

Using non-state proxies

-The use of armed groups in the greater Middle East after the Cold War

Proposal for a PhD project – November 2011

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Table of contents

Introduction	1
Background	2
Research status and relevance.....	3
Theory	5
Problem.....	6
Research approach	6
Method and disposition.....	8
Contributions and limitations.....	10
Supervisor	11
The project timetable	11
References and litterateur	12

Introduction

This PhD project aims at examining states' use of armed groups. The project will address the use of Non-state Proxies (NSPs) in the post Cold War era, especially in regards to how these actors have been used in the greater Middle East. The argument put forward in the project can be divided into two parts. 1.) That there in recent conflicts has been a growing tendency to use NSPs by both states in support of the current world order and states in opposition to it, and that the reason for this is to be sought in the current international system.

Recent findings shows that a power transfer have taken place after the end of the Cold War, whereby state can be seen as weaker and armed groups as stronger. Combined with the growing tendency to use NSPs this leads to the second part of the argument. 2.) That the shift in power distribution has increased the level of potential risk involved in using these kinds of actors, and that this varies depending on the state's goals and ideological compatibility with the NSP.

While the use of armed groups may seem as a relatively cheap way to conduct balancing or obtaining specific goals there is, due to the power transfer, greater potential risk involved for the patron state. The empirical aims of the project are to analyze four specific cases that will

contribute to a better understanding of the general patterns in play. The analysis will not only give an interesting insight into the patterns that have occurred, but will outline the levels of potential risks involved. The theoretical perspective of the project is to establish a contributory framework for analyzing states use of armed groups in a realist tradition. The aim is to better understand why, how and when states use and thereby empower these actors.

Hence the concert output of this project is a result based on four specific cases that will proof that using NSPs has greater cost attached to it, due to the systemic reality and shows the similarities and differences in the use of these proxies. Thereby contradicting the existing belief that not only does the use of NSPs, reduce cost, conserve resources, increase flexibility, but it allows sponsor states to do so at very low risk. This would place this project at the forefront of the debate on the use of non-state actors and armed groups and has lead to the formulation of the main research question: *How is state use of armed groups as proxies in the post Cold War world to be understood?*

Background

The use or support of armed groups in obtaining specific goal is hardly new in world history. However the fact that such support still is practiced by states under the current world order cannot be attributed to great power or superpower rivalries as was once the case. The fact that the use of NSPs is a tool that even the world's only superpower uses has increased the need to understand why states in the post Cold War world still use armed groups. To better understand this it is vital to look at the series of factors that have altered the reality of using NSPs.

These include but are not limited to:

1. The shift in the wake of The Second World War when a new trend emerged and these relatively weak actors began to win wars against much stronger opponents (Creveld 1991).
2. The problems experienced among democratic nations of having to balance between, soldiers return in bodybags and deploying counterinsurgency tactics, whereby increasing the ferocity of war. These are two options that if unmanaged can have great political cost (Merom 2003).
3. The consequence of the end of the Cold War, with regard to a greater risk aversion (Luttwak 2001).
4. The emergence of a unipolar world order that left some states in opposition to, but without the means to balance the world's only remaining superpower (Hansen 2000, 2011; Hansen, Toft & Wivel 2009).
5. And the decrease in the remaining superpower's direct influence on regional power struggles (Buzan & Wæver 2003; Buzan 2008; Frazier & Stewart-Ingersoll 2012).

All these factors combine to draw a completely new picture of how the position of states and armed groups have changed both in regards to restrictions and newly found power. The continued use of armed groups by states has already led to a power transfer that has altered the positions of

states and armed groups. This has in turn changed the way in which these entities should be seen in relation to each other.

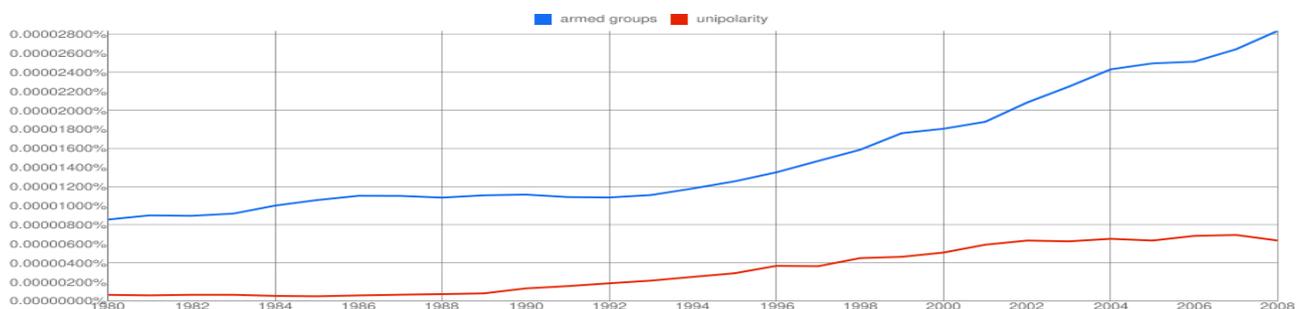
While the changes have occurred on a systemic level there are some regions that are more prone to see the use of NSPs as part of the overall balance of power (BoP). The Middle East is in this regard of special interest. The region has been the stage of superpower interest both during and after the Cold War, and has seen a great deal of outside intervention. These interventions have in many cases been in the form of support for armed groups, both by nations in opposition to and by those in support of, the current international order. Though it may be for different reasons that these states chose to use NSPs to obtain equally different goals, there still seems to be a lot of similarities.

While Iran's interests in the golf and Iraq remain strong, there seems to be little doubt that being in opposition to the US has had a confining effect on Iranian maneuverability in regard to balancing options. The same can be said of their allies in the Levant, the Syrians, who are trying to walk the thin line between balancing Israel and avoiding becoming an Iranian pawn. At the same time the US and later the NATO-alliance has had problems with regards to intervening in regional affairs, mostly due to fear of political consequences. This has led to an active use of regional NSPs to be the 'boots on the ground'. Interestingly all have opted to use NSPs in some form or another to counter their limitations with regards to the use of force.

Research status and relevance

For some time the amount of academic literature on the subject of armed groups has been growing (see graph 1.). Most conflicts in the post Cold War world from Afghanistan to Iraq, Lebanon, Indonesia, Colombia and Libya have all seen the involvement of armed groups which in turn is reflected in the increased interest in these kinds of actors.

Graph 1. This graph depicts the increase in frequency that “armed groups” (top line) and “unipolarity” (bottom line) has been used in the English literature from 1980 to 2008.



Source: Google Ngram. It should be noted that this includes all literature in the Google database and while this does not depict the exact amount or proportions in relation to academic literature it does give an indication of general tendencies.

The literature seems to be divided into several specific categories, three of which are of interest here. The first category is that of the historic backtrackers. These see the current reemergence of armed groups on the battlefield as a case of history repeating and emphasizes that the uniqueness lies in the survivability of this type of actor as a phenomenon in the modern world. While there is little doubt that there are similarities with other actors through history, it seems little has been done to explain these in the context of state security and the changes to and uniqueness of, the systemic situation. Another tendency lies in dividing into types, the consequence being the inability to explain armed groups that transcend this division.

The second category deals with armed groups as ascending or accented, to becoming actors on a systemic level. Here armed groups are seen as more diverse and mimicking states in a search for legitimacy. This research deals with a wide array of armed groups from international terror organizations, insurgencies, rebels to warlord organizations and puts forward under what conditions these can be seen as *like units*. While this category of research does seem to have taken into account the notion of the states being weakened as a result of the post Cold War situation, there is given little attention to the role of the sponsor states and what role armed groups play in the BoP.

A third category sees armed groups as part of the overall security landscape, here little emphasis is placed on the changing position of these groups. The general notion is that of a status quo in relation to the power divide between armed groups and states. This is based on the idea that without the sponsoring state the armed group would risk its basis for existence. The argument is that while groups may seek to obtain specific goals this is only possible with the consent of the patron state and that this again varies depending on the security situation of the patron state. Though this favors the notion of state security in relation to armed groups, it fails to take into account the change in the international system and the altered conditions under which states have to maneuver.

These three categories are by no means the only categories of research dealing with armed groups, but these are the ones relating most closely to the proposed project. The tendency has so far been to look at armed groups as the primary actor and less on the states sponsoring these groups. Also there has been little done to outline patterns for explaining why states in support of the current world order use armed groups. There seems to be little doubt that states remain the principal actors in the international system and that this emphasizes their security concerns in relation to each other as the main reason to maintain the BoP. Exploring the motivations behind the use of NSP would give a new insight into an aspect of the security dilemmas that nations face under the current world order. At the same time as adding a dimension to the security dilemma this would examine the potential pitfalls and risks involved in using such groups.

Theory

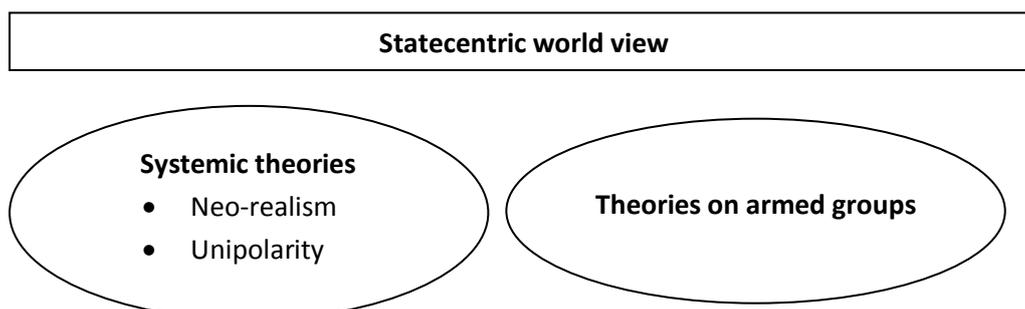
The basis for this proposal rests on well established international relations theories in the realist tradition. These are chosen for their ability to explain different aspects of the dynamics in play. These will in conjunction give a newer and more complete picture than is otherwise available. Hence the theoretical framework is build in segments that all can be used to cast light on different elements used together these will yield an extensive debt to the project. Therefore the theories presented can be said to be related to some extent.

For establishing the basic international level and putting forward the mechanisms and frameworks which actors in the system must relate to, Waltzs Neo-realist theory is chosen. This is done because of the theory's ability to simplify and outline the nature of the systemic (Waltz 1979, 2001). Because there are limitations to the ways in which non-state actors can be addressed in a theory that puts all emphasis on states, there is need to supplement this theory. Another limitation is that the theory fails to predict the current situation with one superpower.

To build on the systemic explanations of Neo-realism, a more detailed view of the current international world order is needed. The theory that provides the systemic level with explanatory power in the current world order is that of Hansens Unipolarity theory. This theory has the ability to give explanation to the position of states in relation to the current world order. In relation to this project Unipolarity theory will provide the setting and conditions under which states on both sides of the international order will have to confine themselves (Hansen 2000, 2011; Hansen, Toft & Wivel 2009).

While these theories explain the systemic aspects of the international system they lack in explaining the inner workings of the defined battle space where the NSP is to operate. Therefore to examine the use of the NSPs, theory drawing on the new role of these actors will be used. Because the theories on armed groups vary in the way they can be used in relation to neo-realist theory a combination of these will best serve the purpose of this project. Most likely a combination of Vincis theory of international relations of armed groups (Vinci 2009), Ahrams theory on state-sponsored militias (Ahram 2011) and Brookers theory on types of stateless warfare (Brooker 2010), will be used. Defining this will be a part of the process in defining the final theoretical basis for the research design.

Together these aspects of the actors and the systemic level will set up a framework where states will be of primary interest.



While these theories are the basis of the project it would also be interesting to include theories that address the regional. However this would most likely be in the reflective stage of the project and will be addressed later on.

Problem

The problem addressed in this project is that of the relative ease and low cost associated with the use of armed groups as NSPs, portrayed in much of the academic literature (Wennmann 2010, Andres, Wills & Griffiths 2005, Record 2002, Loveman 2002 and Towle 1980). In contrast this project claims this assumption not only to be falls but in some relations to have the opposite effect. The reason for this lies in the tendency to underestimate the costs involved due to a misunderstanding of what the systemic situation is doing to the relation.

The main puzzle for the proposed project can be formulated as follows: *How is state use of armed groups as proxies in the post Cold War world to be understood?* This question gives way for two underlying questions. First: *Is there a difference in the way that states opposed to the current world order and states in support of it use NSP's?* And second: *Is the current world order altering the level of risk involved in the using NSP's?*

Research approach

To understand the relation between systemic influence and relative risk levels the approach chosen for this project will first look at the systemic impact on states and how this affects the use of NSPs. Then the issue of compatibility will be addressed to outline the systemic impact in relation to the risk involved in using NSPs in light of these actors new found power. This is done by fist constructing the main hypotheses and two supporting hypotheses these will in turn outline the variable in play.

The main hypotheses: States use NSPs to counter restraints based in the current international system, thereby exposing themselves to potential risk.

On the basis of the main hypotheses there are constructed two supporting hypotheses that will address the two elements that together can cast light on the topic of the project and bring about an answer to the research question.

The first supporting hypotheses: The way in which states use NSPs depend on whether they are in support or opposition to the current world order.

In relation to the **first supporting hypotheses** there is a correlation between the independent variable of *position towards the world order* and the dependent variable *Using NSPs*.

While many of the scholars that have worked with armed groups have opted to operate with many specific categories and types. For this project however it would give merit to categorize these in relation to the way states tend to use them (the dependent variable). The divide goes in the direction of whether their intension is to use these actors internally in a defined national theater or opposing an external actor. These two ways in which NSPs are used by states seem to vary depending on whether the state using the NSP is in support of or in opposition to, the current world order (the independent variable). It is expected that this in turn will correlate with the types of goals that those same states wish to achieve by supporting the NSP in question (see table 1.).

Table 1: Deviations in the use of NSP by states in support or opposition to the current world order in regards to overall goals.

<i>Position towards the world order/ The use of NSP types</i>	States in support of the world order	States in opposition to the world order
NSP acting in relation to internal actors	Long term goals Regime change	Short term goals Blackmail
NSP acting in relation to external actors	(Short term goals)*	Long term goal Semi-allies

*This combination has yet to be seen.

The **second supporting hypotheses**: The current world order is altering the level of risk involved in using NSPs, both in relation to the systemic effects on states and on the NSPs' themselves.

First the position of states in relation to the use of NSPs is expected to reveal a variation in relation to goals wished obtained by supporting these actors (see table 1.). Secondly the strength of NSPs in relation to states is tested by looking at the importance of ideological compatibility which is expected to indicate the level of risk (see table 2.).

The aim is to assess the risks to states when using NSPs. While there are a variety of ways a 'blow back' can manifest itself, there seems to be little merit in trying to categorize these. Instead the new position of the NSPs' seems better understood in relation to the power they have obtained not only by direct influence (or lack of the same) on the international system but also in relation to becoming a part on their patron states balancing capability. This will give an indication of how vulnerable the states goals are in relation to the ideological background and therefore compatibility with the NSP in question (see table 2.). Would this relation prove to have merit one implication would be altering the perception of ideology and alliance formation (Walt 1987), when it comes to NSPs.

Together the relationship between the overall goals of the states supporting the NSP and the compatibility of ideology could be used to give a risk assessment. As simplified in table 2.

Table 2: Shows the level of risk involved in the using NSP depending on ideological compatibility.

<i>Compatibility/Goals</i>	Ideological compatible	Ideological incompatible
NSPs used to obtain short term goals	High*	Low
NSPs used to obtain long term goal	Very low	Very High

*In this case the risk lies in the abandonment both in regards to consequences of mismanagement of image and in regards to the risk of the NSP felling abandoned and shifting allegiance.

Together these two supporting hypotheses look not only at the systemic impact on states directly but also indirectly by looking at the systemic impact on the act of using NSPs.

Method and disposition

The projects researchdesign will in essence be deductive in nature and will look to use existing theory to test the two supporting hypothesis set forward. This will in turn open op for bridging the gap between the existing theories and put forward a new framework for understanding the phenomenon.

First part of the project will examine the theoretical fundament. Here the relationship between states and the international system will be looked at and the ways states can be expected to act under the current system. In this part the framework for determining position to the current world order, what strategic tools are at these states disposal and how this determines the range of options available to them. This will draw on theories that relates to systemic impact both in relation to the unipolar situation but also in regards to looking at regional level dynamics.

The first part of the project will also look at the systemic influence on the non-state actors. Here the existing theory to great extend seems to agree on a rise in power to these actors while contributing this rise to a verity of factors. Here a framework will be set forward for determining the impact of the system on NSPs and how this effect relative strength and the relation to the sponsor state. Along with the systemic impact assessments a clear definition of ideological compatibility will be outlined.

The second part of the project will deal with the four chosen cases. While there has been a multitude of examples of states using NSPs these have been chosen for several reasons. The cases difference in relation to the independent variable, *position towards the world order*. All these NSP cases are situated in the greater Middle East. These are all examples of empowerment to a degree where there is little room for questioning the relationship between state and NSP.

The cases where states are in opposition to the world order are:

Syria and Hizbollah: This case will be used to demonstrate a case of ideological incompatibility. At the same time this is an example of a state trying to use a NSP to achieve long term goals. The risk lies in the influence this new strong actor brings to the Lebanese theater, both in relation to unpredictability but also in relation to the power shift in Lebanon in favor of a particular segment of the population, which can be seen as countering Syrian interests

Iran and The Mahdi Army: Here is an example of ideological compatibility. Here the state uses the NSP to achieve short term goals. The risk has here been in the overall mismanagement of potential long term strategic interests in relation to the future Iraqi state. Like the Syrian case the NSPs are employed to deal with external actors, but in this case the externals are in the national theater.

The analysis of these two cases will primarily rely on existing literature. This is done because of the inaccessibility of data from Iran and Syria. Specifically what are sought are official declarations or documents that would allow an assessment of strategic goals in supporting these NSPs.

The cases where states are in support of the world order are:

US and The United Islamic Front (a.k.a. The Northern Alliance): This is a case of incompatible ideology and a case of supporting NSPs that represent specific parts of the population. The NSP in this case is used to obtain a short term goal, the ousting of the Taliban. The following period shows inadequacies in using the NSP and a need to put 'boots on the ground' which could be related to a shift in political goals. Here again the issue of empowerment is raised. This is a case of using NSPs in relation to an internal threat.

US/NATO The NTC (National Transitional Council): While this case is rather new there are similarities to the other case involving world order supporter states. This case is different in the sense that for the time being, there seems to be ideological compatibility. This is again an example of using NSP in regards to internal enemies. This will be the last case to be analyzed due to the volatile nature of this case.

In these two cases the analysis will be conducted, based on a wider variety of sources. Official statements on strategic aims, military assessment reports and the UN resolutions (1373 & 1970) on which the justification for intervention was based, will be analyzed. The results will then be subject for additional scrutiny when put in context with existing literature. Again the aim here is to assess the strategic goals in supporting these NSPs. Further analysis on the reason for these western powers to use NSPs will be conducted by looking at secondary sources that address the implications of the situation that unfolded after the Cold War ended.

The third part of the project will compare and discuss the findings of the four cases. This will then lay the basis for an assessment of the systemic impact in states and the use of NSPs. Finally a conclusion on states use of armed groups as proxies in relation to the current world order will be presented.

Contributions and limitations

The contribution of this project lies in the ability to contribute to the understanding of state behavior in the current international system. On a theoretical level, this will contribute to outline a framework for understanding the importance of NSPs. The basis for this lies in understanding states motives for using these based on systemic factors. This will enable a theoretical bridge explaining the new position of armed groups on the basis of looking at the states that use them. Where existing literature either concentrates on the armed groups as new actors or on states in relation to states this project includes the “missing” element of systemic influence due to supporting and via NSPs.

On an empirical level the project will contribute by comparing elements of widely different state/proxy relationships. The cases are all examples of outside entities distributing power to a segment of society thereby shifting the internal BoP, with the added risks that such interventions can result in. The empirical also adds a dimension in regards to understanding western support of groups inside the sovereign territory of another nation. Additionally an analysis of the relation between US/NATO and The NTC will be made mostly on the basis of articles and reports because of the actuality of the case.

The limitation lies in the focus on the four cases, though it is expected that some tendencies can be generalized, there is the risk that the finding will be region specific. Another limitation lies in the reliance on secondary literature and sources.

To summarize the contributions that this project can yield:

- Proving that using NSPs has greater cost attached to it due to the systemic reality of the post Cold War era.
- Formulating a theoretic framework for understanding states use of armed groups as proxies in this era.
- Explaining the uniqueness and likeness between states in regards to using NSPs, based on their position towards the world order.
- An insight in the relation between ideological compatibility and risk associated with using NSPs.
- Bridging a gap in the existing literature between the realist tradition of state centrality and the theories on armed groups.

Findings that are of interest to further research:

- With an assessment of the level of risk involved in using NSPs there lies the possibility of devising control mechanisms to counter such risks.
- Likewise the understanding of the mechanisms for state use of NSPs could be utilized to offset/or counter the use of NSPs.
- A greater understanding of the consequences of altering the BoP in a segmented society.

Supervisor

Professor Birthe Hansen, Department of Political Science, University of Copenhagen.

The project timetable

Semesters	Activity	Completed pages
1. Semester	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Literature review • Development of theory and methodology • Follow PhD courses • Introduction • Chapter 1 (Background) 	30-35
2. Semester	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kings College –visiting PhD-fellow • Follow courses in War studies research • Revise theory and methodology • Chapter 2 (Theory) • Chapter 3 (Methodology) 	55-60
3. Semester	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chapters 4 & 5 (opposing states) cases: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Syria and Hizbollah ○ Iran and the Mahdi army 	70-80
4. Semester	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaching seminar 'The cost of war in the new world order' • Chapter 6 (supporting states) case: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ US and The United Islamic Front 	35-45
5. Semester	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaching 'Armed groups' and 'Wars in the greater Middle East (in English)' • Chapter 7 (supporting states) case: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ US/NATO- allies and The NTC 	30-35
6. Semester	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dedicated writing and revision process • Chapter 8 (Discussion and Conclusion) • Hand in the finished PhD-project 	30-35 Total: 250-290

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