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Disposable rebels: US military assistance to insurgents in the Syrian war

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ABSTRACT

During the Syrian War, the US and other Western countries trained, equipped and paid Syrian rebels to fight the government and, later, root out the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). When states use armed groups to attain foreign policy objectives, control is a key concern. The US sought to enforce such control over providers and recipients of lethal military assistance in the period from 2013–18. We investigate the parallel CIA and Department of Defence assistance programmes . We challenge theoretical assumptions related to the application of the principal-agent model to explain the dynamics of foreign assistance to rebels. We argue that, in the US strategy to control rebels, co-ordinating the providers and dividing the recipients of security assistance were essential conditions. Meanwhile, the delays in recruitment, the limitations on the number of soldiers trained, the short supply of weapons and the strict regulation of the actions carried out by the rebels all reduced the efficacy of the assistance. This way of instrumentalising security assistance helped the US and its Western allies to crush ISIL while avoiding a collapse in Damascus. However, this happened at the expense of rebel cohesion, autonomy, and legitimacy.

Introduction

Security assistance is an age old practise, but the current proliferation of Western security assistance programmes is the result of a shift in US foreign policy which took place around 2010, succinctly iterated by Secretary of State Robert Gates: the US should be 'helping other countries defend themselves or, if necessary, fight alongside U.S. forces by providing them with equipment, training, or other forms of security assistance' (Karlin, 2018, p. 111). He further explained that 'within the military, advising and mentoring indigenous security forces is moving from the periphery of institutional priorities,

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where it was considered the province of the Special Forces, to being a key mission for the armed forces as a whole' (Gates, 2010, p. 112). Behind this rhetoric about helping others was a desire to lower the financial, human and political cost (to the US and its European allies) of foreign interventions (Groh, 2019).

However, somewhat counterintuitive to the idea of bolstering states in the Middle East, the US has also over the last decade overseen coalitions training and equipping rebels in Yemen, Libya, Iraq and Syria. In the case of Syria, assistance to rebels was initially aimed at toppling the dictatorship of Bashar al-Asad, while around 2014–15 the objective shifted to defeating the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). The aid consisted of foreign military advisors training and equipping a number of Syrian rebel outfits in different parts of the country, and the US and its European and Middle Eastern allies spent billions of dollars on these programmes (Miller & DeYoung, 2015; Operation Inherent Resolve, 2015). Soon after ISIL was considered crushed, support to the rebels was phased out.

In the present article we explore the utility of new perspectives and analytical approaches related to such programmes when analysing this US-led assistance to rebels in Syria and, vice-versa, what this case study may contribute to theory development. We place the analysis within three distinct but partly overlapping fields of study concerning the training and equipping of rebels: security assistance, proxy warfare and conflict studies. Within all three fields of study the idea of an unambiguous, vertical relationship between a provider and a recipient of train and equip programmes is increasingly challenged, a tendency which also the present special issue testifies to. In particular, the empirical reality of these programmes resists a theoretical modelling based on a standard principal-agent relationship (Miller, 2005). Not only does reality fail to conform to some of the basic premises of the theory, there are also other kinds of forces working on these programme which are not included in the PA-model: for example, horizontal bindings and the kind of relationships forged in the crucible of implementation between the actual persons involved, which might be better captured by other analytical approaches (Ref. Special Issue Introduction). However, this leaves us with two concerns: One, are there circumstances or measures that the provider of assistance can introduce, in order to strengthen the vertical structuring of these programmes so that it is more likely that the recipient complies? Two, if these security assistance programmes fail to deliver in terms of building the capacity they claim as their *raison d'être*, why then do so many countries around the world engage in the provision of security assistance (and why do countries or armed groups bother to receive such aid) (Biddle et al., 2018, p. 133)?

The present article answers these questions by analysing Western military assistance to rebels in Syria with an emphasis on the early phase directed

against Asad. The research method is a qualitative, interpretive approach combining interview data with review of government documents, press reports and secondary literature. Our main argument is that the highly fragmented rebellion offered providers of assistance increased opportunities for control over recipients, but that these control measures undermined the efficacy of the assistance and cemented fragmentation of the rebels and the long-term destabilization of Syria. We further maintain that the US increasingly considered Asad in power as the 'least bad option' compared to a collapse of the Syrian state or a rebel victory where a new government in Damascus was dominated by Islamist groups. This, in turn, indicates that the ineffectiveness of the programmes might not have been an impediment for US strategic interests in Syria.

Analysing security assistance to rebels

States usually give security assistance during peace time, and recipients are most often the civilian and military branches of a government's security forces (Biddle et al., 2018; Karlin, 2018). However, as indicated by the Robert Gate's quote above, shifts within the global strategic landscape and accompanying adjustments of doctrines have made assistance to rebels more attractive (Mumford, 2013). This has for instance given impetus to the 'by, through and with' approach where boots on the ground are supposed to be local 'allies' supported by air power, 'advisors' and intelligence from the US and its Western partners. By co-opting and tailoring armed units in the host country to perform key functions in counterinsurgency operations under Western guidance, the cost of these operations has been significantly lowered in terms of expenses, casualties and the visibility of the Western involvement (Krieg, 2016; Rolandsen et al., 2021). The defeat of ISIL's 'caliphate' on Iraqi and Syrian territory demonstrated the potential impact of assistance to rebels within the framework of expeditionary warfare and out-of-area counter-insurgency (Watling & Reynolds, 2021).

The increase in overt assistance programmes to rebels over the last ten to fifteen years has resulted in a correspondingly intensified scholarly interest in this phenomenon, in particular within the fields of security assistance, proxy warfare and civil war/conflict studies (Kaplan, 2019; Karlén et al., 2021; Krishnan, 2019; Pattison, 2015; Tamm, 2016). The present study is first and foremost grounded in the field of security assistance in the sense that we concentrate on the inherent design and effectiveness of programmes and the nature of interaction between providers and recipients. We do however also engage with the other two areas of study.

Research on proxy warfare is preoccupied with how security assistance to rebels can be a tool for a state's pursuit of foreign policy objectives (Mumford, 2013). Several articles on proxy/surrogate warfare in the Middle East focus on

the use of proxies as substitutes for direct intervention and the use of security assistance to rebels as a tool for providers to implement their foreign policy aims (Cragin, 2020; Karlén et al., 2021; Krieg, 2016; Krishnan, 2019; Mako, 2021). We question the premise within these studies that the provision of assistance to rebels is aimed at maximizing military gains. Instead, we argue that the shift towards integrating local allies into military interventions has resulted in a diversification of objectives, where the goal of defeating the opponent might be replaced by other objectives such as ensuring a balance of power between opposing forces or to control a specific territory of strategic importance.

Research focusing on third-party intervention in civil wars tries to establish how security assistance can influence the shape and behaviour of the rebel group, as well as power dynamics between the parties to the conflict and between rebels and the people living in areas under their control (Karlén et al., 2021; Rauta, 2016; Salehyan, 2010; Tamm, 2016). One important finding from this line of research is that external assistance to rebels is much more common than typically assumed and must be counted as a salient factor when analysing intra-state wars (Salehyan, 2010; San-Akca, 2016). Our present study adds to this body of research by highlighting how external providers actively shape rebel organizations and 'manage' how they wage war. This is different from the current mainstream approach where it is assumed that providers do not have such goals and where security assistance to rebels is treated as an on/off relationship which inadvertently impacts the rebel organization and behaviour.

In all the three fields of study engaging with security assistance to rebels, the principal-agent approach to decision-making analysis is the dominant theoretical framework for discussions around the motives and results of the practice (Karlén et al., 2021; see also Special Issue Introduction). This approach models the logic of interaction between a principal, in this case the provider of security assistance, and the agent, the recipient of such assistance (Rolandsen et al., 2021). The principal employs the agent to carry out certain tasks in pursuit of the principal's objectives. In its classical iteration, the theory explains that the motivation for using an agent is either that the principal does not have implementation capacity to do the work itself, or that the agent is better suited to carry out the task than the principal (Miller, 2005). From the principal's perspective, the main drawback with outsourcing tasks to an agent is that it becomes more difficult to control the ways in which the task is carried out. More specifically, the loss of agency is manifest in the ensuing problem of *adverse selection*: the principal has insufficient information about the different agents' comparative capacities and advantages, which makes it difficult to assess the value of the deals offered by these agents. There is also the problem of *shirking*, where the agent either overtly or in secret does not carry out the task in the manner agreed. Within the context

of security assistance there is an additional challenge related to *moral hazard*, which means that the principal might end up with imputed moral responsibility for the actions carried by the agent (Krieg, 2016, 109–11). In sum, the principal's loss of agency is related to both the extent to which the principal can control the agent and the level of information it can access about the agents and the tasks they carry out. These problems become more acute in situations where there are high levels of 'goal incongruity' – that the principal and the agent do not share the strategic objectives – which was increasingly the case in the US' assistance to rebels in Syria.

This application of the P-A approach has faced criticism. In particular the notion of a dyadic relationship between a principal and an agent has been questioned: There is often a much more complex mechanisms of support where there might be several external actors providing assistance to the same rebels and where the relationship between these different principals might be bound together (Karlén et al., 2021). Such horizontal dynamics make the task of controlling the recipients of security assistance harder (Ref. Special Issue Introduction).

Providers have sought to resolve this problem of control by designing more detailed vertical control mechanisms into their programmes, especially in situations of goal incongruity with rebels. Importantly, principals may calibrate the amount and type of aid provided, as well as using it selectively as a reward and punishment system (Watling & Reynolds, 2021: 80–86). This is an effective step because the amount of aid provided often determines the difference between victory and mere survival for a rebel group. Indeed, the principal might be satisfied with an outcome where the rebels keep the government in a perpetual wartime situation while maintaining the support at survival level. In some cases, the amount of support is determined by the principal's inherent capacity to provide assistance (cf. Western aid to Ukraine) or because the principal does not consider rebel victory sufficiently important to invest the necessary amount of assistance (Watling & Reynolds, 2021: 88–90). In the case of the revolt against Asad in Syria, rebel victory was increasingly seen as an undesirable outcome.

While the size of the resource flows is the most important factor determining the impact of foreign assistance, the reliability of the flow of food, equipment, ammunition, spare parts and other consumable resources also has an impact (Watling & Reynolds, 2021: 81–82). Moreover, as demonstrated in the war in Ukraine, the type of weapons distributed to rebels impacts their capabilities. Put simply, rebels who only receive light weapons may only take control over poorly developed peripheries where government armies lack a permanent presence. But, to successfully take and hold areas where the enemy has a permanent, and often entrenched, military presence, rebels will in most cases need stronger offensive weapons such as artillery and mortars. To protect detected defensive positions, they need anti-air capabilities.

Salehyan (2010) points out that also rebels need to agree to receive the security assistance provided by a foreign government. There is a cost related to relinquishing autonomy to the provider and also possibly reputation loss among the rebel groups' constituencies (see also: Karlén et al., 2021: 2072–73).

In the following we will scrutinize the US' goals related to training and equipping Syrian rebels, and evaluate different measures put in place to counterbalance the problems concerning control as highlighted by the principal-agent model. The high level of rebel fragmentation was an essential condition as this created a situation where the principal could: pick and choose among prospective agents; force them to undergo extensive vetting; regulate the flow of weapons and munition as a way to reward and punish behaviour; and demand extensive documentation of the actions carried out. Towards the end of the article, we discuss the impact of this approach to security assistance and argue that it was not only the limited concern about efficiency and effectiveness that made these programmes possible, but also a limited concern for the long-term consequences these attempts to control the Syrian rebellion would have on political developments within the country and the broader region.

Methodology

Our investigation is focused on security assistance programmes targeting rebels in the north-western, central and southern parts of Syria. The Kurdish rebels in the north-east followed a different trajectory and are not included in this investigation. The analysis builds on a broad collection of written sources and 19 semi-structured interviews with recipients and observers of US-initiated security assistance in Syria. To obtain information about security assistance to rebels is difficult because such activities tend to be clandestine, allowing the provider to deny involvement (Karlén et al., 2021; Krishnan, 2019). This was also the case with the CIA programme in Syria. Important sources are therefore accounts by foreign journalists who have interviewed fighters, fixers, and local intellectuals, or who talked with anonymous sources among the Western militaries. More information is available on the Pentagon's training and equipping of Syrian rebels for the sake of fighting ISIL. Still, there is little in-depth and detailed information describing the design and implementation of the programme. We have therefore triangulated the available written sources with our own interview data.

Interviewing recipients of security assistance comes with its own challenges in the Syrian war context. We faced constraints related to access, safety, and political dependency in the chosen country for the face-to-face encounters. The interview material was collected in Gaziantep, Turkey, in September 2019, accompanied by complementary interviews in Istanbul

and four video calls. For a lack of prior contacts among Syrian rebel groups, we relied on a research assistant and local journalists to identify and contact recipients of US military training. The participants were informed about the purpose of the research and the right to withdraw their consent at any time before agreeing to take part in the interviews. The encounters took place in cafes, restaurants, and parks, and in private homes on two occasions. We did not record the conversations and will not refer to any individual or group with names to protect the participants' confidentiality. We interviewed a total of 10 fighters of different rebel groups. Apart from one (interview 16), all had been affiliated with the Free Syrian Army. None of the groups had a strong ideological orientation in terms of calling for an Islamic state. But religion is part and parcel of the (Sunni-dominated) rebel environment, and one of the groups carried a manifestly Islamic name (interview 4). The fighters' presence in Turkey reflected Ankara's general policy of hosting Syrian refugees and continuing military and security ties in some cases. Some interviewees professed having moved to Turkey after the US withdrew its support to them. The fact that the rebels were no longer under US patronage meant that they could speak more freely about their experiences. However, their continuing dependency on Turkey made inquiring about Turkey's role in the security assistance a more sensitive topic. Another shortcoming of the interview material is that the fighters had operated in different parts of Syria, complicating comparisons in some respects. We are cognizant of these limitations and have factored in contextual factors when drawing conclusions from the data.

The US' shifting objectives and approaches to security assistance in Syria, 2011–18

While the official US objectives in Syria were to replace Asad with a Western-style secular democracy and, subsequently, to defeat the ISIL 'caliphate', its approach to the Syrian war was shaped by contradictory impulses. President Barack Obama sought to reduce US commitment in the Middle East, but the steady conflict escalation created pressures and perceived imperatives to act. When the Arab uprisings set off, Obama was two years into office. Obama sympathized with the popular protests and expressed support for them from the outset. His ambiguous ambition was to be seen as intervening decisively in favour of the forces behind the 'Arab spring' and against Asad's atrocities, while avoiding that the US would 'own' the conflict, as had happened on his predecessor's watch in Iraq and Afghanistan (Phillips, 2016). Moreover, Washington feared that a regime change in Damascus would either result in fundamentalist rule or a weak Western oriented government dependent on its support to stay in power. Neither alternative was likely to end the internal conflicts in the country and could potentially result in a disintegration

of the state, as had happened in Libya. In addition, there were several other limitations concerning relations with Russia, European domestic policy (migration first and foremost) and regional allies and adversaries (Itani, 2016; Van Dam, 2017).

To manage the resultant contradictions and expectations surrounding US engagement in the Syria conflict, low-level security assistance to Syrian rebels became a politically viable solution. The US security assistance was part of a larger context where a mix of diaspora initiatives, wealthy individuals and a range of other countries provided money, weapons, and training to the rebels. The US attempted to coordinate the provision of assistance in the field through two co-ordination centres (see below). Apparently, the US capacity to co-ordinate assistance from allies from outside the region, such as the UK, France and Italy, was relatively high. As for the level of control the US managed to impose on its allies in the region – Turkey, Jordan, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and UAE – observers suggest that it was limited at the outset but increased over time (Interview 19). In the following we will both look into the specific design of the US programmes and also the ways it sought control through co-ordinating other providers (Baylouny & Mullins, 2018).

Phase one: fighting Asad (2011–2014)

During the first year of the Syrian uprising, the conflict escalated from popular protests to civil war (Baczko et al., 2018). Bashar al-Asad pursued a 'security solution' to the uprising, including intimidation tactics, sniper shootings to terrorize demonstrators and targeted killings of political activists (Abboud, 2018). The repression peaked in August 2011, during Ramadan, and President Obama pronounced that 'the time has come for President Asad to step aside' (Yassin-Kassab & Al-Shami, 2018). The leaders of Britain, France and Germany released a joint statement with the same message. In their words, the US and allies were advocating regime change. However, they were not prepared to commit their own soldiers to achieve this goal. The protesters looked to NATO's intervention in Libya and raised calls for military protection. Officers and soldiers defected from the Syrian army and regrouped under the banner the 'Free Syrian Army' (FSA). The armed uprising developed in a decentralized manner, and the FSA leadership had limited ability to coordinate and control the insurgents on the ground. From early 2012, it was also challenged by a rival military structure (the Higher Revolutionary Military Council). Initially, the rebels were primarily supported by private donors and regional states like Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey (Barnard & Saad, 2012; Chulov, 2012). The FSA received expressions of support from Western states but few resources it could use to centralize the insurgency (Lister, 2016). Short of US support, the armed groups were left with religiously conservative donors in the Gulf, accelerating the Islamization of the insurgency (Pierret, 2017).

On the incumbent side of the conflict, the Syrian government increased the calibre of the military means deployed. Testing the international response to what had triggered the intervention in Libya, it sent fighter jets against rebels in July 2012. Five months later, it fired Scud missiles on rebel-held Aleppo. The opposition and regional powers' demand for a 'no-fly zone' was turned down by President Obama. In statements, he emphasized that the use of chemical weapons was the red line. Nonetheless, in April 2013 the White House reported to Congress that, in the intelligence community's assessment, chemical agents were being deployed (Phillips, 2016, p. 178). This did not result in the promised overt military reaction from the US, but allegedly from that point onward, the CIA was authorized to provide lethal assistance to rebels (Muñoz, 2013). After the 21 August 2013 chemical attack on al-Ghouta, outside Damascus, in which an estimated 1400 people died, the CIA programme was scaled up. Security assistance took the place of a military intervention.

From 2013 the external powers increased their military involvement and turned Syria into a theatre of proxy war (Leenders & Giustozzi, 2020). Iran, Hezbollah and Russia aligned with the government while the United States, France, the United Kingdom, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates stepped up their support for the forces fighting Asad. The United States held back on lethal aid (Hinnebusch & Saouli, 2019: 209–27). But, the CIA was reported to coordinate between donors and opposition commanders as early as May 2012 (Schmitt, 2012) and played a key role in directing weapons from Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey to selected Syrian rebels by 2013 (Chivers & Schmitt, 2013). The CIA operation had the code name Timber Sycamore. It was the enactment of the first objective of the US in the Syrian war, i.e., fighting Asad. There is only sporadic information available concerning the scope and impact of this programme. However, in 2015, it was reported to cost about USD 1 billion per year, making it one of the CIA's largest ever covert operations (Miller & DeYoung, 2015).

More information is available concerning the DOD train and equip programme which started from late 2014. This programme went through two stages. The first started in late 2014 and was implemented through the Pentagon as a part of the larger Operation Inherent Resolve. It corresponded to the second objective of defeating ISIL. In 2015, the programme was authorized a budget of USD 500 million (Operation Inherent Resolve, 2015: 30). In the first stage of the DoD programme, recruiters were targeting the same segment of rebels as the CIA, but it is unclear how many were in fact enlisted. One condition to join was that the fighters trained had to put their struggle with Asad on hold, which turned away many potential recruits (Osborne, 2021). In addition, there was a drawn-out vetting process, which seems to have slowed down the programme considerably (discussed further below). Another obstacle was instances where the Nusra Front, a group

affiliated with al-Qa'ida, attacked groups that had received training. In October 2015, the programme was suspended and was soon after replaced with a new approach (Barnard & Schmitt, 2015; Robinson, 2016: 31–32).

Phase two: fighting ISIL (2014–2018)

The fall of Mosul turned the US government's attention to the threat posed by ISIL, triggering a US-led international military intervention in Syria and Iraq. These developments made the US set counter-terrorism at the top of its priorities in its second phase of its engagement in Syria, at the expense of regime change (Hinnebusch & Saouli, 2019: 223–24). From September 2015, Russia sent its air force to Syria, allegedly to fight ISIL but in reality to bolster Asad's position. This gave the government army the upper hand in the war.

Western provision of weapons and training was scaled up with the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) as the main recipient. In October 2015, the YPG joined with Arab, Assyrian and small minority group militias in announcing the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which were trained to serve as ground forces. With the help of Western airstrikes, arming and training, the SDF successfully dislodged ISIL from the territories it had held in Syria. This success came at the price of mounting tensions with Arabs in the territories the YPG took over.

Although the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) was the main US partner during this stage, the DoD also provided training and equipment to groups such as the Hamza Division, Brigade 51 and the Mutasim Brigade (Interview 18) as well as the Revolutionary Commanders Army at the Al-Tanf garrison at the South-East border to Jordan and Iraq (International Crisis Group, 2022; Rumley & Schenker, 2021). The FSA groups that received US support in the first phase of the war continued to rely on Western assistance. However, the shift to fighting ISIL put them in a bind. For them and their support base, defeating Asad was still the strategic priority. But militant Islamist groups had come to dominate the insurgency, which both reduced the US appetite for toppling the Syrian government and increased the FSA groups

dependence on the West. This goal incongruence has implications for the application of the principal-agent model when studying external assistance to rebels. In the subsequent analysis, we therefore focus on the FSA groups, although the SDF/YPG were the most significant actors on the scene in the second phase of the war.

Measures to increase the principal's vertical control in security assistance programmes to Syrian rebels

To improve control the US imposed a range of procedures and failsafe mechanisms to ensure that the assistance was provided only to politically acceptable recipients. However, for this to work there were two general conditions that needed to be fulfilled: that the rebels had to be fragmented while the providers were unified. Then the US would achieve the necessary level of detailed information about the operations carried out and had the opportunity to pick and choose among different rebel outfits, while the rebels had no opportunity to 'shop around'. Below we will outline different measures used to increase control and discuss how these affected the impact of the programme. Measures included: increasing cohesion among the providers; extensive vetting of potential recruits; restricting training curriculum; regulating the flow of weapons and munition; and demanding extensive documentation of the military operations carried out. Our investigation shows that the US' support to Syrian rebels was first and foremost focused on maximizing the provider's control of the implementation and hindering adverse outcomes. The reason for this was the anticipated political cost and potential adverse outcome of inadvertently supporting the 'wrong' rebels or providing rebels with the 'wrong kind of' support. We argue that the US pursued this strategy at the expense of military efficiency and effectiveness and with considerable cost for the rebels' legitimacy.

Co-ordinating providers while supporting fragmented rebels

Several studies have pointed to the lack of alternative recipients as the main reason why it is difficult for providers to control recipients of security assistance by threating to cut off the aid (Biddle et al., 2018; Elias & Weisiger, 2020). This is a reflection of the commonplace approach to rebel assistance where the foreign provider channels aid through a national leadership structure, which then distributes the assistance to its various units as it sees fit. In Syria, the US took a different approach to mitigate this constrain on control: it provided training and resources on a selective and decentralized basis, while seeking to orchestrate the aid given by other providers.

As mentioned above, in the beginning of the conflict, regional countries provided aid to the Syrian opposition independently (Baylouny & Mullins, 2018). Under Timber Sycamore, the CIA set up joint operations centres in Turkey and Jordan to oversee the provision of arms and training (Legrand, 2016). The Müşterek Operasyon Merkezi (MOM) in Turkey and the Military Operations Command (MOC) in Amman coordinated between the US, its European and Middle Eastern partners and rebels. Western and regional intelligence officers considered requests for arms and ammunition from

Syrian commanders and decided what to supply (Interviews 2, 9 and 19). During the battle with ISIL, the Pentagon implemented its train and equip programme from bases inside Syria. Most of these bases were in the north in the areas controlled by the SDF with al-Tanf in the south as the main exception.

The MOC and MOM centres constituted a practical solution for overseeing providers and recipients of security assistance alike. By attempting to organize regional states in the same command structures, the US sought to minimize the openings for rebels to 'shop around', thus reducing the adverse selection problem identified by the principal-agent literature. Moreover, by controlling and structuring the sites of interaction between providers and recipients, the US also sought to hinder the development of an informal group dynamic between the individuals involved in the exchange and thus avoid subversion of the intended agenda (Gaston, 2021).

The second tier of this approach was to deal with rebel groups on a case-by-case basis, which was made feasible by the fact that from the outset the Syrian insurgency was characterized by fragmentation (Hatahet, 2017). Western governments referred to this lack of unity as a major obstacle for outside military aid and exhorted the uprising to unite under a civilian democratic leadership. Their own selective approach to the rebellion did little to help, however. The US and partners channelled assistance to numerous lower-level commanders and smaller groups instead of buttressing one overall leader. For example, when the CIA began operation Timber Sycamore, it sidestepped efforts by the main civilian opposition group, The Syrian National Council (SNC), to impose its authority over the rebels. The SNC tried to organize the scattered local groups fighting under the name of the Free Syrian Army into a cohesive force (Schmitt, 2012) and set up the Free Syrian Army's Military Command in 2013. But the MOC operations centre in Jordan ignored the SNC's structures from the outset. The MOM in Turkey initially cooperated but ignored the SNC after December 2013 (Lister, 2016: 13; International Crisis Group, 2014: 26). Since the SNC or FSA were unable to safeguard US arms supplies, the CIA decided to deliver arms directly to trusted commanders in Syria (Entous, 2015).

Vetting and training of recruits to secure malleable and transparent rebel groups

The vetting of recruits was another linchpin of the US control system, which was intended to address the principal-agent-theory problem of adverse selection. The US had limited intelligence on the rebels groups in the early phase of the conflict and lacked a presence on the ground (Stein, 2014). Alarmed by previous examples of personnel and arms joining Islamist groups, the US wished to ensure that only 'moderate' fighters could benefit from

weapons and training (Osborne, 2021). Candidates for security assistance had to go through thorough assessment processes to qualify for Western aid. As we will discuss further below, those planning the programme probably knew that such background checks on recruits would severely delay and restrict the amount of security assistance provided. This might indicate that the low numbers of selected recruits were not necessarily a result of poor vetting capacity but a way to delay and limit the number of rebels who were trained and equipped in a situation where the US' objectives were in flux, and where the perceived risk of adverse consequences of the programmes was a grave concern. This interpretation is partly supported by a recent dissertation which indicates that the vetting was of a low quality and was more of a bureaucratic requirement (Gaston, 2021).

Training was an integrated part of the US' strategy to maintain control during the whole period 2013–18, but the nature of this training differed between the first and the second stage of the DoD programme. In the first phase, the training provided by the US under the CIA programme was relatively basic. According to our interviewees, it centred on physical exercise and basic infantry skills. A training session would typically last for 15–20 days and carried the participants out of the country. The recruits were drilled in the use of light weapons and introduced to military tactics as well as principles of war and first aid. A few were selected for more specialized training. Through media training, rebels would learn how to share their achievements on the battlefield and document compliance with the providers' orders (see below). One of our interviewees were among those who learned how to operate the TOW missile system, which was given to trusted rebels in 2014. There were also other kinds of training such as the creation of border guards in Jordan, and the UK directed a large programme to train the Free Syrian Police (Interview 5).

In the second phase the US approach to training changed from focusing on recruiting new fighters to increasing the competence of existing soldiers (Shear et al., 2015) and integrating the rebel forces into the larger military apparatus that was fighting ISIL. The 'by, through and with' doctrine implies a certain level of training to shape various local actors so that they become more compatible with the Western approach to expeditionary warfare. However, relative to the deep integration of the SDF into the US and its allies' efforts to fight ISIL, this occurred to a much lesser degree with the rebels seeking regime change in Syria.

Military training brought Syrian rebels and US instructors together, giving opportunities for the providers of security assistance to observe and build ties with the recipients (Interview 6). The training sessions partially compensated for the fact that Western states reportedly had limited information about the Syrian rebels and lacked experience of working with them in the past. A rebel commander explained that the trainers would put pressure on the fighters to

expose their mental state. If found to be extremists, they would be kicked out of the program (Interview 8). The training was in this sense a deepening of the vetting process. It therefore appears that the training was designed to increase the providers' opportunity to monitor and direct the activities of the recipients. The US' approach to the disbursement of weapons, ammunition and money further reinforced this tendency.

Using control over supplies to orchestrate rebel behaviour

The military training was combined with the provision of cash, weapons, ammunition and equipment. At the end of the course, the rebels would typically walk away with 200 USD and the light weapon they had used during their training. If trained for a special task, there would be extras (Interview 1). This increased its attraction for the fighters. The resource distribution by external providers occurred in an environment of pervasive scarcity of arms and ammunition from domestic sources. Right from the beginning of the conflict, the Syrian opposition had limited quantities of munitions and specific weapons (Szep, 2014). In the initial escalation phase of the insurgency privately owned guns and arms captured from government forces were important. However, when the conflict escalated – partly because of external engagement – the rebels needed supplies which only foreign governments could provide (Interview 11). Even after the West and Middle Eastern states started to channel military assistance, the demand for arms and ammunition was much higher than the supply. It was therefore up to the supplier to decide how much they wanted to give. By varying over time the overall amount of supplies and training provided, different goals could be achieved.

The rebel groups were in competition with each other to secure access to these resources (Banco, 2013). From the provider's point of view, this was a source of leverage. The US and partners used resource distribution to increase their control over the rebels by linking it with loyalty and obedience (Interview 2). By way of illustration, the commander of a rebel group in Southern Syria experienced that the MOC made allocation of military aid contingent on coordination and agreement on which targets to attack and not. In the early days, he said, the fighters themselves decided on their missions and objectives. However, after they came on the MOC's payroll, they had to follow its orders if they wanted to be paid and receive new supplies. If groups attacked unauthorized targets they were cut off, in some cases even during battle (Interview 4).

Furthermore, by controlling both the type and quantity of weapons and ammunition provided, the US could directly impact the military capabilities of the rebels. For instance, the military effectiveness of the insurgent groups was deeply affected by their lack of anti-aircraft and anti-tank weapons (Interview 12). For the entire conflict, the US did not entrust Syrian rebels with air

defence capabilities. The reason was the possibility of such weapons being used against civilian aircrafts, Western forces or, after 2015, Russian aircrafts. Without anti-air capabilities, rebel strongholds and concentrations of civilians in rebel areas became highly vulnerable to government airstrikes. Conversely, anti-armour weapons were essential for the rebels to go on the offensive. But the US forbade its regional allies to provide the insurgents with guided missiles during the first years of the war (although Qatar made an unauthorized delivery of MANPADs early in the conflict). This changed in 2014 when the first rebels were observed with US-manufactured BGM-71E TOW. The introduction of these missiles enabled the rebels to attack defensive military installations and armoured vehicles and tipped the battle with the government to their favour. The supply was limited to certain groups, though. One of the first recipients was the Hazm Movement, which ideology and organization were considered in line with US ideals and interests (Rebels Worth Supporting: Syria's Harakat Hazm, 2014). According to a TOW shooter interviewed for our article, US officers trained Hazm fighters in groups of 100 in Qatar and Saudi Arabia. The training lasted for 35 days after which the rebels were sent to Syria with 24 pickup trucks, 3 weapons carrier trucks, and mortars, bullets, RPG rockets and 10 US TOW rockets. The US requested that the shooter filmed the strike, kept the empty cartridges and shared the GPS co-ordinates of the launching point and the target. Contingent on that the recipient registered hits, the providers would supply new batches of 10 TOW missiles (Interview 17).

Impact and consequences

Our investigation indicates that, within a chaotic context, the desire to control the recipients of security aid was predominant and trumped concerns related to efficiency and effectiveness. In other words, the need to avoid adverse consequences meant that it was acceptable that the aid was inefficient and ineffective. As we have demonstrated, the security assistance was designed to maximize control through measures such as: comprehensive vetting of potential trainees; restriction on the types of weapons provided; limiting the amounts of supplies; and linking future supplies to reporting of compliance with provider policy. Moreover, we have seen how the US exploited the fragmentation among rebels to create a situation where different groups competed for assistance. It also sought to co-ordinate the different providers to reduce the risk of adverse selection.

In the literature the US security assistance to the Syrian rebels is often considered to have been ineffective and a failure overall. One article argues that this failure was reflected in the fact that Asad remained in power and US-Turkey relations deteriorated (Krishnan, 2019). Such analyses are based on a general assumption that any outcome short of a transition to a democratic

secular government in Damascus constituted a failure of the US. However, as we have argued above, the security assistance was also designed to prevent outcomes such as Islamists taking power in Damascus or a further disintegration of the Syrian state, which would have been worse, as Western governments perceived it. The chosen design and implementation of the train-and-equip programme was a practical solution to a policy quandary constituted by, on the one hand, a domestic pressure within the US to support the 'Arab Spring', and the wish to avoid any long-term commitments on the other. It also served the purpose of keeping US soldiers largely out of the war and thereby hindering any casualties affecting the opinions of constituencies at home.

Seen from the perspective of preventing the providers' worst-case scenarios and their long-term strategic objectives, the train-and-equip programmes to Syrian rebels appear moderately successful: the US created a pool of disposable rebels where an underperforming or unwilling recipient could be discarded in favour of someone more malleable, and when the rebels had served their purpose they could all be discarded with little cost to the US and its allies. It is important to bear in mind that the assistance provided was by and large instrumental: The US' main interests when supporting these groups related to the need to 'do something' and the fighters' ability to reach immediate military objectives; the building of long-term institutionalized security capacity was not an important concern. The aid answered expectations and demands from the domestic population, lobby groups in the state and regional allies, and enabled the US to 'have skin in the game' (E. Gaston, 2021). It was provided with little consideration for its long-term impact on Syrian politics and society.

From the recipients' vantage point, the US approach to security assistance in Syria was damaging in several ways. As alluded to in the analytical framework above, the recipients' strategic calculations when receiving external support is seldom taken into consideration. In a context of tightly controlled assistance and goal incongruence, the decision to accept the US support had severe consequences for the rebel groups that we have studied here.

For one, it reinforced, rather than working as a check on, the rebels' fragmentation. When the US and its allies distributed security assistance on a group-by-group basis, this worked against the opposition's attempts to centralize command and control. Providers of training and munitions deliberately and inadvertently encouraged competition between fighters, reducing trust and the potential for cooperation between them (Interview 10). In fact, the principals, orchestrated by the US, instrumentalised divisions among the recipients of weapons and training to enforce discipline and control. Second, the US was unwilling to provide the kind of weapons and operational assistance it would take for the rebels to live up to their constituencies' expectations. The hesitance to provide the necessary assistance to unseat

Asad sapped moderate rebels' support base (Lister, 2016). Instead of attempting to achieve a military victory, the US thought of the CIA programme as a way of pressuring Asad to negotiate and reach a political settlement (Humud & Blanchard, 2020). This solidified the image of the Islamist groups as uncompromising anti-Asad forces and increased their popularity within the Syrian population.

Third, the security assistance counter-acted any attempt among the rebels to become self-sufficient (Hughes, 2014). Locked in conflicts with other insurgents and failing to win support in society, the Western-backed rebels found themselves with few alternatives to submitting to an outside patron. When the US turned to Kurdish fighters to defeat ISIL, and eventually ended the covert support programme Timber Sycamore in 2017, Turkey capitalized of this and took a broad range of Syrian fighters under its umbrella. Ankara used Arab and Turkmen rebels as ground troops in its 2016 Operation Euphrates Shield against ISIL, the 2018 Operation Olive Branch against the YPG-held region of Afrin, and the October 2019 Operation Peace Spring leading to the capture of the ethnically mixed areas Tell Abyad and Ras al-'Ayn from the Kurds (Al-Hilu, 2021; Pierret, 2021). In 2020, it also sent Syrian fighters to defend Turkey's interests in the armed conflicts in Libya and Azerbaijan. In short, the rebels entered another state's payroll when the US withdrew its support.

Conclusion: Implications for theory development

These findings provide pointers for theory development related to the study of proxy warfare, civil wars and security assistance. Firstly, research from all of these three fields of study has provided compelling evidence that in its classical iteration the principal-agent approach is too simplistic and ill-suited for modelling the exchange between rebels and their foreign sponsors. This includes the observation that instead of one principal (foreign sponsor) choosing between different agents (rebel groups), there are often multiple principals seeking to support one agent. We have seen that in the case of support to Syrian rebels the US took active measures to remedy this situation by attempting to control and unite the other principals and at the same time exploit a situation where there were multiple agents (rebel factions). Regardless of the level of success, these actions indicate that any theorizing around external assistance to rebels must not only account for the many different potential constellations of principals and agents, but also need to consider the capacity of the actors involved to re-order and re-define the rules of the game (Karlén et al., 2021: 2058–60).

Secondly, to complicate the issue further, the Syrian case also demonstrates how the game changed when the US-led coalition of principals switched the objectives pursued in the Syrian war: from supporting

'moderate' rebels in their goal of unseating Asad, to re-focus the war effort on weeding out ISIL. For the rebels studied in the present article this meant that there was a shift from congruity to incongruity of goals between them and the coalition of principals. Not only did Western governments begin to doubt whether they actually wanted regime change in Damascus, they also preferred to avoid increasing tension with the Russians fighting on the side of Asad. Furthermore, they wanted the rebels to focus their efforts on ISIL, which the rebels did not regard as a priority. In consequence, the rebel factions had to choose between remaining true to their goals and be cut off from aid, and adapting to the providers' shifting goals while risking to lose whatever legitimacy they had. In terms of theory development this means that attempts at modelling external assistance to rebels (and governments for that matter) as a principal-agent relationship, must also consider the ways in which objectives and military realities on the ground change over time so that a model based on the early phases of the conflict cannot necessarily be used for the whole duration of the conflict and, vice-versa, models based on later stages of the conflict might not be valid for previous stages.

Finally, existing theories concerning foreign support to rebels are also challenged by the observation that the US and other providers chose control over maximizing the military strength of the fighters. This undermines an often-tacit assumption that increasing military capability is the sole goal of security assistance to rebels. It is necessary to take into account the possibility of a provider and recipients pursuing other goals than rebel success on the battlefield. This includes keeping rebels on a drip-feed of weapons, cash and supplies without giving them the necessary support to succeed. Indeed, the idea that foreign powers provide assistance only to the point of keeping an insurgency alive, is probably a more widespread phenomenon than existing theory development allows for. In fact, external actors' preference to maintain status quo through sustaining a military equilibrium between parties in a civil war, is a factor which might in many cases explain the long duration of such wars.

Interview list

(1) Journalist, Gaziantep, 14 October 2019
(2) Journalist, Gaziantep, 14 October 2019
(3) International observer, Gaziantep, 15 October 2019
(4) Rebel commanders and officials (group interview), Gaziantep, 15 October 2019
(5) Free Syrian Police officer, Gaziantep, 16 October 2019
(6) Rebel officer and political analyst (group interview), Gaziantep, 16 October 2019
(7) Political activist, Gaziantep, 16 October 2019

(8) Rebel commander, Gaziantep, 17 October 2019
(9) Security analyst, Gaziantep, 17 October 2019
(10) Security analyst, Gaziantep, 18 October 2019
(11) Rebel officer, Gaziantep, 18 October 2019
(12) Rebel officer, Istanbul, 21 October 2019
(13) Political analyst, Istanbul, 21 October 2019
(14) Political analyst, Istanbul, 21 October 2019
(15) Rebel fighter, Istanbul, 22 October 2019
(16) Rebel spokesperson (video call), 20 November 2019
(17) Rebel fighter (video call), 18 December 2019
(18) Journalist (video call), 16 August 2022
(19) Political analyst (video call), 17 August 2022

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