EXTERNAL SPONSORSHIP OF NON-STATE ACTORS AND THE TRAJECTORY OF THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

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Abstract

This article examines how external sponsorship of non-state actors affected the trajectory of the Syrian civil war between 2011 and December 2024. It compares two sponsorship relationships: the United States–Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) partnership and Iran's support for Hezbollah and other pro-Iranian armed groups. The comparison focuses on four dimensions: mechanisms of external support, the degree of sponsor influence over the supported actor, effects on territorial and military capacity, and implications for conflict management and political settlement. The study employs a qualitative comparative case-study design and thematic analysis of academic publications, policy reports, official documents, and specialist analyses. Sources were selected for their relevance to the research question and assessed through source triangulation, with particular attention to consistency across scholarly, governmental, and specialist accounts. The findings indicate that the two sponsorship models produced different patterns of influence. U.S. support for the SDF was comparatively conditional and operationally focused, particularly on countering the Islamic State, while the SDF retained significant political objectives of its own. Iranian support for Hezbollah and allied militias was more deeply embedded in a broader regional security network and was closely connected to the survival of the Assad government. Both relationships altered local balances of power and complicated the prospects for a negotiated settlement, but the evidence does not support treating external sponsorship alone as the cause of the war's duration. Rather, external support interacted with domestic fragmentation, regime strategies, regional rivalries, and the changing territorial balance. The article argues that proxy relationships are best understood as mechanisms that reshape the incentives and capabilities of conflict actors rather than as single, independent causes of conflict prolongation. The study is limited by its reliance on secondary sources and its focus on two sponsorship relationships.

Key words: External Sponsorship; Non-State Actors; Syrian Civil War; Proxy Warfare; Hezbollah; Conflict Dynamics.

Introduction

The Syrian uprising began in 2011 in the context of the wider Arab Spring and gradually developed into a protracted armed conflict involving the Syrian government, opposition groups, and regional and extra-regional actors. The initial protests reflected demands for political reform, greater political freedoms, release of political prisoners, and an end to corruption and repression. The government's violent response contributed to the militarization of the uprising, while the fragmentation of opposition forces further complicated the conflict (Ali et al., 2024; Mirza et al., 2021). As the conflict expanded, external actors increasingly influenced the capabilities, strategies, and political positions of Syrian state and non-state actors (Asseburg & Wimmen, 2012; Haider, I., & Khan, S., 2020). The internationalization of the Syrian conflict did not follow a single pattern. External powers employed

different combinations of military, financial, political, and organizational support. The United States developed an operational partnership with Kurdish-led forces, particularly the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), primarily in the campaign against the Islamic State (Humud & Blanchard, 2020). Iran, by contrast, supported the Assad government directly while also relying on Hezbollah and other allied militias to strengthen the regime's military position and preserve its regional strategic interests (Antonyan, 2018; Mason, 2021). These relationships provide a useful basis for examining different models of external sponsorship.

This study therefore examines how different models of external support affected the military capabilities, territorial influence, political autonomy, and conflict dynamics of non-state actors in Syria between 2011 and December 2024. The study does not assume that external sponsorship alone caused the prolongation of the Syrian conflict. Instead, it examines how external assistance altered the resources, incentives, organizational capacities, and bargaining positions of supported actors within a conflict shaped by multiple domestic and international factors (Phillips, 2019; Walther & Pedersen, 2020). The comparison is analytically significant because the two cases differed in purpose and structure. US support for the SDF was principally organized around counterterrorism and the defeat of ISIS, although it also strengthened Kurdish territorial and political influence (Kaya & Whiting, 2017; Plakoudas, 2017). Iranian support for Hezbollah and other allied militias formed part of a broader strategy aimed at preserving the Assad government and maintaining Iran's regional strategic depth (Mason, 2021). The study therefore applies a common analytical sequence: external sponsor → non-state actor → mechanism of support → military and political effects → consequences for conflict dynamics. The study is limited to 2011 to December 2024, with the endpoint reflecting the collapse of Bashar al-Assad's government in December 2024. It contributes to existing scholarship by comparatively examining the US–SDF and Iran–Hezbollah/pro-Iranian militia relationships, identifying similarities and differences in their sponsorship mechanisms, and assessing their implications for military power, territorial control, political bargaining, sovereignty, and prospects for conflict resolution.

Literature Review

The literature on the Syrian conflict can be grouped into four broad strands. The first examines the domestic and international causes of the conflict and maps the interests of regional, extra-regional, and non-state actors. Studies in this strand demonstrate that the war cannot be explained through domestic grievances alone because the conflict became increasingly embedded in wider regional and international rivalries (Haider, I., & Khan, S., 2020; Ali et al., 2024). The second strand focuses on US policy. Humud and Blanchard (2020) examine the evolution of US objectives and the constraints on American policy, while Gani (2019) discusses the Obama administration's strategic patience and policy miscalculations. Research on US assistance also shows that support to Syrian opposition actors was selective and conditional rather than equivalent to unrestricted sponsorship (Rolandsen & Selvik, 2024). Studies of local governance further suggest that foreign assistance could strengthen local institutions under certain conditions but did not automatically produce durable political settlements (Carnegie et al., 2022). The third strand examines Iran's role and the relationship among Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah. Al-Moussawi, A. H. A. E. (2017), Mason (2021), and Hage (2019) emphasize Iran's strategic interests, the importance of Syria to Iran's regional security architecture, and the role of Hezbollah and allied militias in supporting the Assad government. Antonyan (2018) further demonstrates that Iranian and Russian approaches were not identical, despite their shared support for the Syrian government. The fourth strand concerns non-state actors and rebel fragmentation. Kaya and Whiting (2017) and Plakoudas (2017) examine the Kurdish movement and the evolution of the SDF, while Walther and Pedersen (2020), Schwab (2023), and Corradi and Cama (2025) address rebel fragmentation, strategic choice, coalition cohesion, and

institutional dynamics. Petrosyan (2024) places Syrian non-state actors within the broader literature on contemporary warfare.

Although these studies provide substantial knowledge about individual actors, a comparative problem remains. US–SDF and Iran–Hezbollah relationships are usually examined within separate literatures and are rarely assessed through the same analytical dimensions. As a result, it is difficult to determine how differences in sponsorship mechanisms, sponsor control, proxy autonomy, and strategic objectives affected military and political outcomes. The contribution of this study is therefore not to claim that the two relationships are identical, but to compare them systematically while retaining their contextual differences. The article addresses this gap through a focused research question i.e. how different models of external sponsorship of non-state actors affected the balance of power, territorial control, and conflict-management prospects in Syria between 2011 and December 2024. The comparison emphasizes mechanisms rather than simply listing events, allowing the analysis to distinguish between external assistance, actor capacity, battlefield effects, and broader political consequences.

Materials and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative comparative case-study design to examine two sponsorship relationships within the Syrian civil war: (1) the United States–SDF relationship and (2) the Iran–Hezbollah/allied-militia relationship. The cases were selected purposively because they represent two analytically contrasting forms of external sponsorship. The US case is characterized by a partnership that was strongly tied to counter-Islamic-State operations and involved substantial operational dependence but significant political autonomy on the part of the SDF. The Iranian case represents a more embedded sponsorship model in which Hezbollah and other allied militias formed part of a wider regional security network supporting the Assad government. The temporal scope is 2011 to December 2024. The starting point corresponds to the outbreak of the Syrian uprising, while the endpoint corresponds to the collapse of Bashar al-Assad's government in December 2024. This boundary permits the study to assess the evolution of both sponsorship relationships across the principal phases of the war without conflating the pre-collapse conflict with the subsequent transitional political order. The analytical model follows five linked stages: external sponsor → non-state/proxy actor → mechanism of support → effect on actor capacity → political and conflict outcome. The mechanisms examined are military assistance, training, intelligence and operational coordination, financial support, political protection or diplomatic backing, logistical assistance, and ideological or sectarian mobilization. The outcomes are assessed through four principal categories: (1) military effectiveness and territorial control; (2) proxy autonomy and sponsor influence; (3) effects on the balance of power and bargaining positions; and (4) implications for conflict management, sovereignty, and political settlement. The evidence is drawn from secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books and chapters, policy reports, official government and international-organization documents, and specialist conflict analyses. Sources were selected when they directly addressed US or Iranian policy, the SDF or Hezbollah/allied militias, external assistance, or the consequences of such assistance for the Syrian conflict. Thematic coding was organized around the categories identified above. Relevant evidence was compared across sources to identify recurring patterns and disagreements. Where numerical estimates differed, the study avoids presenting contested figures as precise facts and identifies the source and period to which an estimate applies. Government and policy sources were used primarily for statements about official policy and declared objectives, while academic and specialist sources were used to interpret those policies and their consequences. This form of triangulation reduces reliance on any single institutional or political perspective. The study uses process-oriented reasoning to assess causal relationships. It distinguishes between association, contribution, and

causation. Evidence that external assistance increased the capacity of a supported actor is treated separately from evidence that the assistance changed the duration of the conflict. Alternative explanations—including domestic political fragmentation, regime military strategy, Russian intervention, Turkish intervention, jihadist mobilization, and regional rivalries—are therefore considered before drawing conclusions about conflict prolongation. The study has two principal limitations. First, it relies on secondary evidence and therefore cannot reproduce the advantages of field interviews or participant observation. Second, the two cases are not identical organizationally: the SDF is a coalition with a Kurdish-led core, whereas Hezbollah is a Lebanese non-state organization operating in Syria alongside other allied forces. The comparison is consequently analytical rather than a claim of strict case equivalence.

Results

THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA IN THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

After the Second World War, the United States became one of the principal external powers in Middle Eastern politics, and the Assad regime and its allies considered it to have been indirectly involved in the Syrian conflict from the very beginning (Haider, I., & Khan, S., 2020). The United States' intervention in the Syrian civil war demonstrated strategic caution that ultimately evolved into reactive policymaking rather than proactive leadership. US policy toward Syria should be understood across the Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations. Under Obama, Washington combined political pressure on Assad with limited support for opposition forces and, from 2014, a major counter-Islamic-State campaign. The Trump administration placed greater emphasis on counterterrorism, curtailing Iranian influence, and protecting US personnel and partners. The Biden administration maintained the counter-Islamic-State mission and support for the SDF while avoiding large-scale military escalation. This periodization is important because the US–SDF relationship continued to evolve after 2016. The Obama administration pursued a policy of "strategic patience" that emphasized national interests and restraint; thus, rather than committing to direct military intervention, the US engaged in military intervention "behind the scenes to demonstrate its willingness and capacity to act as a global hegemon" while retaining deniability. Initial US involvement included covert funding of opposition groups. In 2011, Tamara Wittes of the US Bureau for Near Eastern Affairs provided background confirmation that the US was funding democracy movements on the ground in Syria. This support was soon extended to armed opposition forces, loosely brought together as the Free Syrian Army (FSA). The State Department took charge of supplying non-lethal aid, including food rations and pickup trucks, to the opposition. The CIA was involved in covert operations to empower opposition groups and provided training and communications support from the Turkish and Jordanian borders. By August 2011, President Obama had called for Assad's removal and marked the "red line" regarding the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons. A major turning point occurred in August 2013 following alleged chemical weapons attacks in Ghouta, when Obama made strong calls for military action but ultimately backed down from direct military intervention, instead accepting Russia's proposal for dismantling Syria's chemical weapons through UN mechanisms. On 10 September 2014, Obama announced plans for military operations against ISIS in Iraq and Syria. The US conducted airstrikes against ISIS, but the Pentagon's US$500 million program to train and equip Syrian rebels to fight ISIS was ultimately dismantled in October 2015 (Gani, 2019). During the Trump administration, US policy emphasized three broad objectives that crystallized US strategic interests in Syria: first, the enduring defeat of the Islamic State; second, a political settlement to the Syrian conflict pursuant to UN Security Council Resolution 2254; and third, the withdrawal of Iranian-backed forces. Defense Secretary Mark Esper further clarified that "the United States strategy in the Middle East seeks to ensure the region is not

a safe haven for terrorists, is not dominated by any power hostile to the United States and contributes to a stable global energy market" (Humud & Blanchard, 2020).

The United States–Kurdish Alliance in Syria

The Kurds are an ethnic group seeking self-determination and autonomous rule across the Middle East. In the context of Syria, Kurdish groups viewed the Syrian war as a significant opportunity to advance their goals of self-determination. The Kurdish autonomous region of Rojava is presented as evidence of the viability and necessity of Kurdish self-rule within any future Syria, with Kurdish leaders declaring that "federalism should be the future" (Kaya & Whiting, 2017). The primary Kurdish groups operating in Syria include the PYD (Democratic Union Party), which is the main political faction within the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and originated as an offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK); the YPG (People's Protection Units/Yekineyen Parastina Gel), which is the military wing of the PYD and serves as the party's fighting force; the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party); and the SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces), a multiethnic militia whose core is the Kurdish People's Defense Corps (YPG), established as an alliance of Arab, Assyrian, Armenian, Kurdish, and Turkmen militias under the aegis of the YPG (Maguire, 2020). By 2018, the SDF controlled approximately 25 percent of Syria, including some of its richest oil and gas fields (van Wilgenburg & Fumerton, 2024). Rojava (or Western Kurdistan) represents the primary Kurdish stronghold in Syria. By 2012, Kurds led by the PYD began taking control of territory they called Rojava (Kaya & Whiting, 2017). The region consists of three autonomous cantons: Afrin in northwestern Syria near the Turkish border, Kobani in the central part of the Turkish-Syrian frontier, and Qamishli at the easternmost edge near the Turkish border. The PYD-YPG managed to establish governance structures through the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), created in July 2018 to govern these areas and unite different councils and canton administrations under SDF control (van Wilgenburg & Fumerton, 2024).

The primary objectives of Syrian Kurds were autonomy and self-rule, political-military control, and national liberation. The United States has a long history of engagement with Kurdish movements. However, historical US support for the Kurds has generally been motivated by short-term strategic interests rather than a long-term commitment to Kurdish autonomy (Sarı, 2019). The US–SDF partnership emerged from a confluence of strategic necessities, of which the operational doctrine shift, i.e., the shift from costly population-centric counterinsurgency campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq to the adoption of a doctrine of working "by, with, and through" local proxies, and the emergence of ISIS were the prime necessities. The US had three primary motivations for the partnership with the Kurds, i.e., combating Islamic extremist forces without deploying large contingents of American troops, maintaining leverage in the region to counter Russian and Iranian influence, and preventing a Middle Eastern adversary from establishing hegemonic regional power (Sarı, 2019). Similarly, the Kurdish forces had their own motivations for the partnership with the United States. They aimed to utilize international support to advance their goal of autonomy (Kaya & Whiting, 2017), gain legitimacy on the international stage through cooperation against a common enemy and build domestic and international support for their political project (Plakoudas, 2017).

The United States provided extensive military support to the SDF. In September 2014, the United States began air operations against ISIS targets in and around Kobani as part of the broader campaign against the Islamic State, inaugurating successful cooperation with the YPG that persisted despite Turkish opposition. This air support was instrumental in military operations; for example, US airstrikes turned the tide of the Kobani battle in March 2015. The United States delegated responsibility for ground operations to SDF fighters, which allowed US soldiers to play a more enabling role (Maguire, 2020). It provided critical political legitimacy and protection for the Kurdish project, including international legitimacy. A strong Kurdish presence at the forefront of resistance to ISIS was leveraged to generate support from the EU and the United States for Kurdish goals (Kaya

& Whiting, 2017). It restrained Turkey from invading northern Syria on multiple occasions. For example, when Turkey threatened invasion after the SDF captured the Tishrin Dam and crossed the western bank of the Euphrates River in December 2015, the United States restrained Ankara (Plakoudas, 2017). The United States renamed the Kurdish-led militias from their PKK-affiliated designation to the more politically palatable "Syrian Democratic Forces" to address political sensitivities (Maguire, 2020). The US provided critical support for the establishment and recognition of Kurdish governance in Rojava, the northeastern part of Syria bordering Turkey and Iraq. Through military cooperation against ISIS, the US enabled the PYD-YPG to expand its territorial control. By early 2016, the Syrian Kurds had expelled ISIS from various Kurdish-majority areas and enjoyed the protection of the United States (Plakoudas, 2017). The SDF's territorial gains progressively helped the PYD-led political administration expand and consolidate its political-military power. The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) was created in July 2018 to further unite councils and cantons under SDF control. By 2018, the SDF controlled approximately 25 percent of Syria, including territory along the border with Turkey east of the Euphrates River and Syria's richest oil and gas fields. This economic control provided the Kurdish administration with resources for governance and the consolidation of power (van Wilgenburg & Fumerton, 2024).

The siege of Kobani in September 2014 became the defining military moment of US–Kurdish cooperation. ISIS laid siege to Kobani and almost captured it in early October 2014, sending shockwaves across the Middle East and Europe. In September 2014, US air operations around Kobani became an important early stage of operational cooperation with the YPG. Despite the heroism of Kurdish fighters, US air operations ultimately turned the tide of the battle. The Islamic State was defeated in Kobani on 15 March 2015 after suffering its worst losses in a single battle (Plakoudas, 2017). Following the liberation of Kobani, the YPG achieved significant territorial gains by closely coordinating with the US Air Force and receiving support from the Free Syrian Army. They captured the strategically important town of Tel Abyad on 16 June 2015, uniting the Kobani and Jazira (Qamishli) cantons. The YPG then advanced 50 km north of Raqqa, the Islamic State's capital, by July. In August 2015, the YPG recaptured Hasakah and expelled jihadist rebel groups from the entire province, cutting off the main ISIS supply route between Raqqa and the city of Mosul. The US and the YPG broadened their coalition against ISIS by forming the Syrian Democratic Forces in 2015, which included non-Kurdish groups fighting against the Assad regime in Syria. On 10 October 2015, the SDF was formally established as an alliance of Armenian, Kurdish, Arab, Assyrian, and Turkmen militias under the leadership of the YPG (Plakoudas, 2017). The largest coordinated operation against ISIS was the Raqqa Campaign, which operated from 2016 to 2017. In October 2016, the US commander announced a joint operation with 30,000 SDF fighters to take Raqqa, and by 2017, the SDF included around 30,000 Arab fighters as part of its coalition, accounting for around 60 percent of SDF forces. The Raqqa operation continued through 2017, and the SDF captured the city from ISIS in October 2017. In May 2018, the SDF resumed operations against ISIS in the Middle Euphrates River Valley in Deir al-Zor after about 1,500 Kurdish YPG fighters returned from Afrin, and on 23 March 2019, the SDF defeated the ISIS caliphate in the final battle at Baghouz, marking the territorial defeat of the Islamic State's self-declared caliphate (van Wilgenburg & Fumerton, 2024).

US support for Kurdish autonomy, while disregarding Turkey's concerns, created strategic contradictions and strains in relations, which complicated the Syrian political settlement. The United States overlooked the PYD's maximalist goal of post-conflict autonomy from Damascus—anathema to Turkey—during the proxy-selection process. This unresolved question of Kurdish governance weakened potential settlements and peace initiatives in the broader Syrian conflict, as Turkey, Syria, and Iran all opposed Kurdish independence or extensive autonomy in the region (Maguire, 2020).

Impact of US Involvement Via Non-State Actors in the Syrian Civil War

The US approach of providing military and security assistance reinforced, rather than controlled, rebel fragmentation. When the US and its allies provided security assistance on a group-by-group basis, this worked against opposition cohesion, contributed to rebel fragmentation, and undermined attempts to centralize command and control. The provision of security assistance, while helping the US to defeat ISIS and avoid collapse in Damascus, had repercussions, as it came at the expense of rebel cohesion, autonomy, and legitimacy. A contentious issue emerged when the US shifted its objectives from supporting the "moderate" rebels fighting the Assad regime to defeating ISIS around 2014–2015. For the Free Syrian Army (FSA) groups, defeating Assad remained the primary strategic priority, but the US and its allies simultaneously took cautious steps to avoid tensions with Russia and to focus on ISIS, which was not a priority for the rebels. This inconsistency and alteration of goals intensified the conflict's complexity and duration (Rolandsen & Selvik, 2024). US intelligence assessed that Assad had little incentive to make meaningful concessions to the opposition, as the regime's support, combined with Russian and Iranian assistance, gave him "little incentive to make anything more than token concessions." The US continuously called for a political settlement, yet territorial gains by the Syrian government pushed the remaining armed opposition forces into increasingly untenable positions, reducing their bargaining power, further intensifying the conflict, and reducing the prospects for peace (Humud & Blanchard, 2020).

The relationship between the Syrian Democratic Forces and the US was unstable. When the US overlooked the long-term political objectives and interests of the SDF during proxy selection, changed its own short-term preferences for its Syria mission, and failed to reconcile the conflicting ambitions of Turkey and the SDF, this led to the breakdown of the partnership. After Turkey's incursion into northern Syria in October 2019, the SDF negotiated separately with the Assad government, shifting toward Damascus and Moscow rather than maintaining an exclusive partnership with the US. This weakened the unified opposition front that was necessary for effective peace negotiations (Maguire, 2020). US-backed support for local councils in Syria showed mixed outcomes for conflict resolution. The flow of aid to communities with locally embedded governing institutions increased civilian support for opposition bodies, and this effect was substantial. However, this assistance did not translate into enhanced prospects for peace when these institutions were externally imposed or dominated by entities such as ISIS (Carnegie et al., 2022). Fundamental legal questions arose when US authorities conducted military attacks inside Syria against ISIS without Syrian consent while, at the same time, criticizing Syria for similar actions against rebel forces and demanding UN action against the regime. Syria, under al-Assad, had the legal right to protect its sovereignty from internal or external armed rebellion under the UN framework (Pradhan & Sing, 2024). The doctrines of humanitarian intervention and the responsibility to protect (R2P) become problematic when applied to the Syrian conflict without clear provisions distinguishing an intra-state conflict from transnational conflicts. The Syrian case represented a "big power engagement" in which the two global powers, i.e., the US and Russia, turned the country into a "grand chessboard" to increase their influence in the region and reshape the global balance of power. The power struggle between the US and Russia and sectarian UN engagements undermined the purpose of humanitarian intervention and R2P (Pradhan & Sing, 2024). Further, the US strategy of maximizing provider control through extensive weapons restrictions, vetting, limited supplies, and compliance linkages raised ethical and normative concerns about rebel agency and autonomy. The groups that received assistance from the US experienced this approach as disadvantageous to their strategic autonomy and institutional development and were treated as "disposable rebels," discardable once they had served US purposes at little cost (Rolandsen & Selvik, 2024). The war in Syria was used as a geopolitical tool by the US for propaganda aligned with its national and international political interests. The US narrative emphasized humanitarian intervention and support for the "moderate" opposition while

overlooking its role in fragmenting rebel forces and prolonging the conflict (Pradhan & Sing, 2024). The US portrayed local councils and certain rebel factions as legitimate alternatives for governance and as democratic actors. International donors considered these local councils "the vanguard of the moderate opposition and the civilian equivalent of the Free Syrian Army." However, aid funding alone was insufficient to earn community respect when institutions were perceived as externally imposed or lacked local support (Carnegie et al., 2022). The US applied conflicting standards, initially viewing Iraqi Kurds as the "good Kurds" and the PKK as the "bad Kurds"; then, after deciding to support the SDF, it shifted the narrative to include the PKK-affiliated YPG in the "good Kurds" category. This selective framing served US strategic interests rather than constituting principled engagement aimed at ensuring peace in the country (Maguire, 2020).

The involvement of major powers such as the US had profound consequences for the civilian population. The humanitarian consequences were catastrophic. OHCHR estimated 306,887 civilian deaths between 1 March 2011 and 31 March 2021 (OHCHR, 2023), while millions of Syrians were internally displaced or became refugees. These figures refer to different categories and should not be conflated. US support contributed to the military and political capacity of selected non-state actors, but the evidence does not establish that US support alone prolonged the war. Its effects interacted with regime strategy, Russian and Iranian intervention, Turkish policy, jihadist mobilization, and opposition fragmentation, which led to the fragmentation of Syrian society, loss of life, and the displacement of civilians both inside and outside the country (Humud & Blanchard, 2020). Local economies faced severe disruptions due to tightly controlled assistance approaches and resource scarcity. Local councils also faced resource shortages aggravated by Syrian regime tactics, including aerial bombardment and sieges. While aid provisions were important, they could not compensate for the destruction of economic infrastructure and livelihoods. US aid to local councils provided humanitarian services, including education, road repair, rubble removal, emergency response, and administrative services, but the positive effects of this assistance on governance occurred only when the institutions were not imposed by outside actors or foreign entities (Carnegie et al., 2022). The reconstruction of Syria faces difficulties arising from years of proxy warfare, fragmented non-state actors with divergent and often conflicting interests, and external actors maintaining a military presence. US policy sought to use the continued provision of reconstruction assistance as leverage to encourage the Assad regime to accept a political settlement, yet this limited the international cooperation necessary for stabilization and threatened deeper fragmentation (Humud & Blanchard, 2020). The US approach was "damaging in several ways" to recipient rebel groups. Building long-term institutionalized security capacity was not a concern for the US; rather, the focus was instrumental, i.e., taking action and achieving immediate objectives. This approach left Syria's non-state institutions weakened, delegitimized, and dependent on external support rather than rooted in community governance structures (Rolandsen & Selvik, 2024).

IRAN IN THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

The relationship between Syria and Iran was a lasting and strategically significant partnership in the Middle East. The Syrian-Iranian relationship has been characterized by privacy and uniqueness, divided by two divergent ideologies, i.e., the secularism of the Syrian regime and the Islamic regime of Iran, but united by shared interests and mutual obligations concerning opposition to the United States and Israel. Iran viewed Syria as a pathway to the Arab world through which to support its "Axis of Resistance," while Syria viewed Iran as a source of pressure in its negotiations with Israel. In March 2011, when the Syrian uprising began, the Iranian government supported the Syrian regime against the uprising, describing the uprising as a foreign and Western conspiracy aimed at destroying Syria's resistance against Zionists and the West (Al-Moussawi, A. H. A. E., 2017). Iran attempted to defend the Assad regime against all odds, as a friendly government and strategic

partner in Damascus was in Iran's interest in countering the leadership of Saudi Arabia, the US, and Israel in regional geopolitics. Iran therefore deployed troops in Syria to protect the Assad regime and routinely provided cargo flights to Damascus (Haider, I., & Khan, S., 2020).

From 2011 to 2013, Iran enhanced the defense capabilities of the Syrian government with law-enforcement personnel and IRGC ground forces to advise and assist Assad and to provide training and logistical support to the Syrian army. The IRGC assisted in establishing the paramilitary National Defense Forces and trained 100,000 government auxiliaries and pro-Assad militias from various sects. As the war continued and Syria needed greater economic support and diplomatic cover, Iran provided a $1.3 billion credit line to Damascus in January 2013, another $3.6 billion in July 2013 to purchase oil products, and, in addition, a free-trade agreement that had been in place since December 2011 (Mason, 2021).

In late 2015, Iran changed its battlefield strategy, with the IRGC, together with 3,000 Quds Force personnel, helping the Assad regime plan the 2016 Battle of Aleppo and supplementing the battle with 6,000 to 8,000 Hezbollah fighters. Moreover, Iraqi Shia fighters and about 3,000 Afghan Shia fighters were deployed as part of Liwa Fatemiyoun (the Afghan battalion), with estimates reaching up to 20,000 fighters by 2017. Until 2016, the IRGC and Iranian paramilitaries were estimated to number around 6,500 to 9,200 fighters. From April 2016, smaller units of the regular Iranian army arrived on the battlefield, probably to offset the drawdown of Russian forces. Iran also supplied Syrian forces and Shia militias with light and advanced weapons, including rockets, rocket launchers, Kalashnikov rifles, anti-tank missiles, and possibly Safir tactical military vehicles. By 2018, Iran and Syria had signed updated military cooperation agreements, indicating Iran's intention to remain in Syria indefinitely, although this contributed to ongoing tensions with the Syrian army. Iran invested billions of dollars in the Syrian economy in industrial projects, including cement factories, automobile assembly lines, rocket and missile factories, power plants, and silo construction, and established an Iranian-Syrian joint bank (Mason, 2021). Iran's support for Syria's position in the UN remained consistent through its backing of the Assad regime. Iran not only sent regular army forces together with substantial military support to defend the Assad regime but also used its influence to persuade Shiite non-state actors and fighters from the Middle East, South Asia, and other parts of the world to come to Syria and fight against what it described as anti-Islamic forces in the country. Most importantly, the non-state actor Hezbollah, in alliance with Iran, played a significant role in safeguarding the Assad regime (Haider, I., & Khan, S. 2020).

The Iran–Hezbollah Nexus and Its Impact on the Syrian Civil War

In March 2011, when the Syrian uprising began, the Assad regime started to depend on Hezbollah and Iran for its protection, which shifted the balance of power in Syria to its advantage. Initially, Hezbollah framed its Syrian intervention as being motivated by the protection of Lebanese-Syrian dual nationals living on the Syrian side of the border. Following the death of a Hezbollah member in Syria on October 11, Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah acknowledged Hezbollah's participation in helping Syrian government forces defend villages around Qusayr near the Lebanese border in a limited engagement. By May 2013, indicating a long-term presence, Secretary-General Nasrallah had presented a comprehensive argument for the party's strategic involvement in the Syrian war. Hezbollah focused not on reform in Syria but on the proliferation of armed groups, which posed a danger to Lebanon, and intervened to protect its interests and the goals of the broader "Axis of Resistance." Iran and Hezbollah mobilized militias in two ways, i.e., by recruiting foreign fighters from places such as Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan and, at the same time, mobilizing Syria's Shia community. Staffan de Mistura, the UN's special envoy to Syria, estimated in 2015 that Tehran spent some $6 billion annually in financial and military assistance to strengthen the Assad regime, and Iran paid the thousands of foreign fighters brought to Syria. For Iran and Hezbollah, intervention in Syria presented an opportunity to establish a stronghold through local Shia militias, as well as to

facilitate future Iranian intervention across the Middle East by training non-Syrian pro-Iranian militias. Iran and Hezbollah sought to establish an institutional framework, including the creation of a religious network, strongly indoctrinated militias, and supportive communities, all beyond the control and influence of the state. In 2012, the first independent Shia representative body in Syria, the Supreme Islamic Jaafari Council, was established as an extension of Lebanon's Supreme Islamic Shia Council. The council's clerics participated in commemorations of the Islamic Revolution in Iran and organized funerals for Shia fighters killed in combat. By 19 May 2013, Hezbollah and Syrian forces had launched a major offensive to retake Qusayr, with Hezbollah suffering heavy casualties during the nearly twenty-day operation. The rising casualties made it increasingly difficult to explain Hezbollah's involvement as limited engagements (Hage, 2019). The change in battlefield strategy in late 2015 saw the IRGC, with 3,000 Quds Force personnel, help plan the 2016 Battle of Aleppo, supplemented by 6,000 to 8,000 Hezbollah fighters, significantly escalating military operations (Mason, 2021). If Hezbollah had not intervened, the regime would have collapsed easily, the resistance would have ended, with Syria serving as the foundation of the resistance and its foothold. This strategic goal ensured Iran and Hezbollah's long-term commitment to sustaining the conflict against opposition forces, effectively prolonging the war (Hage, 2019). The recruitment of Afghan and Pakistani fighters highlighted the transnational impact, creating a foreign military presence that further internationalized and escalated the conflict beyond Syria's borders (Mason, 2021). When Hassan Rouhani pursued diplomatic initiatives suggesting that a solution in Syria should focus on a strong government in Damascus rather than specifically on Assad's fate, and Foreign Minister Javad Zarif made conciliatory statements about Syria, these efforts were undermined by uncompromising positions focused on maintaining strategic depth (Al-Moussawi, A. H. A. E., 2017). The alliance between Hezbollah and Syria at one point reached a stage at which they not only dictated terms but also had the potential to expand their ideological, military, and political influence inside Syria, making it unlikely that Hezbollah would accept settlements limiting its strategic position. Moreover, Iran and Hezbollah's attempts to create an institutional framework outside state control and influence, intended to supersede Syrian society itself and lay the foundations for future mobilization efforts, posed fundamental challenges to Syrian state sovereignty. The creation and activities of sectarian Shia militias challenged the officially secular character of the Syrian regime and state (Hage, 2019). The recruitment of Afghan and Pakistani Shia militias from refugee camps and directly from foreign countries under the banner of Hezbollah, providing them with salaries and residency, raised significant questions about international law concerning the recruitment of foreign fighters and the creation of militias outside legitimate state structures. Iran's reliance on asymmetric warfare strategies through proxies, involving fighters, including dependent refugees and al-Qaeda operatives, arms components, and financial flows, also highlighted the blurred lines between state and non-state actors, creating major ethical challenges regarding accountability and compliance with international humanitarian law (Mason, 2021).

Iranian support for the Syrian regime became visible through its public adoption of the official Syrian narrative, which launched media campaigns describing the popular uprising as a foreign and Western conspiracy aimed at destroying Syria's resistance against Zionists and the West. The Iranian stance on the Syrian uprising was paradoxical. Iran accused the United States of double standards and hypocrisy because of its claims of supporting popular revolutions in Syria despite its long history of supporting authoritarian regimes in the region and beyond, and this paradox was exploited by the reformist opposition in Iran. Iran described the popular "Arab Spring" revolutions as an "Islamic Awakening," which it assumed to have been derived from the Iranian Revolution itself and which focused on advocating a "people-religion-based" system modeled on Iran (Al-Moussawi, A. H. A. E., 2017). Hezbollah, on the other hand, represented its intervention in Syria through strategic language, i.e., "If Hezbollah allowed Syria's regime to collapse, the resistance would be

besieged... If Syria falls into American and takfiri hands, the resistance will be surrounded and Israel will enter Lebanon to impose its conditions" (Hage, 2019). Iran's involvement in the Syrian civil war led to alarming human security conditions, in which millions of people faced killings and forced migration as a consequence of a conflict involving multiple state and non-state actors (Haider, I., & Khan, S., 2020). Iran's spending on the conflict was estimated at $100 million per year to pay Shiite fighters alone, alongside $6 billion annually in broader support according to UN estimates, representing a massive allocation of resources that could otherwise have been used to address humanitarian needs in Syria. Iran's spending in Syria, which was divided between direct and indirect financial support for the Syrian regime and the financing of military structures, had negative impacts on the living conditions of the Iranian people while also devastating Syria's own economy, which had already been weakened by the conflict (Al-Moussawi, A. H. A. E., 2017). Moreover, foreign fighters, particularly Afghans and Pakistanis, became increasingly dependent on Iran for residence, security, and livelihoods, creating populations trapped within Iran's strategic network with limited alternative economic options (Mason, 2021). The Assad regime eventually managed to impose control and influence over the Shia groups, which routinely included photographs of Hafez and Bashar al-Assad in their propaganda. However, Russia's intervention in September 2015 in defense of the regime and the state created a clash with Iran's attempts to create institutions around state authority, with Moscow's focus on rebuilding state capacity conflicting with Iran's vision (Hage, 2019). The outcomes of the conflict, which included mass displacement, chronic insecurity, and a de facto Kurdish enclave on Syria's southern border, coupled with rising concerns over transnational terrorism in the region, led to the creation of multiple enclaves by different actors, fragmenting Syria's territorial integrity and undermining state sovereignty. The fundamental effect was that Hezbollah's engagements in Syria, supported by the Quds Force, were escalatory and made conflict resolution more uncertain because they increased the number and range of "stakeholders" with diverse and divergent security interests in Syrian territory (Mason, 2021). By strengthening the regime and enabling it to regain territory, the Russians allowed the Syrian regime to gradually restore its authority after years of dependency. Thanks to Russia, the Assad regime created an opportunity to ensure that Iran would not profit from Syria's vulnerabilities. The Assad regime had long demonstrated the ability to harmonize its priorities with changing power dynamics. As Russia continued to assert influence in Syria's state institutions, Hezbollah's role and presence might have declined, but Assad had no desire to break its partnership with Hezbollah, as the regime's continued relationship with Hezbollah was a backbone of Damascus's relations with Iran (Hage, 2019). Iran's ability to shift Hezbollah to northern parts of Syria and the Syria-Iraq border and to move missile components to Lebanon increased the chances of further instability. Iran's growing network of unconventional allies mutually reinforced one another in fragile states where centrifugal forces of decay and disintegration were evident (Mason, 2021). Tensions between Russia and Hezbollah, including standoffs between Hezbollah and Russian forces in June 2018 near Qusayr and Moscow's call for all foreign forces to leave Syria, demonstrated the competing interests that prevented unified governance and stability (Hage, 2019). Thus, for the Syrian regime, returning to its pre-war relationship with Iran and Hezbollah meant separating the Golan Heights from regional proxy conflicts and preventing a new front with Israel from opening on Syrian territory. The regime may have sought rapprochement with the Gulf states, which were Iran's main regional rivals, in an attempt to anchor its own power by using Arab unity to control Iranian influence, potentially allowing Damascus to play Arab states and Iran against each other for its own benefit (Hage, 2019).

Comparative Discussion: US and Iranian Models of External Sponsorship

The two cases demonstrate that external sponsorship should not be treated as a uniform form of proxy warfare. Both the United States and Iran relied on non-state partners, but the structure,

objectives, and degree of control differed. These differences help explain why the two relationships generated different patterns of military effectiveness and political consequences. The main differences between the United States–SDF and Iran–Hezbollah/allied-militia sponsorship models are summarized in Table.

Table. Comparison of US and Iranian Models of External Sponsorship

Dimension	United States–SDF	Iran–Hezbollah/Allied Militias
Principal strategic objective	Defeat of the Islamic State and maintenance of limited regional leverage	Preservation of the Assad government and maintenance of Iran's regional strategic network
Main mechanisms	Training, arms and equipment, air support, intelligence, operational coordination, and political protection	Financing, training, weapons, logistical support, mobilisation, organisational support, and political support
Sponsor control	Substantial operational influence but limited control over the SDF's long-term political objectives	Stronger strategic alignment with Hezbollah and allied militias within a broader regional network
Proxy autonomy	Significant; Kurdish-led actors retained distinct political goals	Considerable operational autonomy, but strategic objectives were closely aligned with Iran's regional interests
Main military effect	Increased SDF capacity and contributed to the defeat of ISIS territorial control in northeastern Syria	Increased regime-aligned capacity and helped prevent the collapse of the Assad government
Political effect	Strengthened the SDF's bargaining position but intensified tensions with Turkey and Damascus	Strengthened Assad's bargaining position and deepened Iran's influence within the Syrian conflict
Conflict-management consequence	Created a dilemma between counterterrorism cooperation and the unresolved question of Kurdish political status	Added military and political stakeholders and reinforced the regime's resistance to concessions

Source: compiled by the author based on the study findings.

The comparison suggests that the principal difference lay not simply in the quantity of external assistance but in the strategic relationship between sponsor and partner. US support was highly dependent on a specific operational objective—countering the Islamic State—and therefore the partnership was vulnerable when Washington's priorities changed. The SDF, however, retained political objectives that extended beyond the immediate US counterterrorism mission. This mismatch became particularly visible in disputes involving Turkey and in the SDF's search for alternative security arrangements when US protection appeared uncertain.

The Iran–Hezbollah relationship was more deeply embedded in a regional strategic architecture. Hezbollah's involvement was connected to the survival of the Assad government and to Iran's broader conception of strategic depth and resistance to Israel and US influence. The relationship therefore operated across military, financial, organizational, and ideological dimensions. Iran's support also extended beyond Hezbollah to other allied militias, making the Iranian case a wider network of sponsorship rather than a single bilateral relationship. The comparison also qualifies the argument about conflict prolongation. External support clearly

increased the resources and staying power of supported actors. It also changed territorial and bargaining conditions. However, neither case permits the conclusion that sponsorship alone determined the duration of the war. The conflict was shaped simultaneously by domestic repression, opposition fragmentation, jihadist competition, Russian intervention, Turkish military activity, Israeli operations, regional rivalry, and the changing capacities of the Syrian government. External sponsorship is therefore better understood as a "conflict-conditioning mechanism": it altered the incentives and capabilities of actors and thereby affected the trajectory of the conflict without constituting an independent explanation for its duration.

A further implication concerns sovereignty. In both cases, external sponsorship contributed to the fragmentation of authority within Syria, although in different ways. The US–SDF partnership strengthened a territorially concentrated non-state-led administration in the northeast, while Iranian support strengthened a network of regime-aligned armed actors operating alongside state institutions. Neither model produced a straightforward transfer of political authority to the sponsor. Instead, both created layered forms of authority in which Syrian state institutions, local actors, and foreign-backed organizations interacted and competed.

Conclusions

This article compared the United States–SDF and Iran–Hezbollah/allied-militia relationships to examine how different models of external sponsorship shaped the Syrian civil war between 2011 and December 2024. The central finding is that external sponsorship influenced the conflict primarily by altering the capabilities, territorial positions, and bargaining power of non-state actors and their state partners. The two cases, however, demonstrate different mechanisms of influence. US support for the SDF was primarily organized around the defeat of the Islamic State. It provided the SDF with substantial military and operational advantages and helped the organization expand and consolidate territorial control in northeastern Syria. At the same time, the partnership remained strategically conditional. The SDF's political objectives, especially its demand for a durable form of local autonomy, did not fully coincide with US priorities. Tensions with Turkey and changes in US policy consequently exposed the limits of a partnership built around a narrower operational mission. Iran's relationship with Hezbollah and allied militias was more closely connected to the survival of the Assad government and to Iran's regional security strategy. Iranian assistance strengthened regime-aligned forces, increased the role of non-state armed actors in the conflict, and helped sustain the government's military position. Hezbollah's involvement and the mobilisation of other foreign fighters also expanded the geographic and organizational scope of the conflict. This contributed to the internationalization of the war and complicated efforts to establish a settlement acceptable to the multiple actors involved. The comparison therefore answers the research question in qualified terms. Different sponsorship models produced different effects because they varied in strategic purpose, sponsor control, proxy autonomy, and institutional embeddedness. US support was more operationally focused and conditional, whereas Iran's sponsorship was more deeply integrated into a long-term regional security network. Both nevertheless affected the balance of power and narrowed the space for an uncomplicated political settlement. The study does not conclude that external sponsorship was the sole cause of the Syrian war's duration. Rather, the evidence indicates that sponsorship interacted with domestic conflict, regime strategies, opposition fragmentation, jihadist mobilisation, and interventions by other states. External actors therefore functioned as conflict-conditioning forces that reshaped the trajectory of an already complex civil war. This distinction is important both analytically and for conflict-resolution policy: negotiations that address only domestic actors are unlikely to be sufficient when external sponsors and their non-state partners possess independent security and political interests. The study is limited by its reliance on secondary sources and by the non-identical organizational character of the two cases.

Future research could strengthen the analysis through interviews with Syrian, Kurdish, Lebanese, and international actors; systematic event datasets; and comparisons with other cases of proxy sponsorship. Such research would help establish more precisely when external assistance escalates conflict, when it stabilizes a partner, and when it creates incentives for negotiated settlement.

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The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Use of Artificial Intelligence

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