

## Proxy Forces in Counter-Insurgency Operations

Sarder Ali Haider<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>PhD Researcher, Bangladesh University of Professionals, Dhaka, Bangladesh

**\*Corresponding Author**  
Sarder Ali Haider

### Article History

Received: 18.09.2021

Accepted: 25.10.2021

Published: 14.11.2021

**Abstract:** This article analyses the feasibility and possible utilization of proxy forces in the counter-insurgency operations. It discusses the characteristics, sponsorship and likely pattern of their employment. A detail analysis of benefits and risks of the employment of proxy forces also have been conducted. Data was collected and examined from a comprehensive variety of secondary source documents. A descriptive, qualitative research methodology has been adopted. A good number of pertinent books and publications have been consulted and relevant case studies are analyzed. An effort has been taken to ascertain the possible areas for further study. According to the present trend, the utilization of proxy forces might become the norm in the upcoming days. Although the control and management of these unique forces are challenging, being a substitute of regular force, those are adept of fetching success in counter-insurgency operations.

### Highlights

- Basic idea of proxy force in general.
- Ideology and benefits of the sponsors and proxy forces.
- Risks and benefits of utilizing the proxy force in counter-insurgency operations.

Suggested control and management mechanism of proxy forces.

**Keywords:** Proxy force, Counter-insurgency operation, Exploitation, Risk and Benefits, Control mechanism.

**Copyright © 2021 The Author(s):** This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use provided the original author and source are credited.

## INTRODUCTION

'Proxy forces' had been an essential tool in history for many years. The basic entreaty of this irregular force is to act as a 'substitute' and ensure achievement of desired objectives. By using the proxy force, the sponsor states avoid direct participation of regular forces. Proxy force involves tactfulness, secrecy, common interest and ability to accomplish the mission. The way of execution might be different based on the situation, mission and ability of the opponents. The use of military equipment by proxy forces may not be always necessary; sometimes tactful approaches of an unarmed movement might bring comparatively

better outcomes. According to different events of history, there were good uses of proxy forces all the time; however, the pattern of use may not be similar like the present days. During cold war, both U.S. and the then Soviet Union exploited proxy forces without involving their own soldiers against each other.

There has been an enormous use of proxy forces in the Middle East, Central Asia and Eastern European countries in the recent history. The powerful countries are getting more interested in using proxy force for attaining financial benefits, avoiding discontent of their own country people, opportunity of avoiding responsibility etc. In

**Citation:** Sarder Ali Haider (2021). Proxy Forces in Counter-Insurgency Operations. *Glob Acad J Humanit Soc Sci*; Vol-3, Iss-5 pp- 193-198.

counter insurgency operations, if proxy forces are well-nurtured, it can bring better success. Normally, it is difficult to bring success in the insurgency operations; the involvement of ethnic local people makes the operation difficult. There are many instances, permanent peace could not be ensured even after signing of peace accord. The prevailing situation of Northeast India, Myanmar and Chittagong Hill Tracts could be the better examples.

In broad terms, there might be two types of proxy forces according to their employment; Private Military Companies (PMCs) and Pro-Government militias (PGMs). In counter-insurgency operations, PGMs are more effective than other type of proxy forces. Although proxy forces have traditionally been regarded as irregular fighters, nowadays they often possess more sophisticated military capabilities. This article studied the possible uses of proxy forces in counter-insurgency operations and analyzed the reasons and impact of their usage, benefits and risks of their employment and suggested measures of control and management mechanisms.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The use of 'Proxy force' is a complex and diversified affair. Renowned scholars on this field pronounced differently regarding its definition. While writing this article, a good number of books and articles have been consulted. The publications on proxy forces might be reviewed according to following four categories:

### **Based on Definition**

According to Senior Policy Analyst, International Security Program David Sterman, the term "proxy" is some armed non-state actors which might be a part of "hybrid warfare". This unique force might be called as "proxy" "auxiliary", "surrogate" and "affiliated" and all these terminologies could be denoted interchangeably (Sterman, 2019). Professor Andrew Mumford thinks that traditional proxy warfare involves the intervention of a third party in order to influence the strategic outcome in favour (Mumford, 2013, p. 40). The term "surrogate warfare" has been introduced by Andreas Krieg and Jean-Marc Rickli (Krieg and Rickli, 2018, p. 115).

### **Pro-Government militias (PGMs)**

Pro-Government militias (PGMs) represent a third type of proxy force that appears when a sponsor state is confronted by an ethnic local tribal based insurgency or anti-secessionist groups. Paul Rogers, Professor of Peace Studies at Bradford University called the proxy wars as "war by remote control" (Rogers, 2016, p. 160). Different authors have discussed PGMs by highlighting case studies as examples. Professor Andrew Mumford deliberated

the initiative of Libya during the cold war, a "coalition proxy warfare" was initiated. Russia sponsored the rebel Libyan National Army (LNA) while Turkey supported the Government of National Accord's (GNA) forces (Mumford, 2013a, p. 45). Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) were exploited and utilized by the USA as the proxy forces against ISIS in Syria from 2016 (Robinson, 2017). Iran utilized its elite Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to recruit and train the proxy guerrillas which are believed to be targeted against Israel, Saudi Arabia and hostile Western powers. According to J. Matthew McInnis, Iran had more than a quarter of a million personnel in its proxy forces (McInnis, 2016, Levitt, 2020, p. 4). British security forces backed and equipped the paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland which conducted extra-judicial killings ruthlessly during the Irish republican movement (Cad wallader, 2013). GAL (Grupos Antiterroristas de Liberación) were the death squads established illegally by officials of the Spanish government to counter the ETA (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna) terrorist group in the 1980s (Woodworth, 2003). Colombia exploited a good number of right wing paramilitary groups against the civilians alleged of supporting leftist guerrillas (Hanson, 2008).

### **State-Parallel PGMs**

Some countries like Ukraine, Iraq, Syria and Nigeria have been reported to utilize "State-Parallel PGMs" and countered the violence creating groups (Felbab-Brown, 2020). The Iraqi Ministry of the Interior has reportedly created some Shia paramilitary forces for defying opposing armed miscreants (Aliyev, 2016, p. 504).

### **Private Military Companies (PMCs)**

Private Military Companies (PMCs) are organized to provide military services on contract basis. These groups are also called 'mercenaries'. Day by day, the use of PMCs is on the rise by the major powers. PMCs also perform peacekeeping tasks for the UN and non-governmental organizations (Pfaff and Miene, 2019). Russia's Wagner Group and 'Chinese Blackwater' are very renowned in this aspect. 'The Tanmen Maritime Militia' is known as China's 'Little Blue Men' for its role in grey zone operations in the Pacific (Green et al., 2017, p. 11). The Wagner Group deployed over 2,000 troops in Syria. It is providing military, security and training services in the Central African Republic (CAR), Burundi and Sudan. Besides that, Wagner has reportedly become involved in the CAR's mining industry (Stronski, 2020). Turkey's SADAT Inc, is well coordinated with IRGC and the Wagner Group. SADAT provides training and consultancy services in various Muslim countries (Jacinto, 2017).

## METHODOLOGY

Data was collected basically from secondary sources which include books, journal articles, newspaper articles, empirical research reports etc. Data has been analyzed from a wide range of secondary source documents. A descriptive, qualitative research methodology was applied while writing this article. This involved literature reviews and case studies for an in-depth understanding of the topic. Possible areas have been identified for further research.

### Analysis and Findings

Two broad categories of proxy forces, i.e. PMCs and PGMs might be again sub-categorized according to their ideological aspects, interest, logistics & its replenishments, employments, ability of achieving success etc. In counter-insurgency operations, popular support is a major factor for reaching the desired objectives. The proxy forces based on the local ethnic communities normally generate success easily in counter insurgency operations. However, the following points are considered while classifying the proxy forces:



**Figure-1: Classification of Proxy Forces in an Insurgency Situation**

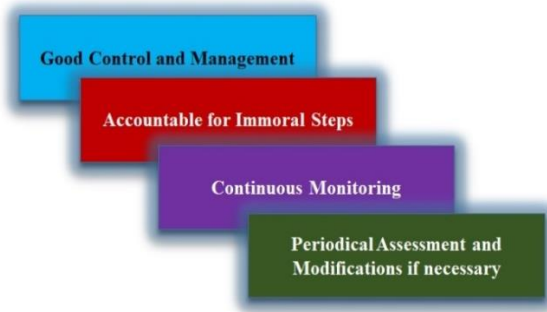
Contemporary proxy forces are characterized by complexity, contradiction and ambiguity. Their degree of dependence on their sponsors varies considerably, as does their scope for independent action, both of which can be changed over the time.

PMCs are not normally used in counter-insurgency operations. In an insurgency situation, the culture, ethnic practices, religion and emotion of general ethnic people are the major factors. The operators of PMCs work for their monetary benefits only. They would try to bring success at any cost within shortest possible time. They are not likely to provide importance of the psychology and ethnic practices of the locals. So, the act of PMCs might become detrimental in an insurgency situation. According to previous experiences, it has been observed that the ethnic groups those contradict understandings with the main insurgent groups and preserve some amount of popular support might be

selected as a proxy force after necessary negotiations and analysis.

## DISCUSSION

Although there are variations of proxy forces, complying with some common control mechanisms keep them in the appropriate track and the development of situations proceed towards the desired path.



**Figure-2: Control and Management of Proxy Forces in Counter-Insurgency Operations**

It is not so easy to materialize all above control and management mechanisms. The background of proxy forces activists in counter insurgency operations are not like the disciplined soldiers. As the PGMs or sponsor state backed insurgents are more successful, normally the activists are recruited from the local ethnic communities. The activists of proxy forces are likely to be ill-disciplined, less educated and poorly trained. Normally they all remain in a tilted situation; sometimes they might act reverse after receiving a good offer from the opponents as they also belong to an ethnic community of the same area.

In an insurgency situation, PGMs are more effective than the regular forces due to their advantages of familiarity with the locals. They can collect workable tactical information and provide idea about the local culture, ethnicities and practices (Hughes, 2016, p. 199). It reduces the risks of conflict escalation (Byman, 2018). According to renowned author Edward Nicolae Luttwak, the use of proxy force is comparatively cheaper (Luttwak, 1995).

### Benefits and Risks

There are both benefits and risks of using the proxy forces. These are cost effective and in most of the cases direct involvement of regular military forces may not get public support (Mumford, 2013, pp. 41-42). But the use of PMCs sometimes creates negative effects on the political, economic and reputational aspects (Mackinnon, 2020). The ethnic insurgents as proxy forces might also create problems. Sometimes their objectives and interests

may not match with the sponsors. At the same time, these people might become unreliable and unruly. In one of the occasions, the pro-Russian rebel commanders became unrestrained in Eastern Ukraine, which the Russia's Wagner PMC intervened and brought the situation on order (Kramer, 2015; Giglio, 2019). PGMs also create challenges and risks for the sponsors. It also might generate political and reputational scandals (Alden, 2011). At many instances, the proxy forces carry out human rights abuses, illegal tax collections and other immoral activities which might diminish their acceptance and credibility; this situation becomes more challenging if the nexus between the proxy forces and sponsors lose confidentiality.

### **Suggested Measures**

Proxy forces were traditionally expected to provide a degree of plausible deniability for a sponsor. It is difficult to highlight a common strategy of controlling the proxy forces due to their diversified characteristics. The sponsor state needs to have detailed study on the proxy forces which are likely to be employed. The situation may not always be ideal, there might be challenges during control and management of the proxy forces. In an insurgency situation, although there might be an ideological spirit among the insurgents, considering the human characteristics, a possible internal personality clash is always expected. So, the intelligence agencies should work relentlessly to identify the appropriate groups led by the leaders who like to think beyond their ideology for grabbing power or wealth. The intelligence agencies of the sponsor state may look for the following characteristics within the targeted proxy force.

- Lack of ideological spirit among the leaders of that group; he gives more priority to his own power and wealth.
- The suggested group should be either logistically and militarily supported by the sponsor or self-dependent. However, if the proxy group is self-dependent, normally they regulate the terms and conditions.
- A secured means of control mechanism will assist the sponsor to maintain a highest possible secrecy.
- Availability of indirect means of logistics and military replenishment is expected.
- The suggested proxy forces need to have acceptance among the general ethnic tribal people. Although the military capabilities of proxy forces will be utilized to counter the opponent insurgents, they will also work for raising popular support in favour of the sponsor state through counselling and motivation. At the same the adequate pacification programs of the sponsor state should be augmented.

- It is not suggested that proxy forces are maintaining themselves by extortion and illegal tax collections. This practice might question their acceptance among the general ethnic communities; again it may not be cost effective to maintain the proxy forces by the sponsor state. To address this issue, there might be some economic projects for the proxy forces; these will also create job opportunities for the local people also.
- Gradually the activists of proxy forces might be encouraged to join the national politics. During the end state of an insurgency situation, the leaders of proxy forces might be given central responsibility. At the same time, the future life of the proxy force leaders should be made secure and comfortable.

In counter-insurgency operations, the proxy forces might be utilized on different occasions at the tactical level. The responsible officer of the regular forces should maintain a secure means of communication with the proxy forces. He should understand their mental and physical strength by regular interactions. There might be modifications of approach based on the changed scenario. There are question marks on the legal status of the proxy forces and the issue aggravates more if any violations of human rights are committed. Considering the overall aspects, there should be a thorough analysis of risks and benefits on the use of proxy force in counter-insurgency operations.

### **CONCLUSION**

Proxy forces have become a priority on many occasions in the present days. In counter-insurgency operations, these are more desired due to its success possibilities. According to history, gaining victory in counter-insurgency operations is difficult by using the regular forces; in most of the cases, the issue remains unsettled for years together. General ethnic people become highly sufferers as a result of prolonged tensions. Sometimes the regular soldiers tend to make mistakes by their conduct with the local people. So both the sides, that means the insurgents and the regular forces exploit the general people. The general people cooperate with the insurgents either due to fear of losing life or they might preserve the similar ideology like the insurgents. However, sometimes the misconducts of the regular forces, undesired political decisions and propaganda campaign of the insurgents influence the general people to support the insurgents. The use of proxy forces in counter insurgency operations elucidate maximum of the barriers for achieving permanent stability in an insurgency situation. The insurgency situation is so complicated that signing of a peace accord doesn't guarantee permanent peace and stability. So, even after signing a peace

accord situation, the proxy force might become a good substitute of the regular forces. The challenges related to the proxy forces generated during the end state of an operation might also be addressed by proactive planning, good coordination and workable management.

## REFERENCES

- Ahram, A. (2011). *Proxy Warriors: The Rise and Fall of State-Sponsored Militias*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Alden, C., Thakur, M., & Arnold, M. W. (2011). *Militias and the Challenges of Post-conflict Peace: Silencing the Guns*. Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press.
- Aliyev, H. (2016). 'Strong Militias, Weak States and Armed Violence: Towards a Theory of State Parallel Militias', *Security Dialogue*, 47(6), 498–516. doi: 10.1177/0967010616669900.
- Amnesty International. (2014). Ukraine must stop ongoing abuses and war crimes by pro-Ukrainian volunteer forces. 8 September. Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2014/09/ukraine-must-stop-ongoing-abuses-and-war-crimes-pro-ukrainian-volunteer-forces/> (Accessed: October 5, 2021)
- Byman, D. L. (2018). 'Why Engage in Proxy War? A State's Perspective', Brookings. Available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/05/21/why-engage-in-proxy-war-a-states-perspective/> (Accessed: October 5, 2021).
- Cadwallader, A. (2013). *Lethal Allies: British Collusion in Ireland*. Cork: Mercier Press. Counter Extremism Project (2020a) *Kata'ib Hezbollah*. Available at: <https://www.counterextremism.com/threat/kata'ib-hezbollah> (Accessed: October 5, 2021).
- Campbell, B. (2002). Death squads: Definition, problems, and historical context. In: Campbell, B., Brenner, A. (eds) (2002). *Death Squads in Global Perspective: Murder with Deniability*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1–26.
- Carey, S., Colaresi, M., & Mitchell, N. (2015). Governments, informal links to militias, and accountability. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 59(5), 850–876.
- Clayton, G., & Thomson, A. (2014). The enemy of my enemy is my friend.... The dynamics of self-defence forces in irregular war: The case of the Sons of Iraq. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 37(11): 920–935.
- Cohen, D., & Nordås, R. (2015). Do states delegate shameful violence to militias? Patterns of sexual violence in recent armed conflicts. *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59(5): 877–898.
- Feldbab-Brown, V. (2020). 'As Conflict Intensifies in Nigeria's North-East, So Does Reliance on Troubled Militias', Brookings, 21 April 2020. Available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/04/21/asconflict-intensifies-in-nigerias-north-east-so-too-does-a-reliance-on-troubled-militias/> (Accessed: October 5, 2021).
- Giglio, M. (2019). 'Inside the Shadow War Fought by Russian Mercenaries', Buzz Feed News, 17 April 2019. Available at: <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/mikegiglio/inside-wagner-mercenaries-russia-ukraine-syria-prigozhin> (Accessed: October 5, 2021).
- Green, A., Hicks, K. H., & Schaus, J. (2017). 'Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia: The Theory and Practice of Gray Zone Deterrence', Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 2017. Available at: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/countering-coercion-maritime-asia> (Accessed: October 5, 2021).
- Hanson, S. (2008). 'Colombia's Right Wing Paramilitary and Splinter Groups', Council on Foreign Relations, 10 January 2008. Available at: <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/colombias-right-wing-paramilitaries-and-splinter-groups> (Accessed: October 5, 2021).
- Hughes, G. (2012). *My Enemy's Enemy: Proxy Warfare in International Politics*. Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press. Hughes, G. (2016) 'Militias in Internal Warfare: From the Colonial Era to the Contemporary Middle East', *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 27(2), pp. 196–225. doi: 10.1080/09592318.2015.1129171.
- Jacinto, L. (2017). 'Turkey's Post-Coup Purge and Erdogan's Private Army', *Foreign Policy*, 13 July 2017. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/07/13/turkeys-post-coup-purge-and-erdogans-private-army-sadat-perincek-gulen/> (Accessed: October 5, 2021).
- Kramer, A. E. (2015). 'Cossacks Face Grim Reprisals from Onetime Allies in Eastern Ukraine', *New York Times*, 4 August 2015. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/05/world/europe/cossacks-face-reprisals-as-rebelgroups-clash-in-easternukraine.html#:~:text=Cossacks%20Face%20Grim%20Reprisals%20From%20Onetime%20Allies%20in,but%20are%20now%20being%20purged%20from%20separatist%20ranks> (Accessed: October 5, 2021).
- Krieg, A., & Rickli, J. M. (2018). 'Surrogate Warfare: The Art of War in the 21st Century?' *Defence Studies*, 18(2), 113–130. doi: 10.1080/14702436.2018.1429218.

- Levitt, M. (2020). 'Fighters Without Borders: Forecasting New Trends in Iran Threat Network Foreign Operations Tradecraft', CTC Sentinel, February 2020. Available at: <https://ctc.usma.edu/february-2020/> (Accessed: October 5, 2021).
- Luttwak, E. N. (1995). 'Towards Post-Heroic Warfare', *Foreign Affairs*, 74(3). Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/yugoslavia/1995-05-01/toward-post-heroic-warfare> (Accessed: October 5, 2021).
- Mackinnon, A. (2020). 'New Report Exposes Brutal Methods of Russia's Wagner Group', *Foreign Policy*, 11 June 2020. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/06/11/russia-wagner-group-methods-bouta-killingreport/> (Accessed: October 5, 2021).
- McInnis, J. M. (2016). 'Iranian Deterrence Strategy and the Use of Proxies', Statement before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 29 November 2016. Available at: [https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/112916\\_McInnis\\_Testimony.pdf](https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/112916_McInnis_Testimony.pdf) (Accessed: October 5, 2021).
- McAuley, J. (2004). 'Just fighting to survive': Loyalist paramilitary politics and the Progressive Unionist Party. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 16(3), 522-543.
- Mumford, A. (2013). 'Proxy Warfare and the Future of Conflict', *The RUSI Journal*, 158(2), pp. 40-46. doi: 10.1080/03071847.2013.787733.
- Oppenheim, B., Steele, A., Vargas, J., & Weintraub, M. (2015). True believers, deserters, and traitors who leaves insurgent groups and why. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 59(5), 794-823.
- Pfaff, C. A., & Miene E. (2019). 'Strategic Insights: Five Myths Associated with Employing Private Military Companies', Strategic Studies Institute, 5 April 2019. Available at: <https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/strategic-insights-five-myths-associated-with-employing-private-military-companies/> (Accessed: October 5, 2021).
- Rauta, V. (2020). 'Proxy Warfare and the Future of Conflict: Take Two', *The RUSI Journal*, 165(2), 1-10. doi: 10.1080/03071847.2020.1736437.
- Robinson, L. (2017). 'SOF's Evolving Role: Warfare 'By', 'With', and 'Through' Local Forces', *The RAND Blog*, 9 May 2017. Available at: <https://www.rand.org/blog/2017/05/sofs-evolving-role-warfare-by-with-and-throughlocal.html> (Accessed: October 5, 2021).
- Rogers, P. (2017) *Irregular War: The New Threat from the Margins*. London: I.B. Taurus.
- Serman, D. (2019) 'How Do We Move Beyond 'Proxy' Paralysis', *New American Weekly*, 7 March 2019. Available at: <https://www.newamerica.org/weekly/redfine-proxy-warfare-strategy-identity/> (Accessed: October 5, 2021).
- Stronski, P. (2020) 'Implausible Deniability: Russia's Private Military Companies', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2 June 2020. Available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/06/02/implausible-deniabilityrussia-s-private-military-companies-pub-81954> (Accessed: October 5, 2021).
- Woodworth, P. (2003) *Dirty War, Clean Hands: ETA, The GAL and Spanish Democracy*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.