



# **GALCON 2026**

*Proxy Conflicts: Addressing Foreign Influence in Internal Civil Wars and Regional Instability*



**SPECPOL Committee  
Research Report**

## Definitions

**Proxy wars:** “Proxy wars are conflicts in which a third party intervenes indirectly in a pre-existing war in order to influence the strategic outcome in favour of its preferred faction.”<sup>1</sup>

**Major Powers:** “A state seen as playing a major role in international politics.” Major powers are capable of creating a change throughout the world.<sup>2</sup>

**Substitute Forces:** “Direct or indirect use of non-state and parastate groups to carry out militarized intimidation or control territory to exert influence or achieve specific security or political outcomes.”<sup>3</sup>

**Foreign interference:** “Foreign interference is when other countries try to secretly interfere with decisions and other matters in another country. They might be dishonest, use unfair power or hide their actions.”<sup>4</sup>

**External backers:** External backers are usually organizations or countries that provide support to affected parties in different ways: militarily, financially, politically, etc.

**UN Peacekeepers:** “UN peacekeepers are personnel deployed by the United Nations to conflict zones around the world with the aim of enforcing ceasefires, protecting civilians, and supporting the implementation of peace agreements.”<sup>5</sup>

**State Actors:** “a person or an organization that is part of a government, and is involved in or important in politics, society, etc. in some way, because of their actions”.<sup>6</sup>

**Non-State Actors:** “a person or an organization that is not part of a government, but is still involved in or important in politics, society, etc. in some way, because of their actions”<sup>7</sup>

**Cold War:** “a state of extreme unfriendliness existing between countries, especially countries with opposing political systems, that is expressed not through fighting but through political pressure and threats.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780199670840.001.0001/acref-9780199670840-e-1742>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095905559>

<sup>3</sup>[https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/ISP\\_GrayZone\\_II\\_fact\\_sheet\\_ProxyForces.pdf](https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/ISP_GrayZone_II_fact_sheet_ProxyForces.pdf)

<sup>4</sup><https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/about-us/our-portfolios/national-security/countering-foreign-interference/defining-foreign-interference>

<sup>5</sup> <https://fiveable.me/key-terms/intro-to-poli-sci/un-peacekeepers>

<sup>6</sup> <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/state-actor>

<sup>7</sup> <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/non-state-actor>

<sup>8</sup> <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/cold-war>

## **Background**

A proxy war is a conflict fought by one or more major powers without any of said powers becoming directly involved. These wars are characterized by the involvement of powerful nations that avoid direct military confrontation and organize battles through rallying actors who receive military, financial and political support from the major powers.<sup>9</sup> Some countries might prefer to choose proxy wars over direct confrontations because they reduce the combat risks to their own military forces. It allows rival countries to compete while reducing the potential escalation to a full war which could cause serious political fallout. Secondly, proxy wars help lower the economic and humanitarian cost since direct confrontation will cost resources, domestic political deterring, and a threat to the interfered country's civilians.

Over the years many countries have used proxy wars as tools to achieve their aims. One of such aims is to gain an advantage in a geopolitical competition.<sup>10</sup> States start to intervene in proxy wars to support parts of the conflicts that prevent their opponents from controlling strategic areas or increasing their influence in the region, a clear contemporary example of that is the Turkish-Emirati-Egyptian-Russian rivalry in Libya. Another aim is controlling natural resources. Regions that are full of natural resources attract foreign influence who intervene in local affairs and conflicts to protect their economic interests. States also get involved in proxy wars for security concerns and the creation of buffer zones, supporting groups within neighboring countries to ensure that a hostile force does not control its borders. Lastly, major powers might also aim at expanding regional influence. Proxy conflicts are a low-cost way for rising forces to show their power and gain new allies and could thus serve as a useful tool for doing so.

The countries choose their own proxies based on strategic and political factors like: consensus of interests or ideology. Countries try to choose parties that have the same targets as them to achieve those targets without being involved in the crises, but having the ability to influence within the conflict. When the countries want to choose their proxies they choose them by their ability to fight or affect the conflict. Additionally, using proxies aims to reduce the military costs and avoids the supporter country from being part of the crises.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup><https://www.fairplanet.org/story/what-are-proxy-wars-and-where-are-they-happening/>

<sup>10</sup>[https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RRA307-2.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA307-2.html)

<sup>11</sup><https://share.google/42a07GaaJt31gX4Iq>

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The proxies accept the support of the foreign forces because of those following reasons: improving their military power: the supporter country provided the proxies in many military aids which increasing their abilities to fight and control the area; increasing the chance to achieve their own targets: when the proxies receive an external support the percentage of achieving, their own targets is higher; and when the local resources are decreasing rapidly: the proxes resort to the supporters to provide them with the necessary aids<sup>12</sup>.

The foreign interference is reflected on many things, it causes prolonging the duration of the conflict because when the proxies receive external support, the conflict becomes more volatile and sustainable, which will increase the internal divisions that will make the conflict much more complicated and hinder the attempts to solve it. This is reflected in the destruction of the country's economy, increasing poverty, the displacement of the citizens, and the collapse of public services.<sup>13</sup>

Usually, proxy wars begin as internal disputes about identity, authority or resources only to then escalate into an international conflict after the intervention of foreign powers, supporting either side and having a stake in the ultimate result of the conflict. By that stage, the conflict no longer is driven solely by domestic issues, but also by competition between external powers. This interference causes the increase of the duration of the war, size of the destruction and the number of civilian casualties<sup>14</sup>. In addition, some entities become more reluctant to negotiate and find solutions because of their dependence on external backers, which makes the proxy war much more complicated because it is connected to the benefits of foreign forces that seek to achieve their strategic objectives.

Many countries in the world suffered and are still suffering from proxy conflicts like Libya<sup>15</sup>. The proxy conflicts in Libya involved many actors and were dangerous, affecting Libya terribly. Another example is Yemen<sup>16</sup> that is currently living one of the most dangerous and longest proxy conflicts in the world, which prevents it from developing the country. Sudan<sup>17</sup> has also suffered from the conflicts between Sudanese Armed Force

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<sup>12</sup> <https://share.google/uusL8czNHh5PITZJF>

<sup>13</sup> <https://share.google/aRkw9TRqHb6hObwwl>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.sipri.org/yearbook/2016/04>

<sup>15</sup> [https://www.startts.org.au/media/RT35\\_Libyas-proxy-war.pdf](https://www.startts.org.au/media/RT35_Libyas-proxy-war.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> <https://goodauthority.org/news/the-uae-is-weakening-its-partnership-with-the-saudis-in-yemen-heres-why-that-matters/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.fpri.org/article/2025/07/foreign-influence-is-fueling-the-war-in-sudan/>

(SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), transforming into one of the most complicated proxy conflict areas. This conflict is rapidly destroying Sudan and causing the people to suffer beyond measure. The danger and the risks of proxy conflicts threaten individual nations, but also global stability.<sup>18</sup>

## **Treaties and Organizations**

**The United Nations Security Council:** “It is one of the six main organs of the United Nations established under the UN Charter. Its primary responsibility is maintaining international peace and security. The Security Council takes the lead in determining the existence of a threat to the peace or act of aggression. It calls upon the parties to a dispute to settle it by peaceful means and recommends methods of adjustment or terms of settlement.”<sup>19</sup>

The UNSC is an official international body that is responsible for global peace and the UN charter allows it to enforce resolutions in pursuit of its aims.

**UN General Assembly Resolution 2131:** declares that no state has the authority to directly or indirectly interfere in another state’s internal affairs, this resolution lays the political and legal groundwork against proxy warfare. It explicitly condemns the financing, training, or arming of groups aiming to destabilize another country. This resolution affirms the non-intervention principle which is a crucial thing for proxy warfare.<sup>20</sup>

**The Geneva Conventions (1949):** “The 1949 Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols are international treaties that contain the most important rules limiting the barbarity of war. They protect people who do not take part in the fighting (civilians, medics, aid workers) and those who can no longer fight (wounded, sick and shipwrecked troops, prisoners of war).” The Geneva Conventions are prioritized over other conventions and treaties because they are universally binding.<sup>21</sup>

**The Arms Trade Treaty (2014):** “The Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) is an international treaty that regulates the international trade in conventional arms and seeks to prevent and eradicate illicit trade and diversion of conventional arms by establishing international standards governing arms transfers.”<sup>22</sup>

Focusing on article 6(3): “A State Party shall not authorize any transfer of conventional arms covered under Article 2 (1) or of items covered under Article 3 or Article 4, if it has knowledge at the time of authorization that the arms or items would be used in the commission of genocide, crimes against humanity, grave breaches of the Geneva Conventions of 1949, attacks directed against civilian objects or civilians protected as such, or other war crimes as defined by international agreements to which it is a Party.”<sup>23</sup> External states frequently arm local factions in proxy conflicts. This practice is specifically

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<sup>18</sup><https://fiveable.me/political-geography/unit-9/proxy-wars/study-guide/kUXuno8oBCimmtDN>

<sup>19</sup>[https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/en/about\\_test1](https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/en/about_test1)

<sup>20</sup>[https://legal.un.org/avl/pdf/ha/ga\\_2131-xx/ga\\_2131-xx\\_e.pdf](https://legal.un.org/avl/pdf/ha/ga_2131-xx/ga_2131-xx_e.pdf)

<sup>21</sup><https://www.icrc.org/en/law-and-policy/geneva-conventions-and-their-commentaries>

<sup>22</sup><https://thearmstradetreaty.org/>

<sup>23</sup>[https://thearmstradetreaty.org/hyper-images/file/ATT\\_English/ATT\\_English.pdf?templateId=137253](https://thearmstradetreaty.org/hyper-images/file/ATT_English/ATT_English.pdf?templateId=137253)

targeted in this article, which forbids states from providing weapons when they are aware that doing so will encourage war crimes, a prevalent aspect of proxy conflicts.

**The UN Charter:** It is an international treaty which codifies the basic tenets of international relations from the sovereign equality of states to prohibition of the use of force in any manner inconsistent with the purposes of the United Nations<sup>24</sup>. Focusing on Article 2(4,7):

\*“All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations.”<sup>25</sup>

\*“Nothing contained in the present Charter shall authorize the United Nations to intervene in matters which are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state or shall require the Members to submit such matters to settlement under the present Charter;”<sup>26</sup>

## **Current Situation**

As of now, proxy wars continue to threaten global and civilian security, in addition to shaping the political world that undermines diplomacy. We will present four examples of many.

Our first case is The Syrian Civil War which began in 2010 as the Syrian Revolution was a conflict marred by foreign interference, with the Assad regime receiving backing by Russia and Iran and the Syrian Rebel groups receiving support from a myriad of countries including the US, the EU, Turkey, Arab Gulf states and others. The Assad regime fell in December 2024 with the victory of the Syrian Rebel groups supported by Turkey and others. The conflict still goes on as Kurdish forces demanding autonomy (and who were previously supported by the US) are not engaged in political and often military conflict with the central government in Damascus, heavily backed by Turkey.<sup>27</sup>

Our second case of a proxy conflict is the one taking place in Libya. Ever since 2011, Libya has been in chaos following the overthrow of the dictator Muammar Gaddafi. Rival tribes and political movements competed over control of the country. Libya is currently divided into two main administrative regions. The West of Libya with its capital Tripoli, are under the control of the internationally recognized Government of National Accord backed mainly by Turkey, Qatar, Algeria and others. Eastern Libya, based in its capital of

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<sup>24</sup> <https://www.un.org/en/academic-impact/un-charter>

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/full-text>

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/full-text>

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cvgrzd76p4lo>

Tobruk, is controlled by the Government of National Stability under the de facto leadership of General Khalifa Haftar and backed by countries such as the UAE and Egypt. While the sides are not currently in direct military confrontation, the relations between them remain cold and hostile, further cementing the divisions within the country.<sup>28</sup>

The third case of a dire proxy war is ongoing in Yemen. The Houthis, who are a religious minority in the general region, have taken over the capital of Sanaa and have established control in their areas following the fall of the dictator Ali Saleh. They are backed chiefly by Iran. Opposing them were other rebel groups who also opposed Saleh but who oppose the Houthis and are also backed by other regional actors in competition with Iran. The legitimate and internationally recognized government of Yemen based in the port city of Aden is backed by Saudi Arabia. The Southern Yemen Movement, supported by the UAE, managed to declare the south of Yemen as an independent entity in December 2025, only to face military backlash from the Saudi-backed government who was able to crush the Southern Movement within a matter of a few weeks. This conflict has created a serious rift between the UAE and Saudi Arabia who were previously allies and close partners in Yemen.

The last case we will be presenting is the proxy war now taking place in Ukraine. Following protests in Ukraine against government corruption in 2014, Russian elements within Ukraine began acting, declaring the independence of a number of regions in the east and receiving Russian support. The Ukrainian government on the other hand received massive support from the US, the EU and NATO in order to counter Russian influence in the region. This finally exploded into a full conflict when Russia officially invaded Ukraine in 2022. The conflict has been raging ever since, with hundreds of thousands of military and civilian casualties and the infrastructure of Ukraine and Russia severely damaged. Ukraine continues to be backed by the EU and NATO, with the US reconsidering some aspects of its support. Russia on the other hand received massive economic support from China and has made use of North Korean troops who were put in the front lines. While many attempts were made at achieving a ceasefire, the conflict does not seem to be reaching an end anytime soon.

These were four examples of recent proxy wars and there are many more. They have caused serious international upheavals, raging from military escalations, social and economic turbulence, stress on the international system and war crimes. This committee

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<sup>28</sup> <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/civil-war-libya>

needs to create the framework in place to prevent this negative phenomenon to insure the stability of the international community.

## **Critical Events and Timeline**

**1936-1939:** the Spanish Civil War, in which the Republicans and the Nationalists in Spain fought over the control of the country; the Soviet Union supported the republicans, while Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy supported the nationalists,<sup>29</sup> delaying a resolution and shifting the conflict from a local struggle into an ideological one.

**1948:** The creation of the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO)<sup>30</sup>; after the Arab Israeli war, the UN created UNTSO to supervise the conflicts and avoid escalation.

**1948-1949:** After World War II, Germany was divided into 4 sections, each controlled by a state actor: the United States, the Soviet Union, France, and Britain; Berlin was the intersection point for all four powers. In June 1948, the Soviet Union blocked all land and water access to the western sectors, trying to force them out, which escalated the conflict. By May 1949, the blockade was lifted again, preventing a direct war and failing to force any Western power out.

**1950-1953:** North Korea, supported by China and the Soviet Union, tried to invade South Korea in 1950, hoping to reunify Korea. South Korea, with the help of the United Nations' command,<sup>31</sup> was mostly supported by the United States to help resist the invasion, which led to the intensification of the conflict and making it part of the broader ideological struggle for the Cold War.

**1954-1975:** A war broke out in Vietnam between the local communists (Northern Vietnam) supported by the USSR and the local nationalists (Southern Vietnam) supported by the United States. This Civil War turned into one of the struggles of the Cold war.

**1998-2003:** The second Congo war was started because the president turned against his allies, leading them to collaborate with the rebel groups. These involvements led to the

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<sup>29</sup> [https://www.britannica.com/event/Spanish-Civil-War?utm\\_source](https://www.britannica.com/event/Spanish-Civil-War?utm_source)

<sup>30</sup> [https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/mission/untso?utm\\_source](https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/mission/untso?utm_source)

<sup>31</sup> [https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/112026?ln=en&utm\\_source](https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/112026?ln=en&utm_source)

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prolonging of the war while the UN peacekeepers tried to protect the civilians and monitored the peace agreements<sup>32</sup>.

**2014-2020:** after the fall of Gaddafi, three main powers disagreed on who should take the authority: Libyan national army supported by UAE, Egypt, Russia, government of national accord (GNA) supported by Turkey and Qatar, and local armed groups. Making it harder for any group to reach full authority and stabilize the country.

**2011-2025:** peaceful protests against the Syrian government were met with violence, escalating the situation to a civil war fought by extremist groups, rebel groups, and the government; Russia, Turkey, Iran, some Gulf states, and the U.S. supported different groups. Foreign intervention made resistance and stabilization near impossible.

**2014-2025:** In 2014, the Houthis, with the support of Iran, attempted to rebel against their government, hoping to take over the country. It led to a civil war supported by some Gulf states, the U.S., and some other governments.

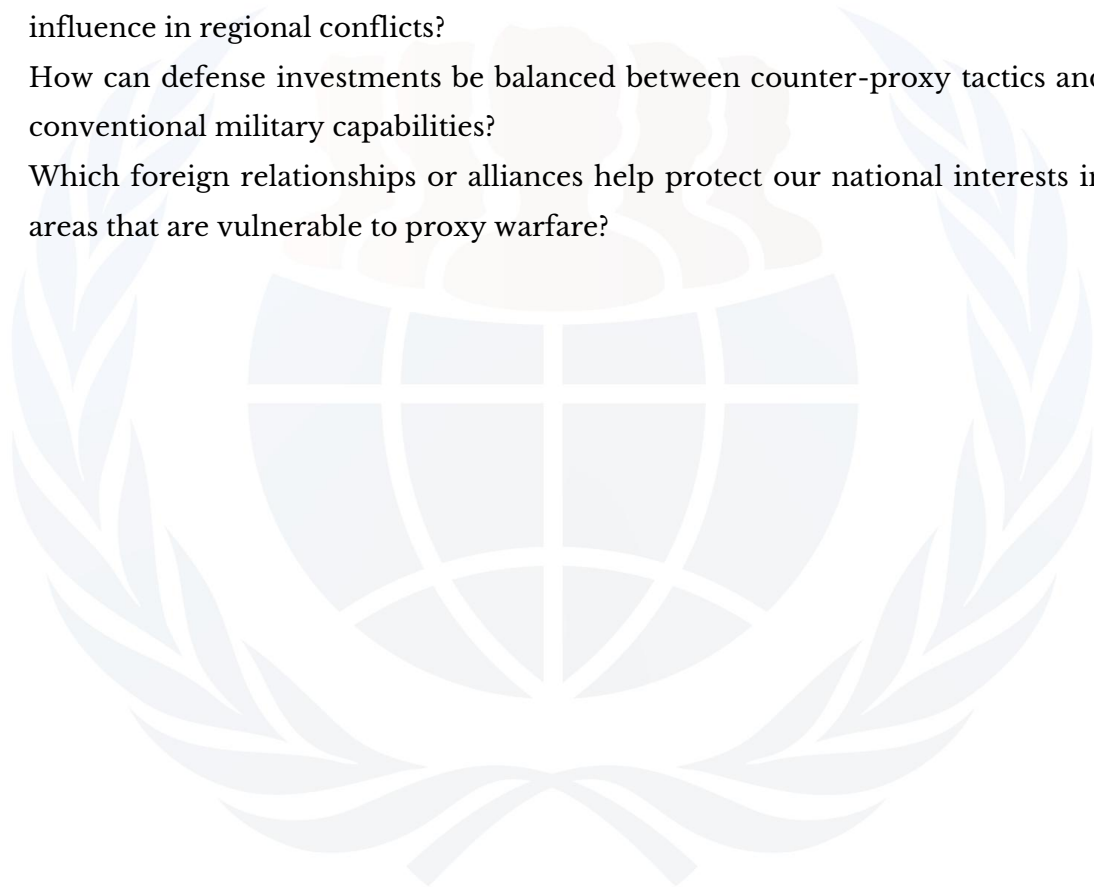
**2023-2025:** The Sudanese Rapid Support Forces (supported by the UAE), and the Sudanese army forces (supported by Russia, Iran, and Egypt) turned against each other, fighting for authority, but with foreign support fueling the conflict making authority and control harder to establish.

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<sup>32</sup> [https://peacekeeping.un.org/mission/past/monuc/?utm\\_source](https://peacekeeping.un.org/mission/past/monuc/?utm_source)

## **Questions to Consider**

- How should a proxy war be defined, and how different is it from a direct military intervention?
- What impact do proxy wars have on civilian security and the balance of power?
- How did your country contribute to the engagement in proxy wars?
- Who are the main foreign forces that most affect the civil wars through proxies?
- What economic and political risks can proxy wars cause in the national interests?
- What can the governments do in order to decrease the social and humanitarian damages of proxy conflicts?
- What may be the effective diplomatic mechanisms for reducing foreign influence in regional conflicts?
- How can defense investments be balanced between counter-proxy tactics and conventional military capabilities?
- Which foreign relationships or alliances help protect our national interests in areas that are vulnerable to proxy warfare?



## Helpful Resources

The PDF document: [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RRA307-2.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA307-2.html)

Youtube video: <https://youtu.be/baycsY5GqWQ?si=pzuul6jgub4-A8Xn>

<https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/November-December-2025/Proxy-Wars/>

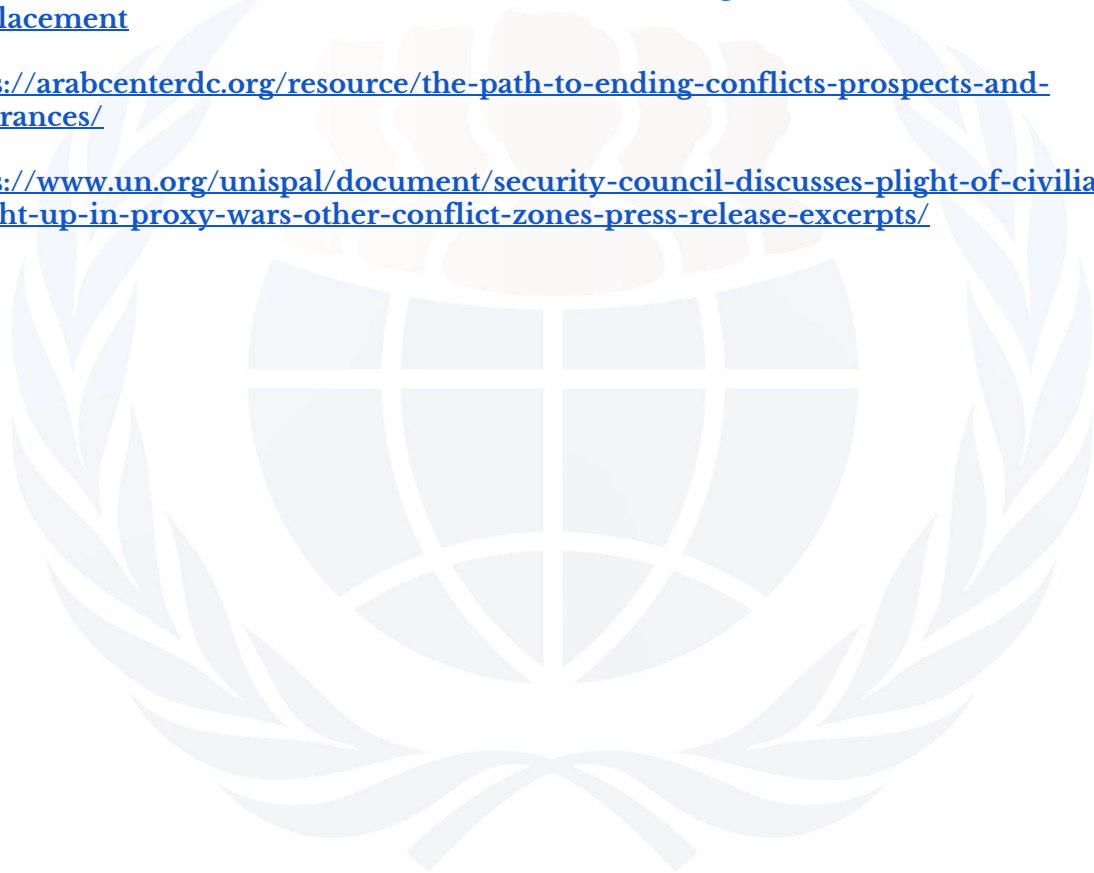
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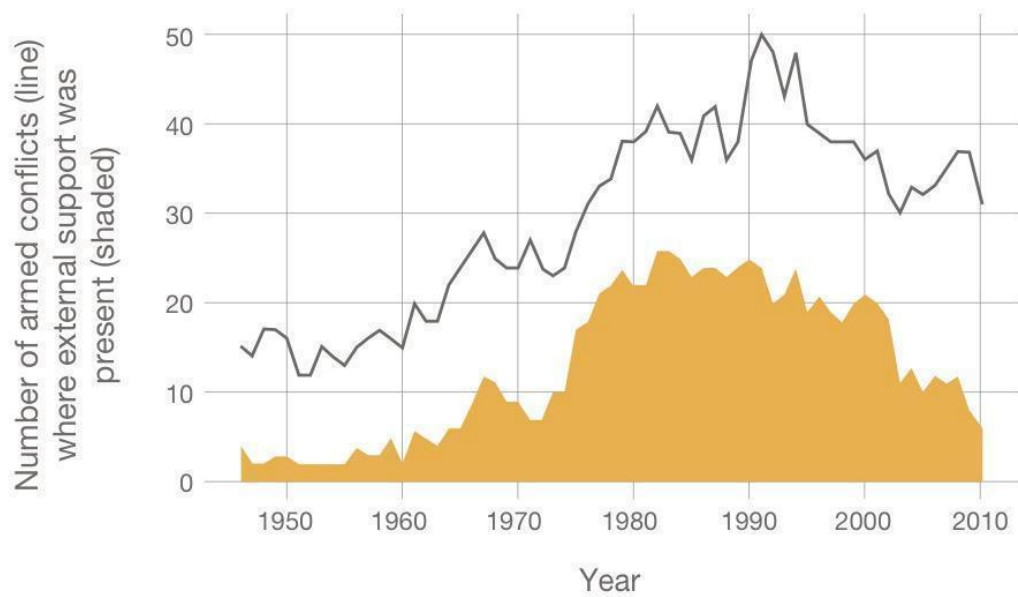


**Relevant Media**

**The Escalating Stakes of Proxy Wars<sup>33</sup>**

Conflict	Sponsors/Targets*	Vital Interest	Control over Proxies	Nuclear Armed	Direct Conflict
Syrian Civil War	Russia	No	Hands-Off	Yes	No
	U.S.	No	Hands-Off	Yes	
Ukraine 2014	Russia	Yes	Mixed	Yes	Yes
	Ukraine*	Yes	Hands-Off	No	
Ukraine 2022	Russia*	Yes	Hands-Off	Yes	No
	U.S.	No	Mixed	Yes	
Iran - Israel	Iran	Yes	Hands-Off	No	Yes
	Israel*	Yes	N/A	Yes	
M23 Insurgency	Dem. Rep. Of the Congo*	Yes	Hands-Off	No	No
	Rwanda	No	Hands-Off	No	

**Number of Proxy Wars over Time**



<sup>33</sup><https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/November-December-2025/Proxy-Wars/>

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