arab Emirates and Qatar have been aiding all rebel forces. In Syria, Saudi Arabia’s role has not been focused on providing material and financial assistance only, but also on offering to boost the status and capabilities of the political opposition to Assad, especially the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces. Such a Saudi intervention had to be more covert than overt; the Kingdom has been denying its direct involvement in Syrian civil war making its intelligence services to do the “dirty job”. Apart from the Saudi support of rebels and anti-Assad (anti-Iranian) forces, an important task of Saudi intelligence has been to engage the United States in the conflict somehow. Saudi Arabia has been calling for greater international pressure against Assad while encouraging the US to take a more active role. In February 2013, the Saudi Arabian intelligence presented the US

⁸ For more, read KRAUS, Josef. 2014. Íránský státní terorismus, Centrum pro studium demokracie a kultury.

⁹ BEAUCHAMP, Zack. 2015. Iran and Saudi Arabia’s cold war is making the Middle East even more dangerous, Vox.com, available at: <https://www.vox.com/2015/3/30/8314513/saudi-arabia-iran>

¹⁰ BERTI, Benedetta and Yoel, GUZANSKY. Saudi Arabia’s Foreign Policy on Iran and the Proxy War in Syria: Toward a New Chapter?, in *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, 8:3, 25-34, DOI: 10.1080/23739770.2014.11446600

¹¹ The term was coined in 2004 by King Abdullah II of Jordan at the time when Iran was reportedly interfering in Iraq in the run-up to the January 2005 parliamentary elections. For more, see the interview available at: http://www.nbcnews.com/id/6679774/ns/msnbc-hardball_with_chris_matthews/t/king-abdullah-ii-jordan/#.WxDuQEiFOHt

with the proof that the Syrian regime had already resorted to using chemical weapons.¹² But although the red line declared by the US administration for military intervention to Syria (use of chemical weapons) has been crossed already many times, the United States had not invaded the country at all. Berti and Guzansky also argue there has been an extension of the Saudi regional influence to the other parts of the region with the same intention - to weaken the Iranian strength and to support anti-Assad forces in Syria. Riyadh reportedly offered to provide \$3 billion in aid to the Lebanese Armed Forces, as part of its effort to preserve influence in the country. Not surprisingly, Hezbollah has been rather critical of the increased Saudi investment in the Lebanese army. The group is asserting that Saudi Arabia has been orchestrating an unprecedented intelligence campaign, led by the Saudi Prince Bandar bin Sultan, to cripple Hezbollah's organizational infrastructure, target its assets, and weaken its political position within the Lebanese political arena.

Nevertheless, in 2014 there was a Saudi-Iranian rapprochement in mutual relations. A change at the position of intelligence chief of the Kingdom helped calm down the tension between the countries. Prince Mohammad bin Nayef, the interior minister, who made his name by leading the campaign against al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula in Saudi Arabia itself in the mid-2000s, has become responsible for the Syrian agenda. Prince Bandar bin Sultan, who ran the file over the past two years and promoted an aggressive policy of the Saudi support for Syrian fighters, including Salafi jihadist groups not formally affiliated with al Qaeda, was removed.¹³

From the Iranian perspective, since the early beginning of the Syrian civil war, Iran has supported Bashar Assad. The Baath regime's overthrow would undermine the Iranian power and influence in the Middle East and weaken the connection to Lebanese Hezbollah. The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) are those who play a crucial role in the Iranian interference in Syria and participate in a proxy war with Saudi Arabia at the Syrian territory. IRGC has provided 'advisors' to assist the Syrian security forces and very soon even actively stepped into the conflict by force. The intelligence support was very important to President Assad. A wide range of Iranian organizations has been involved in the effort, including Law Enforcement Forces (LEF), the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS), and the large defence contractor Iran Electronics Industries (IEI). Except for the presence of different Iranian intelligence agencies on the Syrian soil, there are also many different kinds of Iranian involvement in the conflict. Fulton, Holliday, and Wyer emphasize the military resupply in the air, on the ground and at sea. As a special tactic, the authors mention using the Lebanese proxy of Hezbollah and Iraqi Shia militia in the proxy war against Saudi supported rebels.¹⁴ Compared to Saudi Arabia, there is an Iranian military presence in the battlefield of Syria and Iraq. According to Majid Ra-

¹² BERTI, Benedetta and Yoel, GUZANSKY, ref. 8.

¹³ GAUSE, Gregory. 2014. Saudi-Iranian Rapprochement? The Incentives and the Obstacles, Brookings, available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/saudi-iranian-rapprochement-the-incentives-and-the-obstacles/>

¹⁴ For more information, read FULTON, Will, Josef, HOLLIDAY and Sam, WYER. 2013. *Iranian Strategy in Syria*, Institute for the Study of War and AEI's Critical Threats Project.

fizadeh,¹⁵ there are about 70,000 troops deployed in Syria supporting the Assad government. 15,000 soldiers of the Iranian military (not the official army - Artesh, but from the IRGC), 20,000 members of Liwa Fatemiyoun (Afghani volunteers recruited and operated by the IRGC), 20,000 Iraqi Shia militiamen in ten different groups, 1,000 Lebanese Hezbollah fighters. So, the Iranian support of the Syrian regime is much more direct than the Saudi involvement. Also, it is difficult to claim that the Iranians wage this proxy war only against Saudi Arabia. By supporting Bashar Assad, Iran stays on the opposite side of a frontline from the United States and Turkey, too. But in the context of the Saudi-Iranian proxy war in the Middle East, Iran is the one militarily participating and overtly affecting the conflict.

4 CIVIL WAR IN YEMEN

Although the Yemen civil war could be waged by internal powers only, an external interference has helped fuel the conflict a lot. Iran stepped up its financial and military aid for the Houthi rebels; after the rebels seized the capital Sanaa in early 2015 and began moving to take the rest of it, Saudi Arabia launched a bombing campaign to stop them.¹⁶ So, there are two levels or dimensions of the Yemen conflict - one internal and the other external that are closely related and have come to the forefront of both domestic and regional politics in the light of recent events. The first is the decade-long insurgency fought by the Houthi rebels, a Shia¹⁷ minority in the north, which toppled the central government. The second is a clash between two external actors - Iran and Saudi Arabia - that can affect the balance of power in the Middle East. Yemen is a poorly governed, fractious country along Saudi Arabia's southern border, which can be likened to a sieve in terms of ancient smuggling routes still used by those wanting to enter the Kingdom covertly. Martin Reardon¹⁸ argues Yemen could serve as a potentially friendly base of operations in Iran's rivalry against Saudi Arabia. For Iran, easier access to Yemen means easier access to Saudi Arabia. For Saudi Arabia, which shares a porous 1,770 km long southern border with Yemen, the territory of its southern neighbour can be the Achilles' heel of the Kingdom's security.

For this reason, the Saudis have been providing significant financial and military support to Yemen's central government and even conducted their ground and air strikes against the Houthis and Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) on the Yemeni

¹⁵ RAFIZADEH, Majid. 2016, Iran's Forces Outnumber Assad's in Syria, Gatestone Institute International Policy Council, available at: <https://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/9406/iran-soldiers-syria>

¹⁶ BEAUCHAMP, Zack. 2015. Iran and Saudi Arabia's cold war is making the Middle East even more dangerous, ref. 8.

¹⁷ Zaydi school of thought which is closer to Shia sect of Islam, constituting approximately one third of Yemeni inhabitants.

¹⁸ REARDON, Martin. 2015. *Saudi Arabia, Iran and the 'Great Game' in Yemen*, Al-Jazeera.net, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/09/saudi-arabia-iran-great-game-ye-201492984846324440.html>

side of the border. The military operation in Yemen is a significant departure from Saudi Arabia's foreign policy tradition. Riyadh has always relied on three strategies to pursue its interests abroad. First, it used its wealth to support allied governments or groups. Second, it established a global network of clerics and Koran schools to spread the puritanical interpretation of the Koran known as Wahhabism. And third, it practiced classic diplomacy and mediation, such as leading the peace talks that ended the 15-year civil war in Lebanon in the late 1980s.¹⁹ So, the campaign shows the importance of Yemen for Saudis willing to interfere directly using force to defend their interests and security.

Yemen is highly on focus of (not only) the Iranian and Saudi intelligence services and special forces of course. Iranian intelligence and special forces (Al-Quds) are using small boats to ship AK-47s, rocket-propelled grenades, and other arms to replace older weapons used by the rebels. Weapons aside, Iran is offering financial help, training and encouragement to some groups that protested against president Saleh's rule. On the other hand, the Houthi spokesman Yahya al-Houthi denied that the movement had received any Iranian weapons, training or money, and added that the accusation was an old one levelled by the United States and Saudi Arabia. Many Yemeni political and tribal figures dismiss any Iranian military support as insignificant, noting that the Houthis have plenty of weapons and that Saudi Arabia has been supplying Yemeni factions with arms for decades.²⁰

Recently (June 2018), the Saudi-led coalition backing Yemen's exiled government captured a town south of the port city of Hodeida. International aid agencies and the United Nations have warned the assault could shut down the vital aid route for some 70 percent of Yemen's food, as well as the bulk of humanitarian aid and fuel supplies.²¹ A field attack and air-strikes penetrated and supported by Saudi-led forces meant a direct interference against local actors and Iranian interests in the country.

CONCLUSION

Iran's line in the sand is Iraq and Syria. Both of these countries serve as buffers between Iran and the Sunni Middle East, so having stable and dependable Shia-led governments in each of them serve as a strategic objective that is non-negotiable for Iran. Which brings up the Yemen card, a strategic bargaining chip that Iran may now be holding vis-a-vis the sudden rise of the Houthis and anticipated domestic chaos that is sure

¹⁹ BEDNARZ, Dieter. 2015. *Saudi Arabia and Iran Vie for Regional Supremacy*, Spiegel online, available at: <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/saudi-arabia-and-iran-fighting-proxy-war-in-yemen-a-1027056.html>

²⁰ SCHMITT, Eric and Robert WORTH. 2012. *With Arms for Yemen Rebels, Iran Seeks Wider Mideast Role*, The New York Times, available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/15/world/middleeast/aiding-yemen-rebels-iran-seeks-wider-mideast-role.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

²¹ AL-HAJ, Ahmed. *Saudi-led troops fight rebel forces south of Yemen's Hodeida*, The Washington Post, June 14 2018, available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/fighting-resumes-around-key-yemeni-port-city-hodeida/2018/06/14/3648fdb6-6fa4-11e8-b4d8-eaf78d4c544c_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.b77d77916080

to plague the country for the foreseeable future. By playing it, Iran would seek to pressure the Saudis to tread lightly in Iraq and Syria or risk a concerted effort to undermine them from their southern border.²² From very sensitive sources,²³ the author of this article got confirmation of the bargain theory saying Iran is willing to withdraw its influence in Yemen in exchange for Saudis leaving their support of Sunni rebels in Syria. But still, both countries serve as a buffer zone between Saudi Arabia and Iran (Sunni-Shia worlds) being a battlefield of proxy warfare between those two. It is also obvious that the role of intelligence services of both sides is crucial for using proxies in favour of the respective benefactors. Both, Saudi and Iranian intelligence are highly active in two separate conflicts in the current Middle East. There has been a development in proxy warring since the end of the Cold War. Mainly regional powers such as Saudi Arabia and Iran are involved, but it does not mean that superpowers are passive now. Especially in Syria, the United States and Russia are highly active and often cooperate with regional powers. The concept of proxy war is highly topical even in the 21st Century, and the Middle East with its high-security dynamic is a perfect example to show it.

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²² REARDON, Martin. 2015. *Saudi Arabia, Iran and the 'Great Game' in Yemen*, Al-Jazeera.net, ref. 17.

²³ During the author's residency in Iran having many interviews with university political and security experts and state authorities.