Dadparvar and Parto
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Great powers, the arming of non-state groups, and the prolongation of armed conflicts in the Middle East

Shabnam Dadparvar[1*] and Amin Parto[2]

*Correspondence:
Shabnam.dadparvar@gmail.com

[1] The Institute for History and Culture, Tianshui Normal University, Tianshui, Gansu 741000, People's Republic of China
[2] University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran

Abstract

This paper examines the policies of the United States and Russia in arming non-state actors in the Middle East, analysing their objectives, consequences, and implications for regional stability. The study's central question is: How have the actions of the US and Russia in arming non-state actors impacted the conflicts and stability in the Middle East? Using a qualitative analysis of case studies from Syria, Iraq, Libya, Sudan, and Yemen, the paper explores the differing strategic approaches of the two powers—America's tactical, short-term goals versus Russia's long-term, strategic objectives—and the resulting consequences for the region. The findings suggest that both powers' interventions have exacerbated instability, with the arming of non-state actors often leading to prolonged wars and the emergence of new conflicts. The involvement of regional powers, such as Iran, U.A.E and Türkiye, further complicates the situation, creating an endless cycle of proxy warfare. In contrast, China's abstention from arming non-state actors is driven by economic concerns and a preference for regional stability.

Keywords: Great powers, Proxy warfare, Non-state armed groups, Middle East, United States, Russia, Conflict prolongation

Introduction

Over the past decade, the influence of non-state armed groups across the Middle East has significantly increased. These groups have established governing structures, as seen in Yemen, Libya, Sudan, and Syria, or operate as states-within-states, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon. Their activities are deeply entwined with the region's ongoing conflicts. In Sudan, a civil war persists between the military-led government and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). In Yemen, the Houthis, who had previously reached a ceasefire agreement with Saudi Arabia and the Yemeni government, have escalated their actions, engaging in maritime and missile confrontations with Israel alongside a coalition of US, UK, and European forces. While the civil war in Libya between the internationally recognised government and Khalifa Haftar has subsided, the risk of renewed conflict remains. Syria remains a fractured state, with Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces and various opposition groups controlling territories and engaged in a "frozen conflict", marked by intermittent fighting between these groups, the Assad regime, and neighbouring states.

In Lebanon, Hezbollah, with an armed force larger than that of the Lebanese state, has engaged in direct conflict with Israel. Despite recent political shifts, Iraq continues to host numerous non-state factions, presenting potential for future clashes.

This article seeks to explore the dynamics between Great Powers and non-state armed groups in the Middle East, focusing on providing weaponry to these groups. Specifically, it examines the motivations behind arms transfers by powers such as the US and Russia, the consequences of such actions, and their impact on the prolonged armed conflicts in the region. This study employs a qualitative methodology to address these questions, utilising case studies from Yemen, Libya, Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq. The research investigates the strategic interests behind US and Russian arms transfers to non-state groups through analysis of primary and secondary sources, including government reports, arms trade data, and expert interviews. By comparing these cases, the study aims to assess the geopolitical consequences and the impact of external support on prolonging conflicts in the Middle East.[1]

Literature review

The contemporary literature on Non-State Armed Groups (NSAGs)—also called Violent Non-State Actors (VNSAs) or non-state armed actors—reveals significant variation in definitions and classifications. A substantial body of research aims to clarify the distinctions between NSAGs and other entities, such as terrorist networks, criminal organisations, and loosely organised armed factions. These distinctions are often drawn along several key dimensions, including the group's organisational structure, its use of violence against civilians, and its relationship with other international actors (Wright 2023, 70–71).

Several studies highlight the significance of NSAGs in international relations. For instance, Kenneth Waltz considers these groups as influential actors capable of altering the balance of power (Vinci 2009, 39–40). Moreover, a substantial body of literature addresses the legal implications of arming NSAGs under international law. The classical perspective asserts that, according to Additional Protocol I to the 1949 Geneva Conventions, the legitimacy of supplying arms to NSAGs should be restricted to groups engaged in anti-colonial, anti-occupation, or anti-racist struggles. Furthermore, transferring weapons to such groups must comply with international law, promote peace and security, prevent gross human rights violations, adhere to anti-terrorism conventions, and curb the spread of transnational organised crime (Clapham 2014, 165).

The opposing view of supporting NSAGs has been reinforced by the experiences of the Cold War era, during which such groups, frequently backed by the US or the Soviet Union in conflicts in Nicaragua, Angola, and Vietnam, were often involved in severe human rights violations and widespread criminal activities. These actions resulted in legal consequences in some instances, most notably when the US faced charges before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) due to its support for these groups (Ratner et al. 2009, 126, 153).

[1] For instance, in Syria, nonviolent NGOs faced harsh repression by the government. Similarly, opposition groups to the Syrian government targeted and suppressed many of these nonviolent NGOs due to their criticism. In Libya and Yemen, where political developments escalated into civil wars, the activities of nonviolent NGOs were significantly restricted (Roberts, Willis, McCarthy, and Garton Ash, 2016).

In contrast, emerging perspectives challenge the traditional, one-sided view of NSAGs, emphasising the potential benefits of engaging with them. Proponents of this view argue that, in certain contexts, engaging with NSAGs may be more effective than waiting to establish a unified, strong state. They advocate for constructive engagement, aiming to guide these groups toward goals such as security provision, civilian protection, counterterrorism, and other mutually beneficial outcomes rather than marginalising or weakening them (Ahram 2019, 35). These groups, it is suggested, can align with the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine by intervening in crises where swift and effective international action is lacking, thus helping to mitigate humanitarian disasters. By defending civilians, ensuring safe access to victims, and securing the delivery of aid, NSAGs can complement global efforts to fulfil R2P, particularly when unilateral action proves insufficient in addressing ongoing humanitarian crises (Nnawulezi and Nwaechefu 2022, 152). Furthermore, some scholars argue that supporting NSAGs can be crucial in state-building processes (Ntaka and Csicsmann 2021, 629). They contend that when such groups possess public support, internal cohesion, and international legitimacy, transforming violent control into political power can contribute positively to developing stable governance structures (Podder 2013, 34–35).

The support provided by Great Powers to NSAGs —particularly through the provision of arms, which goes beyond mere political backing—frequently surpasses the boundaries of international and humanitarian law. This support often extends beyond state-building goals, the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), or humanitarian concerns. Instead, arming NSAGs becomes a tool of proxy warfare, a strategic option within the broader foreign policy repertoire. While not an ideal solution, it is seen as a viable, low-cost alternative in great-power competition (Groh 2019, 202–204). Such support reflects a larger pattern of state rivalry, encompassing arms races, direct military confrontations, and covert operations. In cases where states, dissatisfied with the status quo and unable to confront their rivals directly, seek to advance their interests, they often resort to backing NSAGs to target their adversaries (Maoz and San-Akca 2012, 720–724). Great Powers, too, adhere to this strategic calculus.

The "substitution strategy" refers to situations where a state opts to employ a third-party actor, such as a non-state armed group, as a supplementary force or as a substitute for its military personnel. This approach is often adopted when a direct confrontation with a rival is deemed infeasible (Wiger and Atwell 2024, 21). However, the reliance on NSAGs is not solely motivated by the desire to avoid conflict escalation. Strategic considerations, such as reducing financial, human, and political costs, also significantly shape this choice. For example, as China emerges as a global superpower and US interest in counterinsurgency "quagmires" wanes following an economic downturn, the US has become increasingly reluctant to engage in new conflicts centred on counterterrorism or humanitarian intervention. Consequently, the US has increasingly prioritised support for proxies— NSAGs —as a strategic alternative (Mumford 2013, 40–46).

Support for NSAGs can either stabilise or destabilise a region, depending on the strategic objectives of the supporting power. A Great Power that openly supports an NSAG generally seeks to promote stability, often to solidify its geopolitical influence. In contrast, when support is covert, the goal is typically to maintain "plausible deniability", allowing the power to avoid direct attribution while still pursuing its strategic interests.

Regardless of the approach, the underlying objective in both cases is usually to gain or maintain a geopolitical advantage or to undermine a rival's position within a given region (Bryjka 2020, 194).

It is important to recognise that not all dimensions of support for NSAGs are driven solely by inter-state rivalry or the pursuit of geopolitical advantage. In some cases, support is directed not against a state but rather against another NSAG. This often occurs when a state lacks either the capacity or the political will to suppress a specific non-state group. In such instances, a state may opt to support one NSAG to counterbalance and suppress the influence of another, effectively using proxy forces to manage internal or regional dynamics (Krishnan 2019, 544).

While current studies on NSAGs —focusing on their definitions, use in foreign policy, legal and ethical implications, and role in great power competition—offer valuable insights, two critical issues remain underexplored. First, the impact of arming non-state groups, particularly by Great Powers, on the prolongation of armed conflicts in the Middle East has yet to be fully addressed. In addition to global powers, regional actors in the Middle East also provide substantial support to NSAGs, often through arms supplies rather than merely political or financial assistance. For example, Iran supports groups in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and Palestine; the UAE backs non-state groups in Sudan, Libya, and Yemen; Saudi Arabia has provided support to such groups in Yemen and, in the previous decade, in Syria; and Türkiye supports armed non-state groups in Syria.

Other Middle Eastern countries have historically engaged in similar practices, such as Syria's past support for the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Türkiye or Israel's establishment of a Maronite Christian militia in southern Lebanon. The actions of the Great Powers in arming non-state groups must be understood within the broader context of regional actors who have pursued analogous strategies. The activities of the Great Powers and regional actors are intertwined, and the security consequences in the Middle East—particularly the prolongation of conflicts—should be examined within this interrelated framework.

The second issue pertains to the need to distinguish between the actions of Great Powers, particularly the US and Russia, in arming NSAGs, as their motivations, approaches, and outcomes differ significantly. The US does not provide support to these groups for the same reasons as Russia, nor do the methods and consequences of their involvement align. Understanding these differences is crucial in explaining why some Middle Eastern countries, despite their alliances with the US, nevertheless cooperate with Russia in arming certain NSAGs.

In summary, the complex relationships among actors in the Middle East suggest that existing theories, as previously discussed, offer only partial explanations of these dynamics, leaving many critical issues unaddressed. This gap may arise from the unique complexities of the region or from the rapidly shifting alliances and enmities that define it. This article seeks to explore the consequences of the policies of Great Powers, particularly the US and Russia, in arming NSAGs, examining the quality of weaponry provided and assessing the impact of these actions on regional stability. Specifically, it will focus on how these policies contribute to the onset of new conflicts or the prolongation of ongoing ones in the Middle East. In addition to the influence of these Great Powers, regional actors—excluding the exceptional case of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which

frames its support NSAGs as a religious-ideological duty—have also intensified the practice of arming such groups, further contributing to the prolonged conflicts in the region.

Arming NSAGs in the Middle East: a historical and evolutionary overview

The practice of arming non-state groups in the Middle East by Great Powers has deep historical roots. The primary objective of this strategy has traditionally been to destabilise rival states and gain leverage over them. However, as will be discussed, this practice has not been solely driven by geopolitical considerations but has, at times, been influenced by ideological factors as well. During the Cold War, the support provided by both superpowers—the US and the Soviet Union—and their regional allies to armed NSAGs was firmly anchored in the geopolitical dynamics of the period.

The United Kingdom, which remained a "Great Power" and the "primary foreign power in the Middle East" for about a decade following World War II, pioneered non-state groups to achieve its strategic objectives. Britain's engagement in arming NSAGs dates back to World War I, when it supplied arms to Arab tribes in the Arabian Peninsula to fight against the Ottoman Empire, a strategy that contributed to the defeat of the Turks in the region (Walker 2018). As British influence in the Middle East declined, it increasingly relied on the tactic of arming non-state groups to safeguard its interests. For example, during the conflict in North Yemen, while the Republican forces in the north supplied weapons to rebels in Aden (South Yemen, then a British colony), Britain, through Saudi Arabia, provided arms to the Yemeni Imam fighting against the Republicans. This support aimed to counter Egyptian influence in the Arabian Peninsula and prevent the loss of Aden to revolutionary forces (Badeeb 2019).

Similarly, the US, in an effort to exert pressure on Iraq—then closely aligned with the Soviet Union—provided arms to Iraqi Kurds through Iran, a strategy that contributed to a prolonged civil conflict in Iraq during the 1960s and 1970s (Alvandi 2014, 96). In response, the Soviet Union engaged in reciprocal measures against the US and its allies. In Oman, for instance, the USSR supported the Dhofar separatist movement, with the ironic twist that even Communist China, despite its ideological differences with the Soviet Union, provided backing to the Dhofar rebels (Behbehani 1981, 164–175). Similarly, the Soviet Union supported the "National Democratic Movement" insurgents in North Yemen, using South Yemen as a conduit (Burrowes 2016).

During this period, the US and the Soviet Union relied on their regional allies to support various NSAGs. For instance, the Soviet Union provided support to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Türkiye through Syria (Kaválek and Mareš 2018, 102). In parallel, several Middle Eastern countries independently pursued the strategy of arming non-state groups, often with tacit Soviet backing. Notably, numerous Middle Eastern nations supplied arms to the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) and other Palestinian factions involved in conflict with Israel, further complicating the regional security landscape.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, it initially appeared that the Great Powers would cease using the arming of NSAGs as a tool for geopolitical rivalry. Having long abandoned this practice, China entirely discontinued its support for NSAGs. Similarly, Russia, as the successor state to the Soviet Union, refrained from arming such groups for nearly two decades following the Cold War. However, the

US followed a different trajectory. In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks and the subsequent War on Terror, the US underwent significant political and military shifts. Over time, it became clear that the US could not defeat terrorism unilaterally through its military alone. In Iraq, the US began arming Sunni militias under the framework of the "Sons of Iraq" or "Awakening" movement. This coalition of NSAGs allied with the US to combat Al-Qaeda and remnants of the Ba'ath Party, who were engaged in insurgency and terrorist activities in Sunni-majority regions of Iraq (Clayton and Thomson 2014).

The US experience in arming NSAGs, however, was primarily limited to counterterrorism objectives within Iraq. The US did not resort to arming NSAGs, such as the Kurds or Baloch, to exert pressure on its adversaries, particularly Iran. In contrast, without direct intervention from the Great Powers, Middle Eastern states increasingly turned to arm NSAGs as a strategic tool to secure their interests. This trend, however, evolved considerably with the onset of the Arab Spring, the collapse of state authority in several Arab countries (including Libya, Syria, Yemen, and Sudan), and the rise of ISIS. The situation was further compounded by Russia's growing involvement in the Middle East, which intensified Moscow's rivalry with the US. This shift led to an unprecedented and uncontrollable escalation in the region's dynamics of NSAGs support and armed conflict.

Arming NSAGs in the Middle East by great powers in the last decade

Over the past decade, the trend of arming NSAGs by Great Powers —specifically the US and Russia—has been shaped by several critical factors. The first was the Arab Spring, which precipitated the decline of state power in numerous Middle Eastern countries, creating a power vacuum. The second factor is the rise of ISIS and the establishment of the Islamic Caliphate, which necessitated new approaches to counterterrorism. Finally, Russia's entry into the Middle East, marked by its military intervention in Syria, has expanded to include support for armed NSAGs in Libya. In the wake of the Russia-Ukraine war and the subsequent intensification of its confrontation with the West, Russia's relations with non-state groups in countries like Sudan, Yemen, and Lebanon have deepened, further complicating regional dynamics.

US support for NSAGs in the Middle East

US support for NSAGs, although framed primarily as a counterterrorism initiative, has extended beyond the scope of combating terrorism alone. The most notable example of US involvement in arming such groups occurred in Syria. This support had two key components: the first focused on providing arms to opposition forces fighting against Bashar al-Assad's regime during the Syrian Civil War, while the second involved supplying arms to Syrian Kurdish groups and, to a lesser extent, other factions of the opposition, in their battle against ISIS.

In the first phase of US support, the US selectively armed opposition groups in Syria that were neither Islamist nor affiliated with terrorist organisations such as al-Qaeda. This selection process involved a thorough evaluation, oversight, and vetting (Gaston 2021, 46–47). The primary objective behind supplying arms to these groups was to pressure Bashar al-Assad's regime into negotiating with opposition forces and ultimately pursuing a political solution to end the civil war. The 2013 chemical attack in Eastern Ghouta, attributed by the US to Assad, accelerated the process of arming the

Syrian rebels. The US aimed to support Assad's opposition in a way that would prevent arms from reaching al-Qaeda or Islamist groups while also ensuring that Syria did not fragment and preserving the potential for a political resolution.

Additionally, the US sought to limit Iran's influence in Syria. In this context, US support was not aimed at achieving a military victory but at sustaining the rebellion to maintain a military equilibrium between the opposing forces, contributing to the prolonged nature of the Syrian Civil War (Rolandsen and Selvik 2023, 545–546). Moreover, the US sought to fragment Assad's opposition forces, controlling the arms supply and preventing coordinated actions that could lead to unintended and undesirable consequences (Hatahet 2017).

The support provided to Syrian rebels opposing Bashar al-Assad during this period was both diverse and significant, but it was not sufficient to decisively alter the military balance on the ground. One of the key needs of the Syrian rebels was anti-aircraft weapons, particularly Man-Portable Air Defense Systems (MANPADS) such as Stinger missiles, to counter the aerial bombardment carried out by the Syrian and, later, Russian air forces. However, the US chose not to supply these missiles, and it also prevented its regional allies—including Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Türkiye—from doing so. Instead, a variety of other weaponry was provided, either directly by the US or through its allies. These supplies came via multiple channels, including purchases from European countries like Bulgaria, Croatia, Serbia, and Poland, as well as from Sudan and the black market that proliferated following the collapse of Libya (Jia et al. 2024, 11). This covert operation, known as *Timber Sycamore*, was managed by the CIA with a budget of one billion dollars (Mazzetti, Goldman and Schmidt 2017). Among the most effective weapons delivered were U.S.-made TOW anti-tank missiles, which played a pivotal role in 2014 and 2015, particularly in the rebels' offensives in Idlib and their defence against Syrian and Russian assaults in Aleppo (Janovský 2018).

However, following the rise of ISIS and Russia's military intervention in Syria, the US ceased its support for the Syrian rebels. US priorities shifted toward countering ISIS, and there was an apparent reluctance to escalate tensions with Russia by continuing to arm opposition forces. During this period, US support was redirected to the Syrian Kurdish forces, known as the People's Defence Units (YPG), which had allied with other groups to create the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The US also encouraged Syrian Arabs to join this coalition, though with the stipulation that they focus solely on fighting ISIS and refrain from engaging in actions against the Syrian government (Rolandsen and Selvik 2023). This strategy of supporting the Kurds and, to a lesser extent, Syrian Arabs proved highly effective. ISIS lost all of its territorial holdings in Syria, including areas east of the Euphrates River. Significantly, this success was achieved at minimal human and financial cost to the US, as the Kurdish forces, rather than American troops, conducted the ground operations against ISIS. This outcome represented a "cheap win" for the US, achieved through a proxy war (Michnik and Plakoudas 2023, 87–91). However, this victory did not mark the end of the Syrian conflict. As will be discussed further, it precipitated a new round of military engagements involving other actors. After ISIS's defeat in the Euphrates region, the US continued to supply the YPG with a range of weapons, including anti-tank missiles and armoured vehicles (Trevithick 2019).

The US also provided arms to the Kurdish Peshmerga (KP) forces in Iraq to combat ISIS. Although the KP are legally considered part of Iraq's armed forces, they operate independently from the Iraqi military, which created certain complications in the region. Germany and France also supplied weapons to the KP forces in the Kurdistan region of Iraq. A significant point of contention was the provision of guided anti-tank missiles to the Peshmerga. In 2017, when the Iraqi government moved to reclaim control over Kirkuk, the KP used these anti-tank missiles, particularly the Milan missile system supplied by European countries, to destroy several U.S.-made Abrams tanks from the Iraqi Army. This event highlighted the complex nature of international support for NSAGs and the potential for unintended consequences, particularly when weapons are supplied to multiple actors with conflicting interests (Bechosen 2017). Table 1 shows the weapons that the US has delivered to the Middle Eastern NSAGs.

Russia's support for NSAGs in the Middle East

Russia has taken a more covert approach in supporting NSAGs, often refraining from officially acknowledging its involvement. This policy began after Russia's military intervention in Syria, where it not only supplied weapons to Bashar al-Assad's Syrian Army but also to non-state groups aligned with the regime. These groups engaged in battles against Assad's opponents, and ISIS received various Russian-made weapons, including small arms and anti-tank missiles. One of the most notable entities operating in this context was the Wagner Group, a private military company, which played a significant role in assisting NSAGs with whom it had ties. These groups included not only Syrian factions but also Palestinian groups such as Liwa al-Quds, as well as Lebanese organisations like Hezbollah (Weiss 2019).

The relationship between Hezbollah and Russia began during the Syrian Civil War but evolved into a more covert partnership, including financial collaboration and sanctions evasion, by 2018 (Ortega and Levitt 2023). During the Syrian conflict, Hezbollah and Russia closely coordinated their efforts to combat Assad's opponents. As part of this alliance, Russia approved the supply of military equipment to Hezbollah, enhancing the group's arsenal with advanced weapons such as *Kornet* anti-tank missiles and *Yakhont* anti-ship missiles (Cohen 2016).

In recent years, following Russia's military invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the relationship between Russia and Hezbollah has further deepened. Some analysts argue that Russia may view this as an opportunity to leverage Hezbollah's capabilities in escalating tensions with Israel, thus diverting the attention of the US and European powers away from Ukraine and toward the Middle East (Ramani 2024). Additionally, reports indicate that Russia has considered arming Hezbollah with advanced military systems, including the *Pantsir* anti-aircraft system, amid the group's ongoing conflict with Israel (Army Recognition 2023; Tabler and Borshchevskaya 2023).

Russia has not only established relationships with non-state groups allied with the Syrian government but has also engaged with Syrian Kurds. Although Syrian Kurds are close allies of the US DIA 2024, this has not prevented both the Kurds and Russia from deepening their ties. Syrian Kurds fear being abandoned by the US suddenly. They are currently defenceless against Turkish airstrikes, and the US has not taken steps to protect them. This concern has prompted Russia to seek closer ties with the Syrian Kurds,

Table 1 Arms delivered by the United States to non-state groups in the Middle East (2010–2024)[1]

Description	Consignee	Number	Consignor	Manufacturer	Name	Type
By both the US and Saudi Arabia supply	-FSA[F] -YPG[E]	Thousands[F]	The US	The US	BGM-71 TOW	Anti-tank Guided Missile (ATGM)
-	-YPG	Thousands	The US	The US	AT-4[A]	shoulder-fired recoilless anti-tank weapon
-	-YPG	120	The US	The US	M-1151 HMMWV[A]	Military light utility vehicle
-	-YPG	At least 1	The US	The US	International MaxxPro[A]	Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP)
-	-YPG	At least 1	The US	The US	BAE Caiman[A]	(MRAP)
-	-YPG	At least 1	The US	The US	Lenco BearCat[A]	(MRAP)
-	-YPG	3	The US	The US	M1117 ASV[A]	Armored Personal Carrier
By Saudi Financial support	FSA	Unknown	The US	Croatia	RAK-12[B]	Light Multiple Rocket Launcher
By Saudi Financial support	FSA	Unknown	The US	Croatia	M79 Osa[B]	shoulder-fired recoilless anti-tank weapon
By Saudi Financial support	FSA	Unknown	US	Former Yugoslavia/ Croatia	M-60[B]	Heavy Recoilless gun
-	FSA	Unknown	US	US	M-120[C]	120 mm Mortar
-	FSA YPG	Unknown	US	Serbia	M-69a[D]	120 mm Mortar
-	FSA YPG	Unknown	US	US	M02[c]	12.7 × 108 mm heavy machine guns
For FSA By Saudi Financial support	FSA YPG[E] Awakening Councils	Unknown	US	US Bulgaria Serbia Croatia	-M-16[C] -M-4 -MK14 EBR Sniper Rifle[C] -Warsaw class weapons (Kalashnikov, SVD and PK family)	Small Arms and ammunition
For FSA By Saudi Financial support [g]	YPG	Unknown	US	Bulgaria Serbia Croatia[g]	-Mortar -Multiple Launcher Rocket	Heavy Ammunition

[1] The table does not include the weapons that Türkiye, Saudi Arabia and Qatar (and possibly the UAE at some point) sent to the Syrian rebels without US supervision

Sources: [A] Mitzer and Oliemans 2021a, b; [B] Spencer 2013; [C] Smallwood 2015; [D] Richter 2016; [E] Trevithick 2019; [F] Janovský, 2018; [G] New Arab 2016

especially now that Russia is involved in the conflict in Ukraine. From Russia's perspective, using the "Kurdish card" could prove advantageous (Borshchevskaya 2023).

Türkiye has repeatedly accused Russia of supplying weapons to Syrian Kurdish groups, particularly the YPG (People's Defence Units). However, Russia has consistently denied these allegations, asserting that the YPG's access to U.S.-provided arms negates the need for Russian support. Despite these denials, it is evident that Russia aims to retain leverage over the Syrian Kurds, given their strategic significance in the broader geopolitical context, especially in relation to Türkiye (Aben 2017). Tensions escalated following the

discovery of Russian-made weapons, including a portable *SA-18* anti-aircraft system, in the hands of the PKK and its Syrian affiliate, the YPG. This discovery heightened Türkiye's concerns, particularly after the downing of a Russian *Su-24* fighter jet by Türkiye in 2015. Subsequently, the PKK, armed with the aforementioned anti-aircraft system, downed a Turkish Cobra helicopter. While diplomatic relations between Türkiye and Russia in Syria have since improved, Türkiye's suspicions regarding Russia's involvement with Kurdish factions persist (Kenez 2022).

There has been much speculation about Russia's covert connections with the Houthi rebels in Yemen. After Hamas's attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, the Houthis launched a maritime-missile-drone war aimed at halting Israel's assault on Gaza. The US, the UK, and subsequently European countries responded militarily, deploying naval forces to the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. The purpose of this extensive naval deployment was to prevent Houthi attacks on international shipping and to intercept missiles and drones targeting Israel. The Houthis declared that they would not allow Israeli vessels or those travelling to or from Israel to pass through, but they excluded Russian and Chinese ships from their targets, claiming they would not attack them, although, in several instances, these ships were targeted (Carlsen 2024, 94–95).

Russia has been accused of collaborating with the Houthis in several instances. One major accusation is that Russia assists the Houthis in gathering intelligence on shipping movements in the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea, thus enabling more precise targeting of vessels. Some reports even suggest that Russian officers may be present in Yemen, directly aiding the Houthis with these operations (Mathews 2024). Additionally, there are allegations regarding Russia's intention to supply the Houthis with weapons. Viktor Bout, the infamous Russian arms dealer who was imprisoned in the US for years and later exchanged in a prisoner swap, is accused of attempting to sell small arms and anti-aircraft weapons to the Houthis (Orkabi 2024).

A further action by Russia that has alarmed the US is the alleged covert intention to arm the Houthis with advanced anti-ship missiles, such as the *Yakhont*, which have a range of over 300 kms and high speed. These missiles pose a serious threat to commercial vessels and the US Navy and its allies operating in the Red Sea (Irish, Hafezi and Landay 2024). In this regard, Russia's goal seems to be to divert US and allied attention away from the conflict in Ukraine by creating pressure and significant operational costs. This strategy appears to precede Russia's relations with countries such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which oppose the Houthis (Suleymanov 2024).

Russia's involvement in Sudan and Libya, mainly through arms shipments to anti-government warlords, has contributed to the prolongation of civil wars and conflicts in these countries. In Libya, the civil war between General Khalifa Haftar and the United Nations-recognized Government of National Unity (GNA) in Tripoli provided Russia with an opportunity to establish a foothold in North Africa. In this conflict, Türkiye and Qatar supported the GNA, while Haftar and his group, known as the Libyan National Army (LNA), were backed by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Egypt. Russia aligned itself with Haftar (Stoner 2021, 100–101).

Russia not only provided arms to Haftar but also sent the Wagner mercenary group to Libya to fight alongside his forces (Jones et al. 2021, 46). The weapons Russia sent to Haftar included T-62 tanks, heavy artillery, *MiG-29* and *Su-24* fighter jets, Orlan drones,

as well as vast amounts of small arms and ammunition. Additionally, Russia allowed the UAE and Egypt, which had previously purchased Russian-made weapons, to provide those arms to Haftar's Army. This included *Pantsir* air defence systems *(SA-22)* and *Mi-24* helicopters (Mitzer and Oliemans 2021a, b).

Russia's weapon shipments to Haftar and its military support for him significantly weakened the GNA. The Libyan civil war entered a new phase, with violence escalating and foreign intervention reaching broader dimensions (Lefèvre 2017, 329). Russia's objectives in Libya were likely multifaceted. Some analysts argue that Putin's involvement in Libya—despite officially denying Russia's direct participation and claiming that the Wagner group was acting independently—aimed to demonstrate Russia's return to the global stage as a great power (Šćepanović 2021, 352). Others point to Russia's interest in establishing military bases in Libya, including a submarine base in the deep waters of the port of Tobruk.

Furthermore, Russia aimed to show that while the US had abandoned Libya—and possibly the Middle East—Russia remained a reliable partner, willing to collaborate with Middle Eastern nations for their security and stability. However, a critical aspect of Russia's strategy was to undermine US interests through the provision of weapons to NSAGs. The massive shipment of arms to Haftar was part of this broader goal to weaken American influence in the region (Borshchevskaya 2024a).

Sudan is another country where Russia has supported NSAGs through arms provision. Since April 2023, a brutal civil war has erupted in Sudan between the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), led by General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (known as Hemedti), and the military government, headed by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan. In this conflict, Russia, through the Wagner Group and in collaboration with the UAE, has provided arms to the RSF. Russia's interests in Sudan are multifaceted. On the one hand, it seeks to secure a naval base for its submarines along Sudan's coast, a project previously blocked by the Burhan government under US pressure. On the other hand, Russia aims to exploit Sudan's mineral resources, notably gold (Doxsee 2023; Mahjoub 2024).

Russia's involvement in the Sudanese conflict also served a broader strategic purpose: destabilising Africa through a series of coups and civil wars, thereby diverting European and American attention from the ongoing war in Ukraine (Wehrey and Weiss 2024; Pokalova 2023). Ukraine has not remained passive in this regard. The presence of Wagner forces in Sudan and the arms shipments to the RSF prompted Ukraine to deploy its special forces to Sudan, where they fought alongside General Burhan's forces against Hemedti's troops (Sabbagh 2024). Ukraine's objective was to cut off Russia's access to Sudanese gold, a resource that has enabled Russia to circumvent sanctions. Moreover, there is a complex and intense rivalry between Russia, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt over influence in Sudan, with Russia concurrently supporting General Burhan's government as part of this broader geopolitical competition (McGregor 2024).

Despite these rivalries, the crash of a cargo plane in Sudan—carrying weapons from Russia for Hemedti's forces and leased by the UAE—demonstrates that Russia continues to supply arms to Hemedti's rebellious forces (Abdelaziz, Levinson and Lebedev 2024). This continued support highlights Russia's strategic objectives in Sudan, where its influence is closely linked to broader regional and global power dynamics. Table 2 shows Russia's weapons to the Middle Eastern NSAGs.

Table 2 Arms delivered by Russia to non-state groups in the Middle East (2010–2024)

Description	Consignee	Number	Consignor	Manufacturer	Name	Type
M and MV models	NLF	Unknown	Russia	Russia	T-62	Main Battle Tank[A]
Mostly used by Wagner	NLF	Unknown	Russia	Russia	Valkyrie	MRAP[A]
-	NLF	Unknown	Russia	Russia	GAZ Tiger-M	Infantry Mobility Vehicles[A]
-	NLF	Unknown	Russia	Russia	82-BM-37	82 mm mortar[A]
-	NLF	Unknown	Russia	Russia	120-PM-43	120 mm mortar[A]
Some were used by Wagner	NLF	Unknown	Russia	Russia	M-30 D-30	Howitzer 122 mm[A]
-	NLF	Unknown	Russia	Russia	2A65 Msta-B	Howitzer 152 mm[A]
Mostly used by Wagner but also UAE officers Mostly Supply by UAE	NLF Also allegedly under negotiation to transfer to Hezbollah	Unknown	UAE and Russia	Russia	Pantsir-S1M	Surface-to-air Missile[A]
–	NLF RSF (Unknown UAV)[D]	Unknown	Russia	Russia	Orlan-10 Orlan-20 ZALA 421-16E Unknown UAV	Reconnaissance UAV[A]
-	NLF	Unknown	Russia	Russia	P-18 'Spoon Rest D	Radar[A]
-	NLF	Unknown	Russia	Russia	"Groza-S"	counter-UAV electronic warfare station[A]
For reactivation of Libyan Mig-23	NLF	Unknown	Russia	Russia	Mig-23	Fighter Jet Spare Parts[A]
–	NLF	In total 14[B]	Russia	Russia	Su-24 Mig-29	[A]Fighter Jet
-	NLF RSF[d]	Unknown	Russia	Russia	Kornet	ATGM[A]
-	NLF RSF[c]	Unknown	Russia	Russia	-	Ammunition (Heavy)[A]
-	NLF RSF[d] Allegedly for Houthis	Unknown	Russia	Russia	AK/PK/SVD Family	Small arms and Ammunition[A]
Not-delivered yet	Allegedly for Houthis[e]	0	Russia	Russia	Yakhunt	Anti-ship cruise missile

Sources: [A] Mitzer and Oliemans 2021a, b; [B] Reuters 2020; [c] WAR NOIR 2023[d] Human Rights Watch 2024 [e]Irish, Hafezi and Landay, 2024

Objectives and consequences of great powers arming NSAGs

The objectives pursued by the US and Russia through arming NSAGs differ significantly. However, the outcomes of these actions, especially in terms of prolonging existing conflicts or triggering new ones, have generally been similar.

US

The primary objective of the US in arming NSAGs in the Middle East has been to find partners in the fight against terrorism, particularly in regions where the state is either

unable or unwilling to address such threats, as seen in Iraq or where cooperation with the state is not viable, as in Syria. The US armed Kurdish forces in Syria and Iraq, as well as Sunni groups in Iraq through the Awakening Councils, with the goal of combating terrorism, specifically ISIS and al-Qaeda in Iraq. However, the US also supported opposition groups fighting Bashar al-Assad in Syria, primarily under the framework of the "Free Syrian Army", with the clear aim of exerting pressure on the Syrian government. In both cases, the US objective was to achieve tactical, short-term goals, often with the expectation of leveraging these groups for specific outcomes rather than pursuing long-term strategic partnerships.

The flow of weapons supplied by the US to opposition groups in Syria ultimately ended up in the hands of more radical factions, including Islamist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra (later known as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and Ahrar al-Sham). Even groups initially viewed as moderate, like Harkat-Noroeladin-Zanki, were found to have radical Islamist ideologies. Additionally, several groups that were considered moderate were eventually taken over by more radical factions like Ahrar al-Sham. Anti-tank missiles, such as the TOW missile, were among the arms that ended up in the possession of these groups (Cafarella and Casagrande 2016, 8–10). A significant portion of the arms intended for counterterrorism efforts in Syria and Iraq also found their way into the hands of ISIS (Conflict Armament Research 2017, 53).

Arming the Syrian Kurds also had significant consequences. The first consequence was Türkiye's anger over this action. Türkiye does not distinguish between the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) and the YPG (People's Protection Units), believing that the YPG is merely the Syrian branch of the PKK. Türkiye has repeatedly accused the US of transferring some of the weapons delivered to the YPG to the PKK, which then used them in military operations against the Turkish Army in Iraq, Syria, and even within Türkiye. U.S.-made weapons, such as M4 and M16 assault rifles, anti-tank weapons (e.g., AT-4), mortars, multi-barrel grenade launchers, and night vision equipment, have been discovered among PKK forces (Warnoir 2022; Kasapoğlu and Ülgen 2022). The result of this issue has been that Türkiye has entered into an ongoing conflict with the YPG in northern Syria. The daily exchange of fire and bombing of these areas have resulted in significant human casualties. The US has done little to prevent Türkiye's military operations and, on one occasion, only downed a Turkish drone that could have threatened American forces (Ali and Hayatsever 2023). Arming the Kurds in Syria has significantly complicated U.S.-Türkiye relations. While the US and Türkiye initially cooperated to overthrow Bashar al-Assad, today, their primary goals have shifted to combating ISIS and opposing Kurdish autonomy. Türkiye strongly opposes arming the Syrian Kurds, and this issue has led Türkiye to prefer that the Syrian government reassert its authority in northern Syria, thereby eliminating Kurdish autonomy. It is noteworthy that these two NATO allies have experienced significant tension for years due to the US's arming of the Kurds (Alim 2024, 149).

Russia

For Russia, arming NSAGs in the Middle East aligns more closely with a classical approach to supporting such groups. Unlike the US, which overtly armed NSAGs, Russia has adopted a more covert approach, aiming to maintain what it calls "plausible

deniability". In contrast to the US tactical and short-term perspective, Russia views arming NSAGs in the Middle East as a strategic, long-term issue, framing it as part of a 'larger conflict with the West and the US.' One aspect of this conflict is the aim to divert Western attention away from supporting Ukraine due to the instabilities arising in the Middle East, while the other is the weakening of international norms (Borshchevskaya 2024a).

Russia's Middle East policy has traditionally been based on two main pillars: establishing military bases and selling arms to countries in the region. However, since Russia's military invasion of Ukraine, both of these pillars have become unfeasible. The establishment of military bases and arms sales in the Middle East have been hindered due to US pressure and the strict enforcement of sanctions under the "Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act" (CAATSA, Public Law 115–44). For example, Russia has been unable to establish a naval base in Sudan and has not yet succeeded in creating the desired naval base in Libya. Furthermore, Russia's arms sales to Middle Eastern countries have effectively ceased. After the invasion of Ukraine, both Russia's domestic needs and the sanctions, along with the countries' fear of severe US retaliation, have led Middle Eastern nations (except Iran and Syria, which are allied with Russia) to cancel their arms purchases from Russia (Duplessis 2024, 10–13). However, a third pillar of Russia's Middle East policy is emerging: arming NSAGs. Russia's actions in Libya, Sudan, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen should be interpreted within this framework (Borshchevskaya 2024b).

In Syria, Russia armed certain NSAGs to maintain its allied government, and it has pursued similar strategies in Libya and Sudan to capture the state. However, Russia's covert relationships with the Houthis in Yemen and Hezbollah in Lebanon should be understood both as part of its broader strategy against the US and Europe in their efforts to arm Ukraine and as a means of exerting pressure on the Western world. For Russia, destabilising parts of the Middle East (and, on a larger scale, the world) is a leverage against the US and Europe. This perspective offers insight into the consequences of Russia's actions in arming NSAGs. While the US sought to avoid providing NSAGs with weaponry that could directly harm Russia, as evidenced by its refusal to equip the Free Syrian Army with Stinger missiles or to supply Kurdish forces in Syria with air defence systems for protection against Turkish attacks, Russia, in contrast, has aimed to arm Hezbollah in Lebanon with advanced anti-aircraft weaponry and the Houthis in Yemen with anti-ship missiles. This strategy enables them to directly strike at their adversaries—Israel and the U.S. and its allies.

Although there are differences in the objectives of the US and Russia in arming NSAGs in the Middle East, the consequences of these actions have largely been the same. In both cases, the outcome has been nothing but the prolongation of conflicts in the region. With U.S. military support to the opposition forces against Bashar al-Assad, the Syrian civil war was extended without overthrowing the Assad regime. In fact, with the weaponry provided by the US to the rebels, the war expanded in scope without preventing significant civilian casualties, and Russia was eventually drawn into the conflict (Hanania 2020, 185–186). A similar outcome occurred with the US arming of the Kurds. By arming the Kurds, the US raised concerns in Türkiye, prompting Türkiye to carry out ongoing military operations targeting Kurdish areas in northern Syria. The US has not taken

significant action to protect the Kurds from Turkish airstrikes, leaving Kurdish areas in a state of constant conflict and bloodshed (Firmian 2021, 159). Similarly, Russia's actions have resulted in the emergence of new conflicts (as seen in Sudan) or the intensification and continuation of existing conflicts (in Libya, which is currently in a temporary ceasefire, as well as in Yemen, Syria, and Lebanon).

Among the great powers, only China has distanced itself from its Cold War-era ideology and, due to its greater focus on economic issues and the importance of stability for its economic plans, has not pursued arming NSAGs or creating its proxy forces in the Middle East (and other parts of the world) unlike Russia and the US (Watts et al. 2023, vi-vii).

The reasons behind China's reluctance to support NSAGs are clear. China consistently seeks cooperation with states, as it perceives threats from NSAGs and any non-state actor, ranging from Taiwan to separatists in Xinjiang and Tibet. Given its unresolved sovereignty issue with Taiwan, China opposes any actions that threaten the national sovereignty of other countries. Moreover, because the Middle East serves as a crucial region for China's energy imports (including oil and gas) and export markets, China has a vested interest in ensuring the region's stability and security. Consequently, China's policy in the Middle East has focused on upholding state sovereignty, maintaining neutrality in conflicts, and refraining from interfering in the internal affairs of other nations. This contrasts sharply with the approaches of the United States and Russia, which appear to adopt differing strategies (Liu and He 2017, 32).

The role of Middle Eastern countries and armed non-state actors

The objectives and consequences of the actions of the US and Russia in arming NSAGs should be viewed in a broader context, specifically regarding the activities of Middle Eastern countries in arming such groups. Immediately after the victory of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Iran began arming NSAGs with religious-ideological goals. As a result, Iran now has the largest network of such groups across Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, the Palestinian territories, and, to a lesser extent, among populations in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia (Sirrs 2022). However, Iran is not alone in this regard. Türkiye has also raised an army of proxy forces from among Syrian rebels to serve its interests in Syria, Libya, and Azerbaijan (in the second Nagorno-Karabakh war with Armenia) (The Syria Justice and Accountability Centre 2021, 11–14). The UAE has similarly armed NSAGs in Libya, Yemen, and Sudan (Krieg 2023, 454 Ardemagni and Fasanotti 2020). Similarly, Qatar armed some Syrian rebels during the Syrian Civil War and supported opposition forces in Libya during the 2011 revolution (Ulrichsen 2014, 99–120).

In this endless cycle, each Middle Eastern country creates its proxy groups and arms its affiliated NSAGs, believing that if the great powers, who are supposed to ensure "security and stability", engage in such actions, these countries also have the right to undertake similar measures. The combination of the arming of NSAGs by local Middle Eastern powers with the groups armed by the great powers (the US and Russia) is one of the leading causes of the prolonged armed conflicts in the region. This is because there is no endpoint to this proxy game (Valensi 2021, 239–242). As the number of armed non-state groups increases, the state structures in the Middle

East become weaker, and with the rise in the number of failed or collapsed states, new wars will emerge, or unresolved conflicts will continue to fester (Yeşiltaş and Kardaş 2017, 265–66).

It is clear that each Middle Eastern country supporting NSAGs has its specific interests, which are not necessarily aligned with the interests of the great powers, even if they are allies. Türkiye and the UAE are both close allies of the US. However, in Libya, the UAE joined Russia in supporting Khalifa Haftar, while Türkiye backed the Government of National Unity against them. In Sudan, the UAE collaborates with Russia to arm the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). Similarly, the situation in Syria is complex. While the US supports the Kurds, Türkiye, a NATO ally of the US, supports the Kurdish enemies (Zaman 2016, 2). As mentioned earlier, although the Kurds are allied with the US, they have sought covert relations with Russia and even Iran.

Additionally, Türkiye supported the opposition to Bashar al-Assad, while the US stopped its military assistance to these groups and even labelled some of them as terrorist organisations, targeting them in airstrikes. From the US perspective, Türkiye was supporting "part of al-Qaeda" in Idlib, Syria (Drevon 2024, 2). In Yemen, the UAE supports the Southern Transitional Council, which seeks independence and the formation of a separate Yemeni state, while Saudi Arabia backs the official Yemeni government. Both have fought against the Houthi rebels, who are aligned with Iran (Öztürk 2023). This complex situation can be understood by recognising that each country in the region may align itself with a great power, with which it is not necessarily an ally, to advance its interests. For instance, the UAE cooperates with Russia to further its objectives in Sudan and Libya, while Türkiye conducts military operations against non-state actors supported by the US in Syria or supports groups that the US labels as terrorist organisations.

In these complex dynamics, controlling processes become exceptionally difficult as the great powers engage in actions that they are unable to prevent other nations from undertaking. For example, how can the US dissuade Türkiye from supporting the terrorist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in Syria while simultaneously supporting the Syrian branch of the PKK? Likewise, how can the US restrain the UAE's actions in Libya, Yemen, and Sudan when it has supported similar groups in Syria? While the US's involvement in Syria is undoubtedly framed as counterterrorism, it is equally clear that each Middle Eastern country has its interpretation of terrorism and operates accordingly. Similarly, Russia does not adhere to a singular definition of terrorism or terrorist groups. During its military operations in support of Bashar al-Assad, Russia fought alongside non-state armed groups backed by Iran, despite these groups being labelled as terrorist organisations by both the US and Israel. Later, when Russia became embroiled in the war in Ukraine, it utilised these Iran-supported groups as leverage to exert additional pressure on the US and Europe. When great powers cannot agree on fundamental issues such as security and terrorism, Middle Eastern countries will act according to their definitions. However, beyond unilateral actions, these countries also present their relationships with NSAGs as strategic assets, using them as tools to engage with the great powers. For instance, Iran views the Houthis and Hezbollah as valuable assets in its relationship with Russia, and the UAE has adopted a similar approach in Libya and Sudan. The outcome of this anarchic situation is the prolongation of conflicts in the Middle East or the emergence of new conflicts within the region.

NSAGs are not passive participants in this dynamic. At specific points, they attract the attention of great powers, while at other times, their significance may diminish. For instance, the Kurds received substantial support from the US during the height of the war against ISIS; however, as the ISIS caliphate collapsed and its territories were lost, US support for the Kurds decreased. Consequently, the Kurds sought to strengthen their ties with Russia and the regime of Bashar al-Assad, turning to these new allies in response to Turkish attacks. Furthermore, they forged closer relations with Iran, gaining access to 358 anti-aircraft missiles designed explicitly for targeting drones, which enabled them to down numerous Turkish drones (Kemal 2024; Soylu and Kemal 2024). As previously outlined, these groups actively seize opportunities to engage with great powers or regional actors, aiming to bolster their influence and capabilities. For example, although Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen are both proxies of Iran, they welcomed Russia's engagement and cultivated closer relations with Moscow.

Another example can be seen in the armed opposition groups against Bashar al-Assad in Syria. Some of these groups, such as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, which is designated as a terrorist organisation by the US, have sought to gain the US's trust through specific actions. These efforts were aimed at avoiding US attacks and securing their removal from the terrorist list (Zelin 2022, 69–76). These efforts became more pronounced after the potential fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime, with some groups even seeking to establish friendly relations with Russia (Reuters 2024). This behaviour illustrates that similar to Middle Eastern states, NSAGs actively pursue support from great powers, viewing such support as a crucial means to ensure their survival and, by extension, prolong the armed conflict.

Conclusion

Over the past decade, both the US and Russia, as Great Powers, have extensively armed NSAGs in the Middle East. The primary objective of the US in this regard was to combat terrorism (ISIS and Al-Qaeda) in Syria and Iraq. However, in Syria, by arming certain opposition groups, the US also sought to pressure Bashar al-Assad into political concessions and to punish him for the 2013 chemical attacks. While the US approach has been limited, tactical, short-term, and instrumental, avoiding the arming of these groups with game-changing weaponry (such as anti-aircraft systems), Russia has taken a more expansive, strategic, long-term approach without restrictions. Russia has armed non-state groups in Libya, Sudan, and Syria and has even attempted to arm them in Yemen and Lebanon. Russia has not hesitated to supply anti-ship missiles and anti-aircraft systems to these groups. Russia views the arming of these NSAGs as part of its broader global confrontation with the US and Europe. In other words, to divert attention away from Ukraine and retaliate against their support for Kyiv, Russia seeks to strike at their interests elsewhere, namely in the Middle East. This retaliation includes destabilisation and proxy warfare, currently unfolding in the Red Sea, Lebanon, and Sudan. Unlike the US, Russia also aims to capture the position of legitimate government in these regions to gain advantages, such as securing strategic naval bases for its submarines in Libya and Sudan.

Our argument that US support for NSAGs is both short-term and tactical is grounded in several key points, which we have outlined throughout this paper. US backing for

these groups has been primarily confined to the campaign against ISIS. US support for NSAGs in Syria was focused exclusively on this objective and did not extend beyond it. Furthermore, the US provided only a limited range of weapons specifically suited for the fight against ISIS. The US's involvement with NSAGs in the Middle East was not part of its broader global strategy to counter Russia or China.

Additionally, the US has never offered unconditional or comprehensive support to the NSAGs it backs. For example, the US has never fully intervened to prevent Türkiye from bombing YPG positions. Moreover, the prospect of a US withdrawal from Syria is a matter of considerable concern, with the Kurds consistently viewing it as a serious threat.

Although the objectives of the US and Russia in arming non-state groups in the Middle East differ, the consequences of these actions have been essentially the same: exacerbating instability and prolonging conflicts in the region. Arming non-state groups in Syria has not only extended the internal conflict but has also sparked new wars, with the Turkish-Kurdish conflict in Syria being a prime example. Russia's weapons shipments have led to a prolonged battle in Sudan and left unresolved conflicts in Libya. The potential for escalating tensions in Yemen, Syria, and Lebanon remains a real possibility due to Russia's policies.

In a broader context, Middle Eastern countries, which are also actively supplying weapons to NSAGs (such as the UAE, Türkiye, Iran, and others), act in conjunction with the policies of the great powers in the Middle East in such a way that the political avenues for conflict resolution are further diminished, leading to the prolongation of the region's long-standing wars. Among the great powers, China is the only one that has refrained from entering this cycle, primarily due to economic reasons and its interest in stability in the Middle East.

The arming of NSAGs by great powers, such as the US and Russia, as well as by regional actors in the Middle East, consistently contributes to the prolongation of conflicts. This occurs because the parties engaged in these conflicts maintain the belief that victory remains achievable. As long as the flow of arms and ammunition continues, they can hold onto the hope of avoiding defeat, and as long as they are not destroyed, they retain the possibility of eventual success. The persistent supply of weapons only serves to sustain the conflict. These weapons frequently end up in the hands of new actors, who may exacerbate tensions and potentially trigger further hostilities. Moreover, arming any NSAG is likely to provoke discontent among the relevant Middle Eastern states, as such actions undermine the principle of state sovereignty. While it is true that direct intervention by great powers can sometimes foster stability in the Middle East—such as the US military campaign against ISIS in Syria and Iraq—the arming of NSAGs is a different matter. The ramifications of arming NSAGs are far-reaching and long-lasting, extending beyond the scope of a single military operation. Furthermore, supplying weapons to NSAGs, particularly when these groups are considered proxy forces (as in the case of Russian involvement in the Middle East), often aims to create instability.

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