**IBN HALDUN UNIVERSITY**
**SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES**
**DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS**

**MASTER'S THESIS**

# SPONSORING REBELLION: WHY DO SOME PARAMILITARY GROUPS REBEL AGAINST THEIR HOME STATES WHILE OTHERS REMAIN LOYAL?

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**ISTANBUL, 2025**

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**by**
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**A thesis submitted to the School of Graduate Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Political Science and International Relations**

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**ISTANBUL, 2025**

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I hereby declare that all information in this document has been obtained and presented in accordance with academic rules and ethical conduct. I also declare that, as required by these rules and conduct, I have fully cited and referenced all material and results that are not original to this work.

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# ÖZ

## İSYANI DESTEKLEMEK: BAZI PARAMİLİTER GRUPLAR NEDEN KENDİ DEVLETLERİNE KARŞI İSYAN EDERKEN DİĞERLERİ SADIK KALIYOR?

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Ağustos 2025, 69 Sayfa

Bazı paramiliter gruplar neden kendi devletlerine karşı isyan ederken, diğerleri sadık kalır ya da devlet yapısına daha fazla entegre olur? Bu tez, bu soruyu paramiliter gruplar, ev sahibi devletleri ve dış sponsorları arasındaki dinamiklere odaklanan nedensel bir mekanizma önererek incelemektedir. Tez, bir paramiliter grubun, ev sahibi devlet ile dış sponsor arasındaki ilişkilerin bozulduğu bir dönemde artan dış destek alması durumunda isyan etme olasılığının arttığını savunmaktadır. Böyle durumlarda, dış destek artık tarafsız bir kapasite geliştirme aracı değil, grubun özerkliğini genişletmesini ve devlet otoritesine karşı koymasını mümkün kılan stratejik bir baskı aracına dönüşmektedir.

Bu hipotezi test etmek amacıyla çalışma, En Benzer Sistemler Tasarımı'na (Most Similar Systems Design – MSSD) dayalı karşılaştırmalı bir vaka analizi yöntemi benimsemektedir. Ortadoğu ve Kuzey Afrika bölgesinde üç önemli paramiliter grup incelenmektedir: Sudan'daki Hızlı Destek Kuvvetleri (RSF), Irak'taki Haşdi Şabi (PMF) ve Suriye'deki Ulusal Savunma Güçleri (NDF). Bu üç grup da iç çatışma bağlamlarında ortaya çıkmış, otoriter veya kırılgan devlet yapılarında faaliyet göstermekte ve önemli düzeyde dış destek almıştır. Ancak bu grupların gelişim ve davranış biçimleri belirgin şekilde farklılaşmaktadır. RSF, 2019 yılında Sudan'ın geçici hükümetine karşı isyan etmeye başlamış; Sudan ile Birleşik Arap Emirlikleri arasındaki ilişkilerin bozulması ve

artan Emirlik desteğiyle birlikte çatışmanın ölçeği giderek büyümüştür. Buna karşın, hem PMF hem de NDF, benzer düzeyde dış destek almalarına rağmen ev sahibi devletlerine büyük ölçüde sadık kalmışlardır.

Dış destek ile devletlerarası diplomatik dinamiklerin nasıl etkileşime girdiğini izleyerek bu tez, isyanın en çok, dış sponsorluğun düşmanca siyasi koşullarda arttığı durumlarda meydana geldiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Bulgular, kırılgan devletlerde paramiliter davranışın nasıl evrildiğine dair yeni içgörüler sunmakta ve vekâlet savaşı, dış müdahale ve devlet parçalanması tartışmalarına katkıda bulunmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler**: Devletlerarası İlişkiler; Dış Destek; İsyan; Paramiliter Gruplar; Vekalet Savaşları

ABSTRACT

SPONSORING REBELLION: WHY DO SOME PARAMILITARY GROUPS REBEL AGAINST THEIR HOME STATES WHILE OTHERS REMAIN LOYAL?

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Why do some paramilitary groups rebel against their home states, while others remain loyal? This thesis investigates this question by proposing a causal mechanism centered on the dynamics between paramilitary groups, their home states, and external sponsors. It argues that rebellion becomes likely when a paramilitary group receives increased external support during a period of deteriorating relations between the home state and the sponsoring external actor. In such cases, support is no longer a neutral form of capacity-building but a strategic tool of leverage, enabling paramilitary groups to expand their autonomy and confront state authority.

To test this hypothesis, the study adopts a comparative case study approach using the Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD). It analyzes three major paramilitary groups: Sudan's Rapid Support Forces (RSF), Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), and Syria's National Defense Forces (NDF). All three emerged in contexts of internal conflict, operate in fragile or authoritarian states, and have received significant foreign support. Yet their outcomes diverge sharply. The RSF began rebelling against Sudan's government in 2019, and the scale of its confrontation continued escalating amid the breakdown of Sudan–UAE relations and intensified Emirati backing. In contrast, both the PMF and NDF have remained largely loyal to their home states despite also benefiting from sustained external support.

By tracing how foreign backing interacts with inter-state diplomatic dynamics, this thesis shows that rebellion is most likely when sponsorship increases under adversarial political conditions. Adding a layer into understanding paramilitary behavior, and why it is not only a function of domestic dynamics that cannot be understood in isolation from the geopolitical contexts surrounding them as it is also deeply embedded in the shifting landscape of inter-state relations. The findings offer new insights into how paramilitary behavior evolves in conflict prone states and contributes to debates on proxy warfare, external intervention, and state fragmentation.

**Keywords:** External Support; Inter-state Relations; Paramilitary Groups; Proxy Warfare; Rebellion

# DEDICATION

To the warriors who defended our honor and dignity,
To the guardians of our land and soil,

To those who bore the torment of war,
To those who endured injustice and never bowed,

To the forgotten,
To the forcibly displaced,
To those who died silently, alone, trapped and betrayed

To our torn home,
And the dust of its earth.
To my beloved Sudan, always the why…

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my advisor, Dr. Sümeyye Uyar, whose guidance and expertise shaped the course of this research. More than that, I am especially thankful for her unwavering support and belief in me. Her encouragement and faith carried me through moments I thought I couldn't overcome. For that, I will always be grateful.

I am also sincerely grateful to my esteemed lecturers, Dr. Idlir Lika and Dr. Muhammed Affan, whose insights greatly enriched this study.

My thanks extend to the staff of Ibn Haldun University for their consistent moral and material support throughout this journey.

Finally, I offer my endless love and gratitude to my family, who remained by my side through every stage of this thesis with their unwavering presence and love.

Tayseer Mohamedali
İSTANBUL, 2025

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## LIST OF SYMBOLS AND ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|---|---|
| ESD | External Support Dataset |
| IRGC | Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps |
| ISIS | Islamic State of Iraq and Syria |
| MENA | Middle East and North Africa |
| MSSD | Most Similar System Design |
| NAAs | Non-State Armed Actors |
| NAG | Non-State Armed Group |
| NSA | Non-State Actor Dataset |
| PMF | Popular Mobilization Forces |
| RSF | Rapid Support Forces |
| SAF | Sudanese Armed Force |

# CHAPTER I

# INTRODUCTION

Why do some paramilitary groups remain loyal instruments of state power, while others, like the RSF, turn against the very regimes that empowered them? This research engages with this puzzle by examining the interplay between paramilitary groups, home states, and external sponsors, focusing on how shifts in inter-state relations shape paramilitary behavior. This puzzle is especially pressing in authoritarian regimes where these groups are created as extensions of state power, yet may later challenge their creators. The rebellion of Sudan's Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in that developed into a war in 2023, contrasted with the loyalty of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) and Syria's National Defense Forces (NDF), illustrates a critical divergence. This thesis explores how external sponsorship and diplomatic deterioration shape this divergence.

Paramilitary groups are commonly defined as organized armed entities that operate outside the official military framework of a state but often with state approval or oversight (Kalyvas 2006; Ahram 2011; Reno 2011). They have become central actors in contemporary conflicts, particularly in fragile and authoritarian states. These groups often blur the lines between state and non-state violence, functioning both as instruments of state control and as autonomous actors with distinct political agendas. Their emergence and evolution are shaped by a complex interplay of domestic and international forces, including state collapse, civil war, and foreign intervention. As such, understanding the behavior of paramilitary groups, especially their decisions to remain loyal to or rebel against the state is crucial to explaining the dynamics of modern armed conflicts.

Often created or empowered by regimes to exert control beyond the boundaries of formal institutions, these groups function in a space of calculated ambiguity. States utilize them to suppress dissent, project power informally, and execute operations that might attract legal or international scrutiny if carried out by the regular military. Paramilitaries offer

plausible deniability while serving as enforcers of regime stability, and in many cases, they are crucial tools for authoritarian survival (Reno, 2011; Carey & Mitchell, 2016). The distinction between paramilitary groups and non-state armed groups (NAGs) rests on origin and alignment. Paramilitaries are created by states as instruments of coercion. In contrast, NAGs are born in opposition to the state, seeking to challenge its authority from the outset. This foundational difference justifies treating paramilitaries as a distinct category.

Their informal structure and distance from official military chains of command allow regimes to suppress dissent, project power, and navigate internal or external constraints with fewer reputational costs. Their utility lies in their flexibility and deniability, but this very autonomy makes them difficult to control. While these groups may begin as loyal proxies or tools of the state, they do not always remain so. Over time, empowered paramilitaries may accumulate their own constituencies, develop independent political agendas, and challenge the authority of the state they once served. This transformation from instrument to actor is not only common but often destabilizing, especially when external sponsors are involved in reinforcing their autonomy and accordingly, having them is risky for their own creators as they do not always remain loyal.

Some, like Syria's National Defense Forces (NDF), and Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), continue to uphold state authority despite significant autonomy and foreign sponsorship. Others, like Sudan's Rapid Support Forces (RSF), have turned against their home states' governments. Originally established as a paramilitary extension of regime power under former President Omar al-Bashir, the president of the salvation government who ruled Sudan for 30 years, the RSF evolved from a loyal instrument of repression into a rival center of authority. Paradoxically, it rebelled against and played a key role in the ousting of Bashir in 2019, despite his role as the group's primary architect. This transformation culminated in April 2023, when the RSF launched a full-scale war against the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) which is claimed to be loyal to the Muslim brotherhood government of the ousted regime, initiating one of the most significant internal conflicts in Sudan's modern history. What explains these divergent outcomes?

This study argues that the behavior of paramilitary groups, whether they remain loyal or rebel, is deeply influenced by the evolving relationship between the home state and the group's external sponsor. When inter-state relations between a home state government and a foreign sponsor deteriorate, the sponsor is expected to escalate its support to the paramilitary as a strategic tool of leverage. This increased backing can embolden the group to act independently or rebel. External supporters provide paramilitaries with material resources (weapons, funding, training), political legitimacy, international platforms, and in some cases, battlefield intelligence or command coordination. These resources can enhance a group's autonomy and bargaining power, particularly when home state–sponsor relations are fragile. Conversely, when sponsor-state relations are cooperative or stable, paramilitary groups are more likely to remain loyal to the state.

The case of Sudan's RSF illustrates this dynamic. Initially granted autonomy through legal decrees under Bashir, the RSF gained economic independence by controlling gold mines and border zones (Reuters, 2019; Gallopin, 2020). Over time, it developed deep financial and strategic ties with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which intensified as Sudan's relationship with the UAE soured. The UAE's backing of the RSF, including financial flows and logistical support, grew significantly in the years preceding the RSF's rebellion (African Arguments, 2023; Radio Dabanga, 2024). This case stands in contrast to the NDF and PMF, where either foreign sponsorship was aligned with the home state's interests or lacked the intent to challenge state authority. This research examines how foreign policy shifts between external sponsors and home states influence the strategic choices of paramilitary groups. It explores how shifts in relations among states affect the level of foreign support to paramilitary groups, which might escalate into rebellion or reinforce loyalty. It also examines how the geopolitical agendas of sponsors shape the behavior of paramilitary forces within fragile state structures. These questions help reveal the underlying mechanisms that transform loyal auxiliaries into rebellious challengers.

This study adds to the growing literature on the role of external actors in intrastate conflict by focusing on paramilitary groups, a category often overlooked in mainstream conflict studies that focus on insurgents or rebel groups. While extensive research has explored

the impact of external support on non-state armed groups (Salehyan, Gleditsch & Cunningham, 2011; San-Akca, 2016; Karlén, 2020), far less attention has been paid to the complex relationships between state-aligned militias and foreign sponsors, particularly how the relationship between the sponsoring state and the host state can shape the behavior of these groups. A key contribution of this thesis is the extension of theories of external support, traditionally applied to rebel groups to the domain of state-aligned paramilitary actors. By incorporating paramilitaries into this analytical framework, the study expands the understanding of how foreign backing interacts with state dynamics to influence fragmentation, loyalty, or rebellion.

By focusing on the RSF and comparing it with the NDF and PMF, the study sheds light on how paramilitaries shift from instruments of regime stability to autonomous actors, and how foreign sponsorship can tip the balance. These insights are particularly relevant for understanding government-military dynamics, regime resilience, and the internationalization of local conflicts. They also contribute to debates on proxy warfare and hybrid security governance (Ahram, 2011; Kalyvas, 2006). The findings are not only theoretically significant but also hold practical implications for policymakers and international organizations. Understanding the risks associated with foreign sponsorship of paramilitary groups can inform approaches to conflict prevention, stabilization, and post-conflict peacebuilding. In fragile states, where governance is often contested, these actors can become kingmakers or spoilers depending on the incentives created by external and domestic factors.

This research employs a comparative case study design, grounded in process tracing, to examine the behavior and development of paramilitary groups in relation to the evolution of diplomatic and strategic ties between their home states and external sponsors. Sudan's RSF is analyzed as the primary case of rebellion. The NDF and PMF serve as counterexamples where paramilitary groups maintained loyalty. All three groups share certain characteristics: they were empowered or endorsed by the state, operated in weak or transitional security contexts, and received significant external support. This design allows for the systematic comparison of cases where rebellion occurred versus those

where it did not. The study relies on secondary data, including scholarly works, policy reports, UN documents, and investigative journalism. The analysis identifies key turning points in each case where paramilitary loyalty was contested, in order to test the main argument of the study that paramilitary groups are more likely to rebel when external support intensifies amid deteriorating relations between the sponsor and the home state. The findings reveal that paramilitary rebellion is most likely when foreign sponsorship intensifies during periods of diplomatic breakdown between the home state and the external sponsor. The RSF's rebellion is traced to the intersection of heightened Emirati support and Sudan–UAE diplomatic collapse, while PMF and NDF remained loyal under stable foreign relations.

This thesis is organized into five chapters. Following this introductory chapter, which outlines the research problem, significance, and methodological approach, Chapter II presents the literature review and theoretical framework proposed in this study. It examines the academic debates on paramilitary groups and external support, identifying the gaps this research addresses. Chapter III details the methodology, including the rationale for using a qualitative comparative case study approach and process tracing, and explains the case selection, data sources, and analytical tools employed. Chapter IV presents the three case studies: Sudan's Rapid Support Forces (RSF), Syria's National Defense Forces (NDF), and Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), each analyzed in depth to trace the interplay between external support, inter-state relations, and decision to rebel. Finally, Chapter V concludes the thesis by summarizing the key findings, discussing their broader relevance, and offering directions for future research on paramilitary behavior and proxy warfare.

# CHAPTER II

# LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study of non-state armed actors (NAGs) has produced extensive insights into the causes and conduct of civil conflict, with a strong emphasis on rebel groups, insurgents, and opposition forces. However, the specific subset of paramilitary groups, armed actors operating with state approval, has received comparatively less attention. Paramilitary groups are defined here as organized armed entities that operate outside the official military framework of a state but often with state approval or oversight (Kalyvas, 2006; Ahram, 2011; Reno, 2011). Typically formed to fulfill counterinsurgency or regime protection roles, they often function as extensions of state power, especially in fragile or authoritarian contexts.

Unlike rebel groups, paramilitary actors do not inherently seek to overthrow the state but serve state interests, at least initially. Yet, as cases like Sudan's RSF show, these groups can evolve into autonomous forces capable of challenging the very regimes they were created to support. Scholars such as Reno (2011), Carey and Mitchell (2016), and Straus (2015) explore the dynamics of such transformations, emphasizing the overlap between formal and informal governance structures in conflict settings. The autonomy of paramilitary groups, financial, territorial, and strategic, allows them to navigate political and economic networks that can strengthen or sever their ties to the state.

Kalyvas (2006) and Ahram (2011) emphasize the role of paramilitary actors as tools of plausible deniability, enabling states to perpetrate violence while avoiding formal accountability. Paramilitary groups also frequently emerge in the context of conflict-prone states, as documented by Aliyev (2016), where governments delegate coercion to actors better suited to navigate localized violence or societal cleavages. This delegation,

however, may backfire as groups gain resources and political leverage, enabling them to pursue their interests independently. The RSF's evolution from Janjaweed militias to a powerful political and military force exemplifies this trajectory (de Waal, 2007; Gallopin, 2020).

A substantial body of research has examined why states support foreign armed actors, how they select proxies, and the strategic goals they pursue. Scholars such as Byman (2005), Salehyan (2010), and San-Akca (2016) argue that states provide support to NAGs and militias to undermine rivals, project power, and gain influence in conflict regions. Foreign sponsorship has been found to impact all stages of civil war, from onset (Cunningham, 2011; Regan & Meachum, 2013) and duration (Aydin & Regan, 2012; Cunningham, 2010), to negotiation outcomes (Karlén, 2017, 2020) and post-conflict recurrence (Karlén, 2017). Foreign support can also alter the conduct of war, influencing conflict lethality (Heger & Salehyan, 2007), patterns of civilian abuse (Salehyan, Siroky & Wood, 2014), and specific types of violence, including sexual violence (Johansson & Sarwari, 2019).

Funding sources, whether from lootable resources or foreign states, shape organizational structures and behavior. Weinstein (2007) argues that rebel groups with easy access to external funding often attract opportunistic recruits and exhibit higher levels of indiscipline and civilian abuse. Conversely, resource-poor groups develop stronger internal cohesion and ties to civilian constituencies. While scholars have emphasized the effects of lootable resources (e.g., narcotics, diamonds), state sponsors often play a more pivotal role in the formation and conduct of armed groups. Datasets such as NSA (Cunningham, Gleditsch & Salehyan, 2013), NAG (San-Akca, 2016), and ESD (Meier et al., 2023) demonstrate that a significant proportion of NAGs since 1945 have received foreign sponsorship. These relationships can rapidly increase the military capacity of non-state actors, shift the balance of power in civil wars, and prolong or internationalize conflict.

The dual nature of paramilitary groups, as both extensions of state coercion and potential political rivals, makes them unique and unpredictable actors. Staniland (2012) describes

this relationship as one that blurs the line between formal and informal governance. Paramilitaries initially reinforce regime control, especially in periods of unrest or regime transition, but their growing power can render them difficult to control. Carey and Mitchell (2016) stress the independent agency of paramilitaries, arguing that their loyalty is conditional and shaped by both domestic and international political contexts. Straus (2015) and Aliyev (2016) similarly highlight the risk of autonomy and fragmentation in these groups. In the case of Sudan, the RSF used its formal ties to the presidency and its independent economic base to consolidate power, eventually positioning itself as an alternative to the national army (Gallopin, 2020; African Arguments, 2023).

The post-Arab Spring era has witnessed a significant rise in the reliance on paramilitary and proxy forces across the Middle East and North Africa. Unlike the Cold War era when external support was primarily ideological and bipolar, the post-2011 landscape is marked by regional rivalries, fragmented state authority, and the proliferation of non-state actors serving as instruments of regional competition. The collapse of regimes in Libya, Yemen, and Syria, alongside the uprisings in Sudan, created fertile ground for states like Iran, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia to project influence through proxy networks. Scholars such as Berti and Guzansky (2014), Rauta (2020), and Marshall and Rassler (2021) have documented how external state actors transitioned from supporting insurgents to co-opting or embedding within existing security institutions, blurring the lines between state and non-state violence. This shift underscores the need for frameworks that capture the dynamic interplay of diplomacy, paramilitary evolution, and sponsor-state realignment.

The involvement of external actors in supporting paramilitary groups has raised fundamental questions under international law regarding state responsibility. According to the International Law Commission’s Articles on Responsibility of States for Internationally Wrongful Acts (ARSIWA), a state can be held responsible for the conduct of a non-state actor if it exercises "effective control" over the actor’s operations (ICJ, Nicaragua v. United States, 1986). However, in practice, this threshold is rarely met, allowing sponsors to evade accountability while continuing support. The RSF's transformation into a rebel force with documented UAE support, for instance, presents a

challenge to this framework, highlighting the inadequacy of current legal norms in addressing state-supported paramilitary behavior. Scholars like Milanovic (2011) and Tams (2009) argue for revising the definition of "control" to include strategic alignment or persistent backing. This area remains underexplored in studies of proxy conflicts.

While extensive work has addressed why and how external support is given to armed actors, fewer studies explore the implications of deteriorating inter-state relations on paramilitary behavior. San-Akca (2016) calls attention to this gap, noting that the sponsor-target state relationship and how it evolves can critically shape the decisions of armed groups. Jackson, San-Akca, and Maoz (2020) expand this line of inquiry by exploring how alignment or divergence in geopolitical interests between states affects proxy actors.

The RSF's rebellion offers a case where escalating foreign support coincided with a strategic rift between Sudan and the UAE. As Sudan's transitional government under the National Armed Forces pivoted away from Emirati influence, the UAE doubled down on its support for the RSF. This support, financial, logistical, and political, helped transform the RSF into a rival power center. Unlike Syria's NDF or Iraq's PMF, which operate under sponsor-state alignment, the RSF's rebellion illustrates what happens when foreign policy interests diverge and are redirected toward empowering a paramilitary at the expense of the home state (Reuters, 2019; Radio Dabanga, 2024).

Despite the rich literature on NAGs, external support, and proxy warfare, few studies have systematically examined the conditions under which paramilitary groups rebel against their home state governments. Most research focuses on how paramilitaries are used to consolidate authoritarian rule or suppress opposition, rather than exploring their potential to turn against the state. And in cases where their rebellion against their initial sponsors is examined, it doesn't address the effect of foreign relations shifts impacting this rebellion. This thesis fills that gap by emphasizing the strategic role of foreign policy in paramilitary decision-making. It draws attention to the tripartite relationship between home states, paramilitaries, and foreign sponsors, and examines how geopolitical tensions between sponsors and home states can result in the transformation of paramilitary groups from

tools of regime survival to insurgent actors. The case of the RSF, situated within the broader context of Emirati foreign policy in the Red Sea and Horn of Africa, demonstrates the international dimensions of local rebellion. By extending theories of external support to include paramilitaries, this study refines the understanding of how international alignments shape domestic instability. It contributes to the literature by revealing how foreign policy dynamics, often assumed to be peripheral, can be decisive in explaining why some paramilitary groups rebel while others do not.

### 2.1. Theoretical Framework

This thesis introduces a tripartite analytical framework to examine the relationship between home state, a paramilitary group, and an external state that supports the paramilitary group, as illustrated in Table 1. These relationships can be divided into three distinct dynamics that shape each party's behavior and strategies. The first relationship focuses on the home state's use of the paramilitary group as an informal military force. In this scenario, the home state leverages the paramilitary group to extend its military reach without deploying formal military forces, allowing for deniability in operations such as counterinsurgency or covert actions. The group operates with some autonomy but remains aligned with the home state's strategic objectives.

**Table 2.1. Tripartite Escalation Mechanism: External Supporter, Paramilitary Group, and Home State**

| Relationship Trajectory | External Supporter vs. home State Relationship | External Supporter vs. Paramilitary Group Relationship | Home State vs. Paramilitary Group Relationship |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Initial Condition** | Cooperative or neutral; mutual interests align | Limited or benign support; focused on stability or shared interests | Neutral or cooperative; group not a direct threat to the state |
| **Deteriorating Relationship** | Declining due to conflicting interests, political disagreements, or policy changes | Gradual increase in support; exploration of the group as a potential proxy | Increasing tension; group begins to gain influence but is not yet aggressive |

**Table 2.1. (cont.)**

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Increased Support** | Hostile or antagonistic; external supporter views home state as adversary | Enhanced support: funding, training, weapons, and legitimacy provided to group | Growing hostility; state views the group as a rising threat |
| **Empowerment** | Open conflict or non-cooperation; external supporter seeks to destabilize home state | Strong alliance; external supporter sees group as a tool for foreign policy goals | Direct confrontation; group emboldened and actively challenging home state |
| **Rebellion** | Openly adversarial; external supporter benefits from instability | Full backing; external supporter indirectly achieves its objectives through rebellion | Hostile; state and group in active conflict, sparking rebellion |

The second relationship examines the interaction between the external supporter and the paramilitary group. When relations between the external supporter and the home state are stable, the external actor provides support to the paramilitary group in ways that align with both parties' shared geopolitical interests. This support, ranging from financial assistance to weapons and training, enhances the paramilitary group's capabilities and reinforces regional stability or strategic goals. However, as relations between the external supporter and the home state deteriorate, the external supporter may escalate its involvement with the paramilitary group, transforming it into a more active proxy force used to challenge and destabilize the home state.

The third relationship addresses the diplomatic tensions between the home state and the external supporter. As these tensions rise, the home state may view the external supporter's actions as interference, prompting efforts to counter or neutralize its influence. The deterioration in their relations directly affects the paramilitary group, which gains increased backing from external supporters and becomes a more significant actor in the conflict.

In the initial Condition the relationship between the external supporter and the government begins in a cooperative or neutral state. During this period, the external actor might

provide support to a paramilitary group for a range of reasons, such as fostering shared interests, enhancing regional influence, or maintaining stability in areas critical to its geopolitical objectives. The paramilitary group, while supported, does not pose a direct threat to the government, and the external support might appear as a benign extension of diplomatic or strategic alignment.

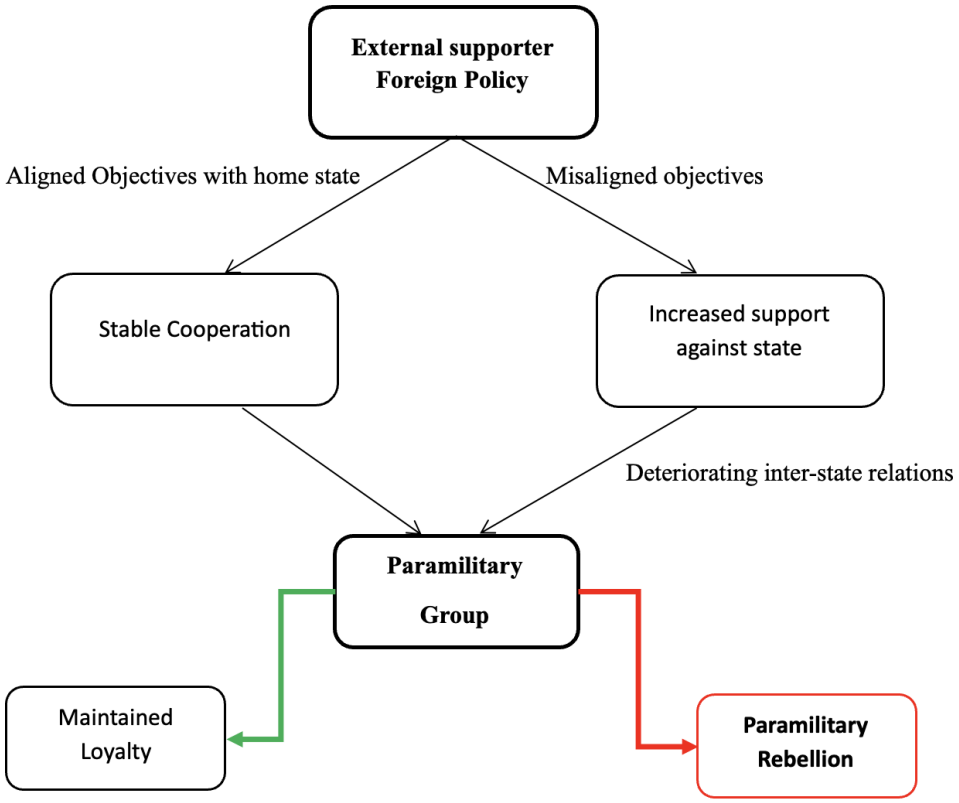



**Figure 2.1. Tripartite Escalation Mechanism: External Supporter, Paramilitary Group, and Home State**

When the relationship starts deteriorating over time, the once-cooperative relationship between the government and the external supporter starts to break. This shift may be caused by conflicting interests, political disagreements, or changes in foreign policy priorities on either side. The erosion of trust and cooperation creates tensions that prompt the external supporter to reassess its approach to achieving its objectives in the region.

As tensions escalate, the external supporter seeks alternative ways to exert influence over the government, turning to the paramilitary group as a strategic proxy. The supporter increases its backing for the paramilitary group, providing it with enhanced funding, weapons, training, and even political legitimacy. This increased support is a calculated move to undermine the government, exert pressure, or achieve foreign policy goals that are no longer attainable through diplomatic channels.

The surge in external support significantly enhances the paramilitary group's operational capacity. With greater access to resources, the group can improve its organizational structure, recruit more members, and conduct more ambitious operations. This empowerment also instills confidence within the group, as it perceives the external supporter as a committed ally with a vested interest in its success. This support shifts the balance of power between the paramilitary group and the government, emboldening the group to consider more aggressive actions. With its newfound strength and external backing, the paramilitary group begins to view rebellion as a viable and even strategic option to challenge the government. The group's objectives align with, or are at least compatible with, the external supporter's foreign policy goals, creating a mutually beneficial dynamic. The group's decision to rebel is driven by its confidence in the support it receives and its belief that rebellion is the best means to achieve its political or strategic objectives.

The paramilitary group ultimately initiates rebellion against the government, sparking conflict. This act of rebellion serves not only the group's interests but also the broader objectives of the external supporter. By destabilizing the government, the external supporter achieves indirect leverage in the region, fulfilling its geopolitical or strategic aims. The rebellion, while primarily executed by the paramilitary group, is intricately tied to the deteriorated inter-state relationship and the external sponsor's calculated intervention. In summary, the tripartite framework demonstrates that paramilitary rebellion is not merely a function of material support, but of the political context in which that support is embedded. The deterioration of home state–external sponsor relations is

the critical trigger that transforms external support from a stabilizing force into a destabilizing one.

# CHAPTER III

# RESEARCH DESIGN

This study adopts a qualitative comparative case study design using process tracing (George & Bennett, 2005; Bennett & Checkel, 2015) to investigate the conditions under which external support contributes to paramilitary rebellion against home states, focusing on the role of external sponsorship and inter-state diplomatic dynamics. The central research question is: Under what conditions does external support contribute to paramilitary rebellion? The hypothesis is that paramilitary rebellion is more likely when an external sponsor escalates its direct support to a paramilitary group during periods of deteriorating relations with the home state.

The research adopts a qualitative comparative case study design grounded in the Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD) (Handbook of Research Methods, 2020, p. 136), which allows for controlled comparison between cases that share systemic similarities, such as authoritarian or hybrid regime type, weak state institutions, and exposure to conflict and external sponsorship, while varying in the outcome of interest: whether the paramilitary group rebelled. To explore the underlying causal mechanisms (Gerring, 2010, p. 1501), the study relies on process tracing (George & Bennett, 2005, pp. 141–143). This method facilitates the reconstruction of chronological sequences and interactions among three key relationships: between the external sponsor and the home state, between the sponsor and the paramilitary group, and between the paramilitary group and the home state. The objective is to identify whether a breakdown in state–sponsor relations is followed by a measurable increase in direct external support to the paramilitary group, and whether this escalation leads to changes in the group's behavior, culminating in rebellion. A Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD) was selected because the three cases, Sudan, Iraq, and Syria, share regime type, regional context, and experience with foreign-backed paramilitaries, which allows control over background variables while isolating differences

in outcomes. A deviant case approach would not have allowed for structured comparison across cases.

The dependent variable in this study is paramilitary rebellion, defined as a paramilitary group engaging in direct and sustained armed confrontation against the home state's military or political authorities. This is measured by the occurrence of organized combat or formal declarations of armed opposition. The primary independent variable is the alignment or deterioration of foreign policy between the sponsor and the home state. Deterioration is indicated by diplomatic incidents, the recall of ambassadors, or shifts in alliance behavior that signal a breakdown in cooperation. While the level and timing of support matter, they are contingent on this political alignment and must be treated as part of the same causal pathway. This is measured through both the flow and intensification of resources such as funding, arms, and training from an external sponsor and diplomatic, political and logistic support.

The study examines three cases: the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in Sudan, the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in Iraq, and the National Defense Forces (NDF) in Syria. Each emerged in a context of domestic conflict and external intervention. All operate within hybrid or authoritarian regimes and have received foreign sponsorship. Despite these commonalities, their trajectories diverge. The RSF launched a full rebellion in 2019. The PMF exhibits a near integration into the formal state structure despite receiving excessive external support. The NDF has remained loyal to the Assad regime. This variation in outcomes, despite similarities in regime type, sponsorship, and conflict environment, makes these cases analytically valuable for identifying the conditions under which external support translates into rebellion. The comparison is structured as shown in Table 2:

**Table 3.1. Case Study Overview, Paramilitary Behavior and External Sponsorship**

| Paramilitary Group | Rebellion | Sponsor | State-Sponsor Relations | External Support Level |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| RSF | Yes | UAE | Deteriorated | Escalated over time |
| PMF | No | Iran | Fluctuating | High, consistent |
| NDF | No | Iran | Stable | High, consistent |

The study relies exclusively on secondary sources. These include peer-reviewed academic publications, policy reports from reputable international think tanks, investigative journalism, and conflict monitoring datasets. These are triangulated to track the escalation of external support and correlate it with turning points in paramilitary behavior.

To test this argument, the study relies on process tracing, a qualitative method that allows for the systematic analysis of causal mechanisms over time (Bennett & Checkel, 2015, pp. 5–9; Collier, 2011), as a primary method of analysis. Process tracing is used to identify how external support is mobilized and whether it correlates with key turning points in paramilitary behavior, especially the decision to challenge state authority. The method of process tracing is applied to each case to reconstruct a specific sequence of events and interactions across three interrelated axes: the relationship between the external sponsor and the home state, the relationship between the external sponsor and the paramilitary group, and the relationship between the paramilitary group and the home state. The goal is to assess whether a deterioration in inter-state relations leads to an observable escalation in the level of external support to the paramilitary group, and whether that escalation subsequently affects the group's behavior, particularly its movement toward rebellion.

The use of process tracing here focuses on identifying a causal pathway in which diplomatic rupture or degradation between states triggers a strategic recalibration, whereby an external actor intensifies its backing of a paramilitary group as a proxy. The level of external support is measured by tracking material indicators such as the provision of funding, weapons, training, and political or diplomatic cover. Escalation is defined as

a shift in the volume, quality, or visibility of support, for example, transitions from covert to overt assistance, from limited to sustained funding, or from indirect to strategic coordination. These patterns are traced through event sequencing, using timelines and key moments that reflect real changes in both support patterns and paramilitary behavior. In the RSF case, this involves mapping Sudan-UAE diplomatic relations and correlating Emirati assistance with RSF's operational and political evolution, culminating in rebellion. In the PMF case, the analysis centers on variations in autonomy and alignment among factions that receive differing levels of Iranian support. In the NDF case, the process shows how the stability of the Iran-Syria relationship underwrites consistent support that reinforces loyalty rather than undermining it.

By comparing these three cases, the study provides both within-case and cross-case insights into how external support functions under changing geopolitical conditions and shapes paramilitary behavior. This methodology allows for a structured and causal investigation into one of the most pressing questions in contemporary conflict studies: Under what conditions does external support lead paramilitary groups to rebel against their home states? By combining process tracing with MSSD and drawing on three well-documented cases, the study seeks to offer a rigorous and nuanced answer to this question, with broader implications for understanding proxy warfare, regime stability, and state-fragmentation in the MENA region. A congruence test (George & Bennett, 2005) is applied in the RSF case to examine whether RSF's rebellion coincided with, and followed, the breakdown in Sudan–UAE relations. This tests whether diplomatic deterioration preceded increased support and RSF's turn against the state.

# CHAPTER IV

# CASE STUDY ANALYSIS

Understanding the role of external sponsorship in shaping the behavior of paramilitary groups requires attention not only to the internal dynamics of each armed actor, but also to the broader geostrategic calculations that motivate external patrons. This chapter presents a comparative analysis of three paramilitary groups under study: Sudan's Rapid Support Forces (RSF), Syria's National Defense Forces (NDF), and Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). While each group emerged from specific local circumstances, their evolution and political behavior have been significantly influenced by external sponsors, namely Iran and the United Arab Emirates, whose interventions are driven by broader regional aspirations.

The cases examined here reveal that support for paramilitary actors is not merely about short-term tactical advantage or regime survival, it increasingly reflects long-term strategic positioning by state sponsors. Iran's sustained investment in cross-border militia networks, exemplified in both the PMF and NDF, has been central to its efforts to consolidate a contiguous axis of influence stretching from Tehran to the Mediterranean. These forces do more than merely defend allied regimes, they serve as instruments of Iranian foreign policy, enabling Tehran to project power and deter adversaries through non-state proxies embedded within state structures. This strategy of militia diplomacy has created a model that not only reinforces Iran's leverage over Baghdad and Damascus but also contributes to a wider proxy warfare across the region.

In parallel, the United Arab Emirates has increasingly adopted a similarly interventionist approach, rather under a different ideological and geopolitical rubric. While both aim to increase their regional Influence, Iran's strategy is often framed in revolutionary terms, the UAE's involvement in conflicts in Yemen, Libya, and Sudan is animated by a drive for regional security yet both policies might reflect a particular interest in gaining access

to strategic maritime corridors such as the Mediterranean, Red Sea and Horn of Africa. The RSF, in this context, has become a central node in Abu Dhabi's attempt to secure footholds along these routes, blurring the lines between military sponsorship and mercantile ambition. Although Iran and the UAE are regional rivals, their shared reliance on paramilitary clients as tools of influence suggests a convergence in strategic practice, if not ideology.

The comparative lens employed in this chapter underscores that external sponsorship of paramilitary forces is not inherently destabilizing. Rather, its effects are mediated by the nature of the sponsor–state relationship and the extent to which such sponsorship becomes institutionalized. The divergent trajectories of the RSF, NDF, and PMF reveal how external backing can alternatively entrench authoritarian stability, foster fragmentation, or enable strategic autonomy. By situating these groups within their geopolitical contexts, this chapter moves beyond a simplistic categorization of proxy warfare to explore how paramilitary actors have become critical intermediaries in a regional security order increasingly shaped by non-state military power.

### 4.1. Case Study 1 – Sudan's Rapid Support Forces (RSF)

The Rapid Support Forces (RSF) emerged from the Janjaweed militias that gained notoriety during the Darfur conflict in the early 2000s. Initially formed as Arab tribal militias mobilized by the Sudanese government to suppress rebellion in Darfur, these forces operated with impunity and were implicated in widespread atrocities. In an effort to institutionalize these groups and bring them under more formal control, former president Omar al-Bashir rebranded them as the RSF in 2013 through a presidential decree. This move formalized the RSF as a paramilitary entity operating independently from the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) but reporting directly to the presidency.

While originally tasked with border security and counterinsurgency operations, the RSF quickly expanded its mandate and influence. Under the leadership of Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, widely known as Hemedti, the RSF developed into a powerful political and economic actor. It capitalized on Sudan's fragile state institutions, filling security

vacuums and extending its presence into urban centers, strategic border regions, and resource-rich areas. The group gained financial autonomy through its control over gold mining in Darfur and Kordofan, giving it an independent revenue base (Reuters, 2019; Gallopin, 2020). The RSF's economic activities also included control of customs, checkpoints, and smuggling networks.

The RSF's rise cannot be understood without considering its external partnerships, particularly its strategic relationship with the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Following Sudan's involvement in the Saudi-led coalition war in Yemen, the RSF was deployed as a proxy force, with thousands of its fighters serving under Emirati and Saudi command. This deployment deepened ties between the RSF and the UAE, both militarily and politically. The UAE viewed the RSF as a reliable regional proxy capable of serving Emirati interests in the Horn of Africa and beyond (African Arguments, 2023).

This cooperation continued and deepened even after Bashir's ouster in 2019. As Sudan transitioned to a civilian-military hybrid government, tensions between the transitional authorities headed by the Sudanese Armed Forces and the UAE began to surface. The new civilian leadership sought to rebalance Sudan's foreign relations, strengthening ties with the United States, European Union, and other Gulf actors. In contrast, Hemedti and the RSF maintained and expanded their relationship with Abu Dhabi. UAE support included direct financial aid, military training, equipment, and diplomatic backing. These resources significantly bolstered the RSF's capacity and autonomy vis-à-vis the Sudanese state.

The RSF's internal development reinforced its growing independence. Hemedti increasingly positioned himself as a national leader, leveraging the RSF's battlefield credibility, wealth, and regional connections. During the post-2019 transitional period, the RSF served as both a security guarantor and political actor. Hemedti was appointed deputy chairman of the Transitional Sovereignty Council, placing him at the heart of Sudan's political process.

Yet, this political inclusion did not lead to integration. Instead, the RSF operated as a parallel force with its own chain of command, economic networks, and external alliances. The group invested in real estate, telecommunications, and private security, creating a shadow economy within the state. Its political rhetoric increasingly emphasized national reform, anti-corruption, and regional development, often framing itself as a corrective force to Sudan's entrenched elites. These developments set the stage for eventual confrontation with the SAF and the state apparatus it represented.

The RSF's trajectory fits the tripartite model proposed in Chapter 3. Initially, relations between Sudan and the UAE were cooperative, and the RSF functioned as a state-aligned paramilitary force. As diplomatic tensions between Khartoum and Abu Dhabi emerged, particularly over Sudan's post-Bashir transition and foreign alignment, the UAE increased its support to the RSF. This support enabled the RSF to consolidate power, build military capabilities, and act with increasing autonomy. The deteriorating relationship between the home state and the external sponsor aligned with a rapid escalation in RSF power.

By 2022, the RSF had become the most powerful security actor in Sudan outside of the SAF. The SAF's leadership, particularly General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, grew increasingly wary of the RSF's growing influence. Disputes over the integration of the RSF into the national army, as outlined in the framework agreement for democratic transition, became the breaking point. The RSF rejected full integration without guarantees of political power-sharing and autonomy. In April 2023, tensions culminated in open conflict between the RSF and the SAF. The RSF initiated coordinated assaults on military installations across Khartoum and other strategic regions. The group's decision to rebel was driven by its perception of strength, its distrust of the SAF, and its confidence in sustained foreign backing.

### 4.1.1. UAE Foreign Policy and Its Evolution

The evolution of the UAE's foreign policy is a crucial context for understanding its support for paramilitary groups like the RSF. Traditionally, the UAE pursued a policy

often described as "armed neutrality," focusing on deterrence and defense of its territory while avoiding overt entanglements in regional conflicts (Almezaini & Rickli 2017). However, this approach has shifted significantly in recent years, evolving into a proactive and interventionist foreign policy characterized by the projection of hard power. This transformation is evident in the UAE's direct military involvement and strategic support for paramilitary proxies in countries like Libya, Yemen, Somalia, and Sudan (Almezaini & Rickli 2017; International Crisis Group, 2018).

The UAE's early foreign policy under Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan (1971-2004) was primarily focused on ensuring the survival and security of the newly formed federation in a volatile regional environment. Almezaini (2012) and Shahrour (2020) emphasize the UAE's awareness of its small size and vulnerability, particularly in relation to its larger and more powerful neighbors, Iran and Saudi Arabia. This awareness led to a foreign policy characterized by caution, pragmatism, and a preference for peaceful settlements and dialogue. Sheikh Zayed's vision emphasized Arab and Islamic solidarity, which is reflected in the UAE's support for various Arab causes, including the Palestinian struggle and developmental aid to other Arab and Muslim countries. This focus on Arab identity and pan-Islamic unity was a cornerstone of the UAE's foreign policy during this period.

Faced with regional security threats, the UAE adopted a strategy of bandwagoning with the United States, seeking protection under its security umbrella. This alliance with the US became crucial to the UAE's security policy, allowing it to focus on economic development and internal stability (Shahrour, 2020). However, even during this period, the seeds of a more assertive foreign policy were sown. The UAE began diversifying its economy, investing in infrastructure, and developing its military capabilities, laying the groundwork for a more proactive role in regional affairs.

The rise of Mohammed bin Zayed as the de facto ruler of the UAE in 2014 marked a decisive shift in the country’s foreign policy, transitioning from the moderate and largely passive stance adopted under Zayed to a more assertive, interventionist, and militarized

approach. Several key factors, rooted in Mohammed bin Zayed's leadership style, worldview, and the political context of his tenure, drove this transformation. Mohammed bin Zayed's leadership coincided with Abu Dhabi's growing dominance within the UAE federation, which enabled greater centralization of foreign policy decision-making since he got into office in Abu Dhabi in 2004. (El-Dessouki, A., & Mansour, O. R. 2020)

His background as a military leader instilled a realist perspective, emphasizing the strategic use of hard power to achieve political objectives, a clear departure from Sheikh Zayed's preference for diplomacy and peaceful negotiations. Moreover, Mohammed bin Zayed's vision extended beyond the domestic sphere, aspiring to establish the UAE as a dominant regional power and a critical global hub for economic and political influence. Under Mohammed bin Zayed, the UAE's foreign policy saw significant shifts in response to regional and global challenges. First, the UAE adopted a firm stance against political Islam, identifying groups like the Muslim Brotherhood as existential threats and actively working to curb their influence, often in coordination with Saudi Arabia. Second, Mohammed bin Zayed pursued a more confrontational approach toward Iran, viewing its regional ambitions as a direct threat to UAE security. This perspective underpinned the UAE's participation in the Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen (Crisis Group, 2018)

Additionally, Mohammed bin Zayed prioritized modernizing and expanding the UAE's military capabilities, introducing compulsory military service and leveraging these advancements to assert greater influence in regional conflicts. Simultaneously, the UAE diversified its security partnerships, maintaining close ties with the U.S. while also cultivating relationships with nations such as France, Russia, and China to reduce dependence on any single ally (Almezaini & Rickli, 2016). Economically, the UAE used its financial resources to enhance its foreign policy objectives, investing heavily in strategic infrastructure such as ports and extending its presence in East Africa and Asia. These efforts underscored Mohammed bin Zayed's broader strategy of leveraging economic power to bolster the UAE's geopolitical influence (Crisis Group, 2018).

Under Mohammed bin Zayed's leadership, the UAE has undergone a profound transformation, evolving from a relatively passive player into a proactive and influential regional power. This shift reflects the interplay of Mohammed bin Zayed's personal vision, the evolving regional security landscape, and the UAE's strategic ambition to secure its interests and expand its global influence. This shift has been especially evident in the UAE's actions across the Middle East and Africa. The country has positioned itself as a key player in conflicts ranging from Yemen to Libya and Sudan. In these contexts, the UAE has consistently supported non-state actors and paramilitary groups as a means of securing its strategic goals. Its backing of the RSF is part of this larger strategy, reflecting the UAE's broader ambition to exert influence over unstable states and to protect its interests in the face of shifting regional power dynamics. (Ibish, 2017)

### 4.1.2. UAE's Relations with Sudan

The UAE has historically maintained strong relations with Sudan, rooted in economic and military cooperation. Sudan has been a key partner for the UAE, particularly in terms of laying the foundations of the state structure, securing access to natural resources, sea ports as well as agricultural projects (Ahmed, N. 2021).

The UAE's relations with Sudan began with mutual goodwill, formalized through the establishment of diplomatic ties in 1971. Sudan was among the first countries to recognize the UAE following its formation. Sudan was one of the first nations to establish diplomatic relations with the UAE in December 1971. Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan visited Sudan officially for the first time on February 20, 1972, just a few months after the formation of the UAE. During his visit, Sheikh Zayed toured every state in Sudan. In return, Sudan's President Gaafar Muhammad an-Nimeiry became the first Sudanese head of state to visit the UAE in the same year, accompanied by a delegation of ministers and representatives. The UAE's policy of Arab and Islamic solidarity aligned with Sudan's regional ambitions, fostering strong (UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Not specified) bilateral relations characterized by mutual support (UAE MoFA).

During the 1970s and 1980s, the relationship between Sudan and the UAE flourished, driven by mutual goodwill and cooperation. However, by the 1990s, Sudan's international isolation, primarily due to President Omar al-Bashir's Islamist policies and Sudan's stance on U.S. intervention during the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, contributed to strained relations with Gulf states, including the UAE. Sudan's emphasis on finding a local solution to the crisis further exacerbated tensions. As a result, the UAE, aligning its policies with Saudi Arabia, distanced itself from Sudan, viewing Bashir's regime as ideologically incompatible with the Gulf's political framework. Sudan was thus categorized among the "Axis of Evil" states in the eyes of many Gulf countries, including the UAE. Despite this, relations with the UAE remained strained until Sudan sought to reset its international position in the early 2000s (Mail & Guardian, 2002).

In the 2000s, Sudan sought to rehabilitate its global standing by moderating its foreign policy, which included expelling Osama bin Laden and distancing itself from extremist groups. This thaw in relations coincided with the UAE's strategic investments in Sudan's agricultural sector, aimed at ensuring food security for the Gulf nation. Sudan's fertile lands offered opportunities for Emirati agricultural exports, while Sudan, facing economic turmoil post the secession of South Sudan in 2011, relied on Gulf financial assistance (Ahmed, N. 2021).

However, tensions between the two nations began to surface in the early 2010s, particularly as Sudan's internal political situation began to deteriorate. The shifting alignment of Sudan's government, coupled with economic pressures and rising instability, led to growing disagreements between Sudan and the UAE. As Sudan's political leadership became more unpredictable and as Sudan's relations with regional powers like Qatar and Turkey grew stronger, the UAE recalibrated its approach to the country (Misirli, H. 2024).

The Arab Spring redefined regional alliances. The UAE, emerging as a counter-revolutionary force, sought to contain political Islam's influence, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood, which Bashir had historically supported. Pragmatism guided Emirati policy,

with the UAE engaging Sudan's government despite its Islamist leanings to counter the growing influence of Turkey and Qatar. (Turkey, T. N. 2019).

Sudan's decision to join the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen in 2015 marked a turning point. Sudanese troops, including forces under Hemedti's RSF, became instrumental in UAE-led operations. In exchange, Sudan received financial aid and investment, temporarily bolstering its economy. However, the transactional nature of this relationship became evident, with many Sudanese questioning the human cost of involvement in Yemen (Middle East Eye, 2024).

The Gulf crisis was another major turning point in Sudan-UAE relations, where tensions began to rise dramatically due to Sudan's refusal to fully align with the Saudi-UAE bloc against Qatar. While the UAE expected unwavering support, Sudan adopted a neutral stance to maintain its ties with both Qatar and the Gulf states, frustrating Abu Dhabi and leading to a loss of trust. In response, the UAE shifted its focus away from Omar al-Bashir's government, channeling financial and military support toward the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) over Omar al-Bashir's government. This pivot, fueled by the UAE's stance against political Islam, culminated in its backing of the 2019 coup that overthrew Bashir, with the RSF playing a key role in the coup. This strategic alignment further entrenched the RSF as a dominant force in Sudan's political landscape while exacerbating public resentment against the UAE's perceived interference (Washington Institute, 2024).

The Sudanese Revolution of 2018-2019, which ended Bashir's 30-year rule, posed new challenges. While the UAE pledged $3 billion in aid to Sudan's Transitional Military Council, its support for military figures like Hemedti drew criticism from pro-democracy protesters, who viewed Gulf influence as undermining civilian rule. Hemedti's control of gold mines and ties to the UAE, forged during the Yemen war, further highlighted the UAE's vested interests in Sudan's political landscape (Washington Institute, 2024).

In response to the political and economic crisis in Sudan, the UAE began to shift its strategy, backing the RSF as a counterbalance to the Sudanese government. By supporting

the RSF, the UAE sought to influence Sudan's political future, ensuring that its strategic interests were protected in the event of a regime change. The UAE's support for the RSF, especially during the rebellion against the Sudanese government, can thus be seen as an effort to maintain influence in Sudan and ensure that a government sympathetic to UAE interests remained in power. The Sudanese authority responded by filing an official complaint with the UN Security Council against the United Arab Emirates for supporting the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in the ongoing war that began in mid-April 2023.

Prior to the 2019 coup, Sudan–UAE ties became strained over diverging interests in Yemen and Israel normalization. UAE grew suspicious of Islamist factions within Sudan's security apparatus and began backing RSF as an alternative force. After Bashir's fall, tensions rose as SAF reasserted nationalist control while RSF deepened ties with Abu Dhabi. By April 2023, this diplomatic rupture had matured into open conflict. This sequence of events aligns with the final stages of the tripartite model: rebellion becomes a rational choice once external support and domestic capacity align against the home state. Between April 15, 2023, and October 25, 2024, the conflict in Sudan saw a total of 9.000 recorded attacks, averaging 16 incidents per day, according to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED). The majority of these attacks, roughly 75%, have been concentrated in three main regions: Khartoum, Gezira, North Darfur. The figures below are visualizations of the scale of confrontations in a six-month span. Figure 2 illustrates the attacks that occurred across Sudan from the outbreak of war on 15 April 2024 to 25 October 2024. This six-month attack map highlights the intensity of the fighting in the capital and its spread southwest into regions still under heavy RSF control, including border areas that have served as key routes for smuggling goods out and weapons into the country.

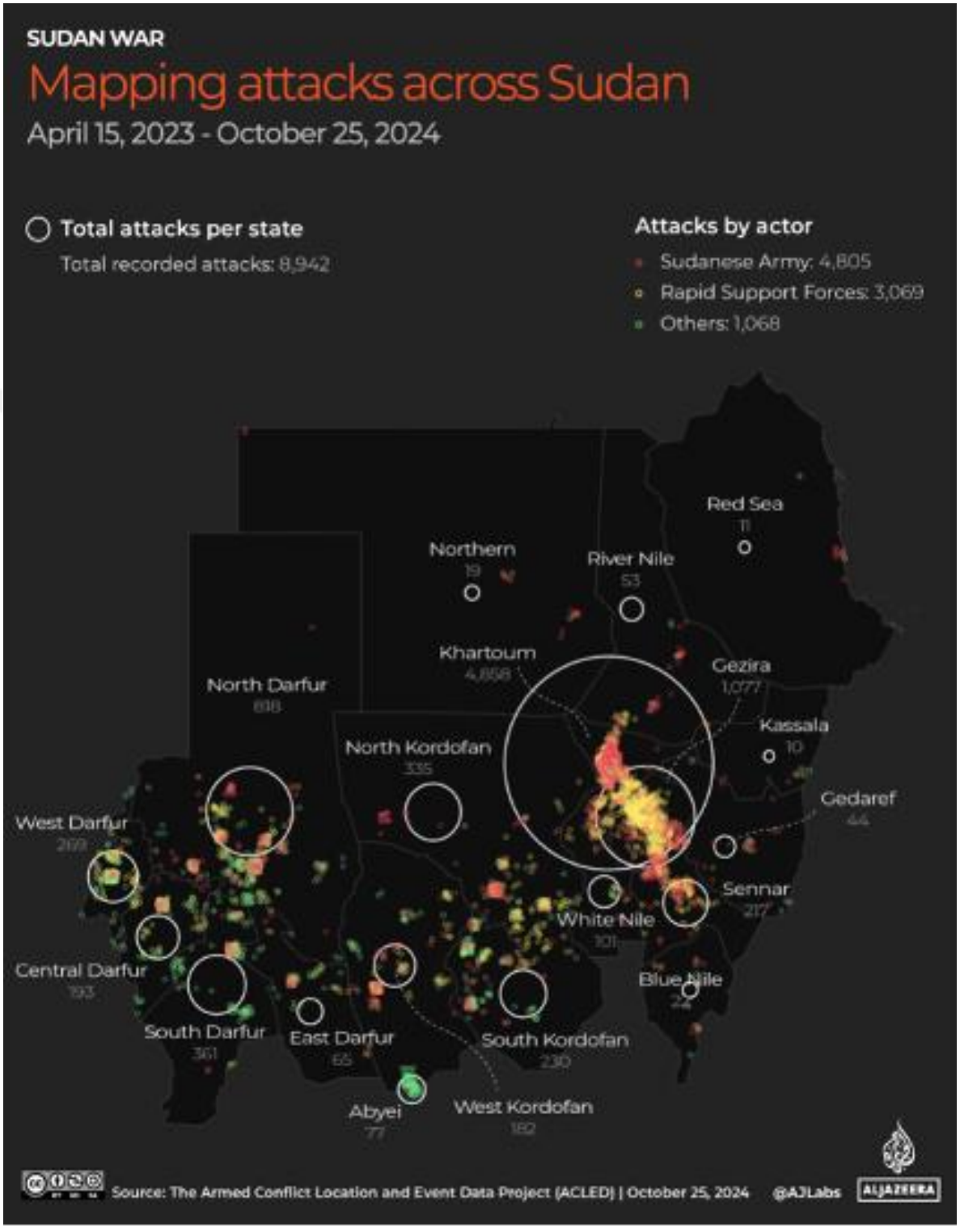



**Figure 4.1. Map of the Attacks, Al-Jazeera (2024)**

The attack timeline shown in Figure 3 illustrates the shifting dynamics of the conflict. In the early stages, the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) maintained clear military superiority, as indicated by the higher frequency and scale of their offensives. However, beginning around January 2024, there is a noticeable increase in both the intensity and frequency of RSF attacks. By mid-2024, RSF activity nearly matched that of the SAF, signaling a significant enhancement in their operational capabilities. This upward trend in RSF attack capacity strongly suggests the presence of growing external support, whether through logistics, weaponry, or strategic coordination enabling the group to sustain and escalate its military efforts on the battlefield.

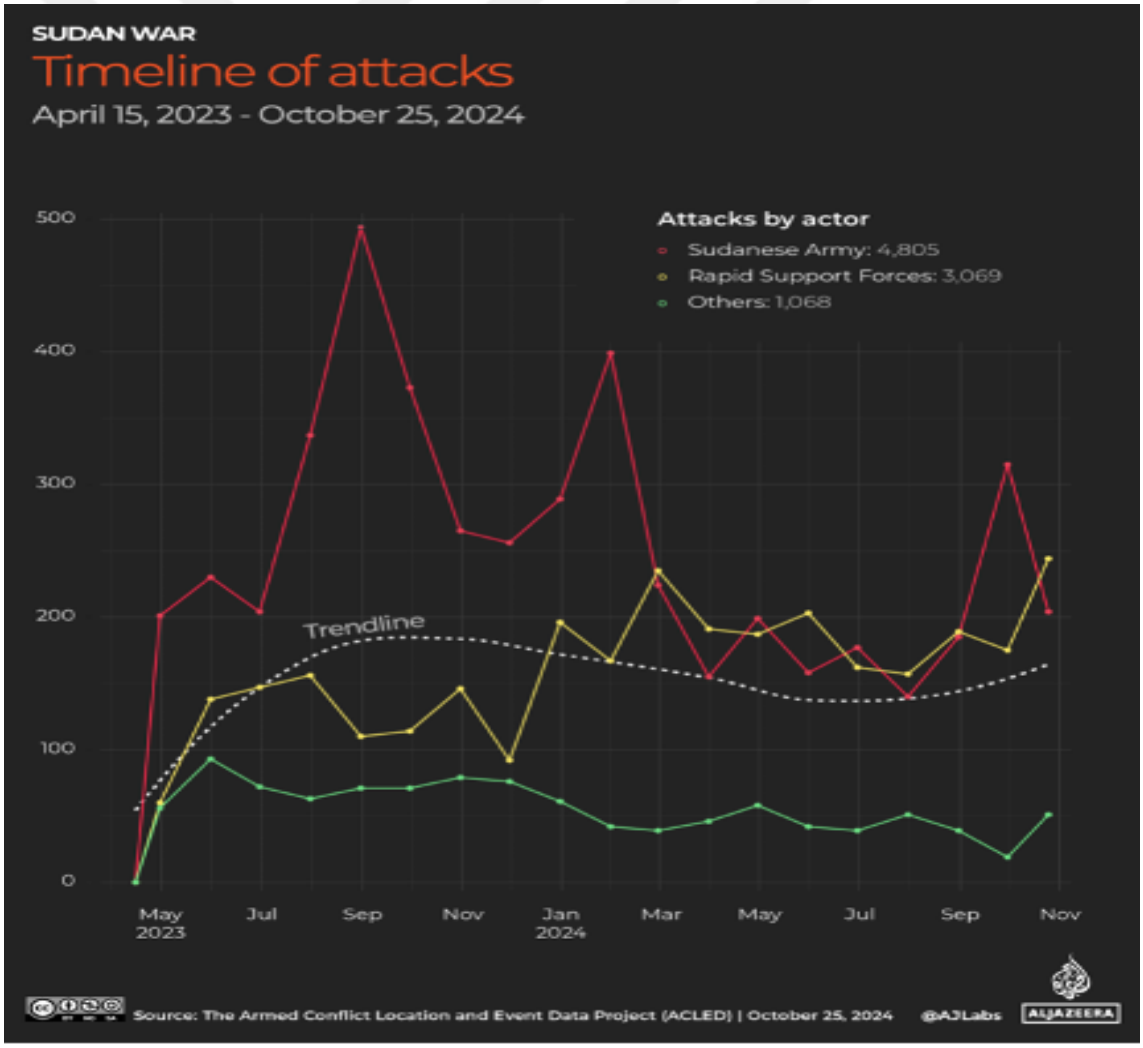



**Figure 4.2. Timeline of the Attacks, Al-Jazeera (2024)**

The RSF case illustrates how paramilitary rebellion can be traced to both internal and external drivers, but also how the interplay between external sponsors and home states can serve as the key trigger. While economic autonomy and leadership ambition set the stage, it was the breakdown in Sudan-UAE relations and the UAE's recalibrated support for the RSF that catalyzed the group's transformation into a rebel force.

This case challenges traditional views of paramilitary groups as permanent extensions of state power. It demonstrates that when foreign policy alignments shift, and when external actors seek leverage in conflict prone states, paramilitary groups can be elevated from informal enforcers to strategic challengers. The RSF's rebellion underscores the dangers of delegating too much power to paramilitary actors in the absence of strong institutional integration and foreign policy cohesion.

### 4.2. Case Study 2 – Syria's National Defense Forces (NDF)

The National Defense Forces (NDF) emerged as one of the most significant paramilitary actors in the Syrian civil war, representing a rare case where a heavily foreign-sponsored militia remained firmly loyal to the host regime. Officially established in early 2013, the NDF was the result of an institutional effort by the Assad regime to formalize local defense groups, initially formed as "Popular Committees," into a nationwide pro-regime militia network. This effort was catalyzed by the regime's weakening control over vast swathes of territory, the exhaustion of the Syrian Arab Army, and widespread military defections (Smyth, 2015). As the war escalated, the Assad regime relied increasingly on community-based militias for territorial defense, particularly in Alawite and other minority areas. These groups were then reorganized into the NDF with training, weaponry, and structural guidance provided primarily by Iran and Hezbollah. Despite this extensive external support, the NDF never attempted to deviate from the Syrian state's authority or challenge the regime politically or militarily, in contrast to other cases where foreign-sponsored militias evolved into autonomous or rival political-military actors (Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, 2023).

Understanding the loyalty of the NDF requires tracing the trajectory of Syria's strategic relationship with Iran. Since the 1980s, Syria and Iran have maintained a close alliance, beginning with Syrian support for Iran during the Iran–Iraq War. This was a rare move in the Arab world and laid the foundation for a deep and resilient alliance. Over the decades, this partnership evolved from shared opposition to Israel and the United States to a full-fledged military and intelligence alliance. By the early 2000s, following the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Iran and Syria aligned more closely to counter growing American and Israeli influence in the region. Iran's support for Hezbollah in Lebanon and its connection to Damascus served as a critical logistical and ideological axis (EUAA, 2023). This alliance matured further in the early 2010s when the Syrian uprising erupted. Iran quickly interpreted the Syrian crisis not as a domestic political upheaval but as a Western-backed attempt to dismantle the "axis of resistance," which included Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah. Iranian support began with logistical assistance and advice, escalating to direct military intervention through the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps – Quds Force (IRGC-QF) and Hezbollah operatives by late 2011. Iran framed its intervention as both ideological and strategic, aimed at preserving the resistance bloc and protecting its regional interests, including access to Lebanon and influence over the Levant (Al-Tamimi, 2015).

Iran's involvement in the creation of the NDF was part of this larger strategy. Beginning in 2012, Iranian and Hezbollah advisers were instrumental in transforming Syria's disjointed Popular Committees into a formalized paramilitary structure. The NDF's design drew heavily from Iran's own Basij militias and Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), both of which emphasized ideological loyalty, local embeddedness, and a decentralized but loyal military structure. Training centers in Damascus, Latakia, and Homs were established with Hezbollah and IRGC-QF oversight, where recruits received instruction in both military tactics and ideological indoctrination (International Crisis Group, 2017). The NDF quickly grew into Syria's largest paramilitary organization, estimated to have reached up to 90,000 fighters at its peak. The operational role of the NDF was clear: it was tasked with urban defense, neighborhood control, and front-line fighting in areas where the regular army could not be deployed. In Homs, Aleppo, and the Damascus suburbs, NDF units were often the primary force securing regime control. Their

familiarity with the terrain, combined with a narrative of sectarian defense, particularly in areas with Alawite and minority populations, ensured their effectiveness and loyalty (Smyth, 2015).

From the Syrian regime's perspective, the NDF was not a threat to state sovereignty but an extension of it. Unlike other militia models where armed groups eventually evolve into parallel power structures, the NDF was embedded within the Ministry of Defense and maintained an official chain of command tied to the Syrian military. Many of its commanders were former army officers or Ba'ath Party loyalists. Salaries, ranks, and privileges were regulated by the state, and the leadership remained accountable to Damascus. This ensured that while Iran provided the resources and training, the political loyalty of the NDF remained with Assad. Furthermore, the Assad regime managed to maintain its grip over the NDF by balancing foreign support with internal legitimacy. Recruits often came from communities with a strong stake in the regime's survival. Many Alawite, Druze, and Christian families saw the Assad regime as their only protection against what they feared would be sectarian retribution from Sunni Islamist rebel groups. Thus, participation in the NDF was not just a financial or ideological decision but also a matter of survival and social preservation (EUAA, 2023).

During the height of the war, particularly between 2014 and 2016, the NDF played a critical role in defending strategic cities and conducting offensive operations alongside the Syrian army, Hezbollah, and other pro-regime militias. Iran continued to fund and equip the NDF during this time, but there is little evidence that Tehran ever attempted to redirect the NDF's allegiance or transform it into a political project. In contrast to cases like Sudan's RSF, where external sponsorship eventually enabled the militia to carve out independent political ambitions, the NDF remained subordinated to the regime's central authority. Iran's support was strategic, long-term, and consistent with preserving Assad's rule rather than pressuring it. The two states maintained high-level diplomatic and military coordination, and no significant political rift emerged throughout the war. Even when Russia entered the conflict in 2015 and began to assert its own military influence, including supporting the formation of the Fifth Corps as an alternative elite force, the NDF

continued to operate under Syrian and Iranian supervision, maintaining its local legitimacy and regime alignment.

After 2017, as major combat operations diminished and Assad reasserted control over most of western Syria, the role of the NDF began to shift. Its units were gradually redirected toward local policing, smuggling control, and reconstruction security. In some cases, the regime absorbed NDF battalions into regular army units or restructured them into internal security forces. Despite this, the NDF did not resist demobilization or reorganization, nor did it attempt to transform into a political or economic power center. There were localized reports of corruption and abuse by some NDF units, particularly in economically strained areas, but these did not translate into organized political dissent or resistance to state authority. The regime's continued control over appointments, salaries, and disciplinary measures prevented the rise of warlords or separatist leaders within the NDF structure. Meanwhile, Iran maintained its support, though with an increasing focus on parallel networks like Liwa Fatemiyoun and other Shia militias brought from Afghanistan and Pakistan. Even so, the NDF was not sidelined or replaced, it remained a key Syrian partner in localized defense and regime consolidation. (ISPI, 2023; Washington Institute, 2022).

Several structural factors explain why the NDF never challenged the regime despite extensive Iranian sponsorship. First, the NDF was structurally embedded in the Syrian state from its inception. It did not emerge as an autonomous actor later co-opted by Iran; rather, it was created with regime oversight and under the Ministry of Defense's authority. Second, the ideological alignment between Iran and the Assad regime, both invested in the "resistance" narrative against Western interventionism and Sunni extremism, prevented the emergence of conflicting agendas. Third, Iran's objectives in Syria were focused on regime preservation and regional corridor-building, not creating a Hezbollah-style actor in Syria that could operate independently. Fourth, the NDF's demographic base, drawn largely from minority communities and regime strongholds, ensured that the survival of the Assad regime was directly linked to the security and well-being of its fighters and their families. Finally, the Syrian regime effectively used material incentives,

rank promotions, and political loyalty as tools to discipline and reward NDF fighters, reinforcing state allegiance.

The durability of NDF loyalty is also linked to the localized nature of its units. Unlike transnational militias, the NDF recruited from communities with direct stakes in regime survival. This hyper-local composition minimized the risk of defection or foreign-alignment divergence. In addition, the Assad regime institutionalized loyalty by offering fighters pensions, state ID cards, and inclusion in military ceremonies, fostering a sense of belonging to the official military establishment.

Furthermore, while Iran provided material and ideological support, the Assad regime carefully regulated the training and deployment of NDF units. For example, the Military Intelligence Directorate maintained oversight over all NDF movements, ensuring operational compliance. Iran's preference for ideological training (Shi'a mobilization and anti-Israeli narratives) was sometimes subordinated to regime priorities, a rare reversal of the typical proxy-sponsor dynamic. This operational fusion further suppressed centrifugal tendencies.

Finally, NDF's evolution into an auxiliary police and checkpoint force post-2017 represents a model of militia normalization. The regime offered NDF leaders local governance roles, allowed some to transition into local councils, and incorporated others into state-affiliated economic networks. This cooptation prevented any rival political base from emerging, ensuring enduring loyalty. This case offers a sharp contrast to other externally-sponsored paramilitary models where the sponsor’s strategic vision diverged from that of the host state. In Syria, the NDF illustrates how a combination of shared strategic interests, institutional integration, and communal loyalty can produce a cohesive, foreign-backed militia that remains firmly within the orbit of the home regime. The Assad–Iran alliance was not transactional or volatile but long-standing, ideological, and mutually reinforcing. The NDF's trajectory reflects this alignment: a militia created by and for the regime, sustained by an external ally whose ultimate goal was never to undermine, but to reinforce, Syria’s authoritarian stability.

### 4.3. Case Study 3 – Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF)

The Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), or *al-Hashd al-Shaabi*, constitute one of the most complex and influential paramilitary networks in the post-2003 Iraqi state. Although the PMF were officially established in 2014 following Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's fatwa urging Iraqis to defend the nation against ISIS, the groups that came to compose the PMF had much deeper roots. Many of them, such as the Badr Organization and Kata'ib Hezbollah, had received years of backing from Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), especially its Quds Force Mansour & Jabar, 2017). These relationships trace back to the 1980s during the Iran–Iraq War, when Iran began cultivating Iraqi Shia opposition groups as part of its broader regional strategy. The Badr Brigade, for example, served as the military wing of the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), a Tehran-backed Shia political group based in exile. With the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, many of these groups re-entered Iraq and were integrated into Iraq's new political and security landscape, often with continued or even deepened ties to Iran (Eisenstadt, 2017).

Following the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq, Iran took advantage of the security vacuum to expand its influence. Tehran supported a network of militias known as the "Special Groups," including Kata'ib Hezbollah and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, which engaged in attacks against U.S. forces and Iraqi rivals. These militias were trained, armed, and ideologically shaped by the IRGC-QF and often operated semi-independently of the Iraqi state (Dodge, 2020). Their existence blurred the line between state and non-state actors and created a dual system of security governance, especially in Shia-majority regions. At the same time, Iran maintained formal diplomatic and economic ties with Baghdad, fostering a pragmatic bilateral relationship based on religious affinity, trade, and common interests, especially the exclusion of Western influence in the region.

The rise of ISIS in 2014 marked a critical turning point. As the Iraqi Army collapsed in the face of ISIS's advance on Mosul, Sistani's call to arms galvanized thousands of volunteers and legitimized the formation of new paramilitary units under the PMF umbrella. While some factions answered the fatwa with a strong nationalist and clerical

outlook, others, already established with Iranian backing, used the opportunity to expand their operational and political reach. Iran responded quickly and decisively: within weeks, General Qassem Soleimani was coordinating military operations on the ground, and the IRGC-QF began providing arms, logistical support, and strategic advice to PMF factions, especially those it had long supported. This phase deepened the integration of pro-Iranian units within the Iraqi security landscape, but it also reinforced the perception of Iranian overreach, especially among Iraqis who valued sovereignty and independence from foreign influence (Mansour & Jabar, 2017).

In 2016, the Iraqi parliament passed Law No. 40, formally integrating the PMF into the Iraqi state's security apparatus under the Prime Minister's control. This was a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it represented a move to bring the PMF under legal oversight, institutionalizing their role and responsibilities (International Crisis Group, 2022). On the other hand, many of the Iran-aligned factions within the PMF maintained their own command structures and loyalty to Tehran, undermining the law's intent. The Iraqi state continued to pay their salaries and provide official recognition, while these groups retained a parallel structure of allegiance and influence tied to Iran's regional ambitions. Despite these dual loyalties, the PMF as an institution remained largely loyal to the Iraqi state, functioning within the boundaries of official policy even as some factions engaged in activities that contradicted state interests, including attacks on U.S. forces and political coercion.

After the territorial defeat of ISIS in 2017, the PMF shifted from a battlefield force to a political actor. In the 2018 parliamentary elections, the Fatah Alliance, comprising several Iran-aligned PMF factions, secured a significant number of seats, positioning itself as a powerful bloc within Iraq's legislature. Iran's strategy appeared to evolve from direct military influence to soft capture of the state via political channels. However, this strategy did not translate into total dominance. Clerically aligned factions, such as the Abbas Combat Division and the Peace Brigades affiliated with Muqtada al-Sadr, resisted deeper Iranian control and distanced themselves from Fatah and the more pro-Iranian elements of the PMF (Washington Institute, 2023) The presence of these nationalist and clerical

factions created a counterbalance within the PMF structure, preventing it from acting uniformly in Iran's interests.

The outbreak of mass protests in Iraq in October 2019 marked another key inflection point. Demonstrators demanded an end to corruption, poor governance, and, notably, foreign interference, particularly from Iran. PMF-linked factions, especially those with IRGC ties, were implicated in the violent suppression of protests, fueling a legitimacy crisis. For the first time since 2014, large segments of the Iraqi population openly questioned the role of the PMF and condemned its behavior. This period of unrest was compounded by the U.S. drone strike in January 2020 that killed both Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the de facto leader of the PMF and the primary link between Iran and Iraq's paramilitary ecosystem (Middle East Eye, 2023). Their deaths created a leadership vacuum and disrupted the centralized coordination that had previously kept Iran-aligned factions aligned under a unified strategic vision.

Despite this disruption, the PMF did not rebel against the Iraqi state. In fact, many factions sought to preserve their status by aligning with the formal institutions of the state. Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi attempted to curtail the influence of the most unaccountable PMF factions, but his efforts met with resistance and only limited success. Meanwhile, the broader Iran–Iraq relationship remained intact. Tehran continued to support PMF factions, but with reduced financial capacity due to U.S. sanctions and economic challenges at home. The IRGC-QF adopted a more decentralized approach, allowing local actors more autonomy while maintaining ideological and strategic guidance (Dodge, 2020). This period revealed the depth of institutionalization that had taken place: the PMF, by now embedded in Iraq's political, economic, and military systems, had more to gain from preserving the status quo than from challenging it. After the 2020 killing of Qassem Soleimani, Iran's relationship with PMF factions evolved. Some elements resisted Baghdad's central authority more openly, reflecting Tehran's attempt to pressure the Iraqi state via proxies. However, this pressure never reached the threshold of rebellion, partly due to Iran–Iraq diplomatic stability.

The 2021 parliamentary elections further complicated the landscape. The Fatah Alliance suffered significant losses, while nationalist factions, especially the Sadrist Movement, gained ground. The PMF's political wing protested the results, and some factions engaged in intimidation and street violence, culminating in the November 2021 Baghdad clashes. Still, no full-scale revolt occurred. Instead, the PMF adapted once again, using its remaining political influence and its economic holdings, control of border crossings, access to state contracts, and patronage networks, to entrench itself within the Iraqi state. In 2022 and beyond, PMF units began professionalizing their structures further, sending officers for training in official military academies and acquiring advanced technology, including Iranian-supplied drones. These moves signaled a transition from paramilitary insurgency to quasi-state actor embedded within Iraq's defense framework (Eisenstadt, 2017; BBC Monitoring, 2023; Al Jazeera, 2021).

The reasons the PMF have remained loyal to the Iraqi state, despite massive external backing from Iran, are multifaceted. First, the strategic goals of Iraq and Iran, particularly in countering ISIS and reducing U.S. influence, have generally been aligned, limiting the incentives for Tehran to use the PMF as a tool of coercion against Baghdad. Second, the PMF are not a monolith; internal factionalism has constrained the ability of Iran-aligned units to dictate the organization's trajectory. Third, the political and economic benefits of state integration have offered PMF factions a powerful incentive to remain within the system rather than confront it. Fourth, while Iran has been a generous and strategic sponsor, its support has aimed to embed influence rather than provoke instability. Finally, the absence of a significant breakdown in Iran–Iraq diplomatic relations has meant that Iran never needed to escalate its use of the PMF beyond what the state could tolerate.

The PMF's complexity arises from its internal heterogeneity. While many units followed Iranian directives, others maintained strong nationalist credentials. These intra-PMF cleavages created a balancing effect that inhibited full-scale rebellion. For instance, the Abbas Division and the Shrine Militias (those affiliated with Najaf clerical authorities) explicitly distanced themselves from pro-Iranian militias, promoting a narrative of Iraqi sovereignty and professionalization. Moreover, PMF factions like Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and

Kataib Hezbollah built parallel bureaucracies, including their own intelligence services, media channels (al-Ahd TV), and economic wings managing logistics and imports through border crossings. These structures were modeled on Hezbollah in Lebanon and allowed PMF groups to act as "states within the state" without directly confronting the federal government (International Crisis Group, 2022). Following Soleimani's death in 2020, Iran shifted toward a more decentralized management model, giving factions more autonomy in return for continued alignment with strategic goals. The result was a hybrid system where no single faction could dominate, but all retained a stake in the political order. This prevented coordinated rebellion while institutionalizing paramilitary influence over Iraq's security and economy (Stimson Center, 2025).

Finally, PMF involvement in state contracts, reconstruction projects, and elections provided political incentives to remain within the state. In the 2021 elections, despite losing seats, PMF-affiliated parties retained significant behind-the-scenes influence, leveraging coercive capacity to influence post-electoral negotiations. Thus, PMF behavior aligns with the tripartite model's empowered-but-loyal category, where fragmentation and rent-seeking behavior outweighs the incentive to rebel.

This case reveals the limits of external sponsorship in transforming paramilitary actors into outright challengers of the state. It also underscores how institutional design, political integration, and factional diversity can act as buffers against external manipulation. The PMF remains a hybrid force, simultaneously a part of the Iraqi state and a vehicle of foreign influence, but their loyalty has thus far been channeled toward preserving the state rather than undermining it. Their continued evolution will depend not only on regional geopolitics and Iranian strategy but also on Iraq's ability to assert a cohesive national identity and enforce the rule of law within its fragmented security apparatus.

### 4.4. Analysis and Discussion

This section applies a tripartite framework to explain how the interaction between a home state, a paramilitary group, and an external sponsor shapes the likelihood of paramilitary

rebellion. It outlines a five-stage causal process, beginning with cooperative relations and benign support, and escalating through political tensions, increased backing, empowerment, and ultimately rebellion. The framework argues that rebellion occurs when deteriorating home–sponsor relations lead the external actor to use the paramilitary group as a proxy, thereby encouraging defiance against the state. This is applied to the three cases under study to test the argument that the rebellion of a paramilitary group against its home state's government, coupled with the evolving foreign policies of external actors and the increased support to the group is a result of deteriorating relations between the home state and the external supporter.

The RSF exemplifies the full trajectory, demonstrating the critical role of foreign influence in shaping the trajectory of paramilitary groups. In the RSF case, the UAE and Sudan originally maintained cooperative relations. During this period, UAE support for RSF appeared aligned with broader regional counterinsurgency efforts, such as the war in Yemen. However, as Sudan's transitional government began to diverge from Emirati regional priorities, particularly by expressing neutrality in the Gulf crisis and distancing itself from Saudi-Emirati agendas, diplomatic relations began to sour. The UAE responded by escalating support for the RSF, channeling financial resources, training, and political legitimacy to the group. As predicted by the framework, this led to the RSF's operational and political empowerment. Ultimately, the RSF, emboldened by this support and lacking ideological alignment with Sudan's authorities, launched a full rebellion in 2019. The RSF case closely follows the entire sequence of the causal mechanism, illustrating how a paramilitary rebellion can emerge from a breakdown in inter-state relations.

By aligning a theoretical expectation that paramilitary rebellion becomes more likely when diplomatic relations between a sponsor and a home state deteriorate, with empirical developments in Sudan–UAE relations and RSF behavior between 2017 and 2023 a congruence test is applied to the RSF case following George & Bennett (2005). The test unfolds across three critical phases: First the Pre-Deterioration Phase (2017–2018): Sudan and the UAE enjoyed relatively cooperative ties marked by aligned policies in Yemen and mutual engagement through security elites. RSF deployments to Yemen occurred during

this period under Sudanese state authorization and Emirati logistical support, but RSF's loyalty to Khartoum remained intact.

Second Deterioration Phase (2019–2021): Tensions began emerging after the 2019 ouster of Bashir. The UAE favored RSF leader Hemedti over Sudanese transitional civilian or SAF-aligned actors, undermining Khartoum's authority. Ideological divergence also became more visible, as the UAE's anti-Islamist agenda clashed with Sudan's power-sharing experiment that included Islamist remnants. During this period, Emirati political and financial support for RSF increased independently of the Sudanese central government. Third, the Escalation and Rebellion (2022–2023): As Sudan's transitional process faltered and SAF–RSF tensions grew, UAE diplomatic alignment with Khartoum diminished further. Emirati gold-linked economic partnerships with RSF and intelligence coordination accelerated, while relations with SAF cooled. In early 2023, the final rupture culminated in the RSF's armed rebellion. This sequence demonstrates congruence between diplomatic deterioration and escalated external support leading to rebellion. This congruence test does not assert monocausal determinism but establishes that the timing, intensity, and nature of UAE–RSF ties are consistent with the theoretical claim that strategic divergence between sponsor and home state contributes to paramilitary defection (George & Bennett, 2005, pp. 126–127).

In contrast, the National Defense Forces (NDF) case deviates sharply from this pattern. Formed in 2012 under the authority of the Syrian Arab Army, the NDF was intended to institutionalize loyalist militias into a coordinated paramilitary force operating in support of the Assad regime. While it has received training, arms, and logistical support from external actors, particularly Iran and Hezbollah, this assistance has been delivered in coordination with the Syrian regime, rather than in opposition to it. Crucially, the sustained strategic partnership between Iran and the Syrian government has not created an incentive for Iran to support the NDF in ways that would undermine Assad's authority or encourage its use as a proxy force. Instead, the NDF operates under the command of Syria's Ministry of Defense, maintains close coordination with formal military and intelligence structures, and remains heavily reliant on state-provided resources. Though

there have been localized incidents of corruption and fragmentation, the NDF has never exhibited a trajectory toward rebellion. This case thus serves as a control in the comparative design, illustrating how institutional incorporation and sponsor-state alignment, both politically and strategically suppress the potential for paramilitary defection or opposition.

The PMF represents an intermediate case, characterized by internal variation among its constituent factions. While some PMF units align ideologically with the Iraqi state and participate in electoral and institutional processes, others, particularly those supported by Iran, function with a degree of autonomy, engaging in actions that contradict Baghdad's interests. The tripartite framework explains this divergence: Iran's strained relations with Iraq's central government following U.S.-Iran tensions and the killing of IRGC commander Qassem Soleimani prompted Tehran to deepen its ties with specific PMF factions. This selective support empowered pro-Iranian elements, emboldening them to resist state oversight and in some cases act against state forces. While this has not resulted in a unified rebellion, it constitutes partial defiance and erosion of central state authority. The PMF thus validates the framework's mechanism up to the point of empowerment, with rebellion being fragmented rather than complete.

These dynamics, as outlined in Table 3, are essential to understanding how proxy conflicts and state fragmentation unfold in contemporary conflicts.

**Table 4.1. Inter-state Relations and Its Effects on Rebellion – SUDAN – UAE - RSF**

| Time/Period | UAE's Policy | Action Taken | Sudan Response | Outcome |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Early 1970s - 1989 | Initial diplomatic ties established and developed<br><br>Arab and Islamic solidarity | Focus on economic development and building relations<br><br>Major donor to Sudan | Participated the formation of the UAE<br><br>Maintained good relations | Strong bilateral relations focused on mutual support |
| 1989 - 2004 | Bandwagoning with the US<br><br>Maintain regional influence | Taking a step back when Sudan refused US intervention in Iraq and suggested regional solutions | Made efforts to maintain the relations and clarify its position | Relations deteriorating |
| 2004 - 2014 Post Mohamed bin Zayid | Assertive and interventionist character | Suppression of Political Islam<br><br>Controlling manner in the region | Maintained policies to reform relations but skeptic about Emirati regional goals | Tensions arise |
| 2015 War in Yemen | Controlling manner and asserting influence in the region | Financial and military support to troops in Yemen | Deployment of troops in Yemen from the SAF and RSF | RSF grew stronger and more involved with UAE, increasing Emirati leverage |
| 2017 Gulf crisis | Position UAE against Qatar, maintain dominance | UAE sides with Saudi-led blockade of Qatar | Sudan remained neutral, but eventually sided with Qatar | Rising tensions, increased RSF support |
| 2018-2019 Sudan revolution | Exploit the situation to counter political Islam and gain control in Sudan | sabotage by the military and economic elites supported by the Saudi-Emirati bloc | Popular backlash against UAE influence; deepened RSF alignment | Military retained power; rise in anti-UAE sentiment in civilian groups |
| 2019-2023 post Bashir era | Secure interests in Sudan<br><br>Shape the new scene | Backing RSF-Co-led military council<br><br>financial and diplomatic aid | Resistance from army and former leaders; RSF became entrenched<br><br>Coup attempt to overthrow the military council | UAE influence declined among Army and public but persisted through RSF |
| 2023 - present | Maintain influence through RSF as proxy | Rise in military, financial, and logistical backing for RSF | Sudan filed an official complaint with the UN Security Council; Expelling diplomatic representation, Increased local opposition, | UAE-Sudan relationship destroyed UAE-RSF develop stronger ties<br><br>RSF Rebels |

### 4.4.1. A Trajectory of Rebellion: Foreign Policy of States and Paramilitary Support

While direct military intervention is politically or economically infeasible, states often use paramilitary groups as tools in achieving their foreign policy objectives. Paramilitaries offer a level of deniability, allowing sponsors to pursue strategic interests while avoiding the international scrutiny and risks associated with conventional warfare. By empowering paramilitaries, states can exert influence in conflict zones, protect their economic interests, and shape political outcomes.

For the UAE, the support of paramilitary groups such as Sudan's Rapid Support Forces (RSF) exemplifies a broader strategy of extending influence in regions like the Horn of Africa and the Middle East, areas of significant geopolitical competition. This strategy aligns with the UAE's wider ambitions of emerging as a dominant regional power, driven by its concerns over security, economic vulnerabilities, and the need to counter the influence of rival actors, including Turkey, Qatar, and Iran (Almezaini & Rickli, 2017). Unlike Iran's close ideological affinity with Syria and Iraq, the UAE's relationship with Sudan was transactional and lacked shared identity. Abu Dhabi's long-standing opposition to political Islam clashed with Sudan's complex Islamist legacy. This ideological mismatch contributed to the instability of the RSF's alignment and its drift toward rebellion. Despite the strong arguments and evidence provided by the Sudanese government to support accusations against the UAE, and although expert reports, including those from the UN Panel of Experts, validated the credibility of these accusations, the UAE continues to deny involvement (Security Council Report, 2024). Furthermore, other UN member states hesitate to condemn these actions against the Sudanese people and the sovereignty of the state. Some states even go so far as to suppress criticism of the UAE's role in arming the genocidal militia and openly advocate for further interventions, as seen in the latest resolution presented by the UK and vetoed by Russia at the UN Security Council (United Nations, 2024).

- UAE’s Relations with Africa

The United Arab Emirates (UAE), traditionally focused on the Middle East and the Gulf region, has in recent decades expanded its foreign policy engagement to encompass the African continent. This increased focus on Africa is driven by a combination of strategic, economic, and security considerations, marking a notable shift in the UAE's foreign policy priorities. The UAE’s growing engagement with Africa is driven by a complex set of economic, security, and geopolitical motivations. Economic interests, including access to natural resources and the establishment of trade routes, have been a significant driver of the UAE’s involvement in the continent. The UAE has invested heavily in infrastructure projects across Africa, including ports, airports, and roads, positioning itself as a critical hub for trade and commerce between Africa, the Middle East, and Asia.

UAE's long-standing tradition of providing humanitarian aid and development assistance to African nations. This aid has been channeled through various Emirati agencies, often targeting infrastructure development, healthcare, and education projects. This aligns with the UAE's self-portrayal as a generous donor committed to supporting developing nations and promoting sustainable development (Cochrane, 2021). Alongside aid, the UAE steadily increased its economic investments in Africa, particularly in sectors like energy, real estate, and telecommunications. These investments are often driven by a pursuit of profitable opportunities and access to new markets, reflecting the UAE's outward-looking economic strategy (Vidal Ribé, 2020).

The UAE's approach towards Africa underwent a significant transformation in the 2010s, becoming more assertive and encompassing a broader range of interests, including security, maritime dominance, and geopolitical influence. The UAE has identified maritime security in the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa as a critical strategic interest, particularly in safeguarding vital trade routes from piracy and potential threats from regional rivals like Iran (Vidal Ribé, 2020). This has led to a concerted effort to establish a network of ports and military bases along the African coastline, often through partnerships with local governments and investments in port infrastructure. Dubai Ports

World, a state-owned Emirati company, has played a key role in this strategy, acquiring concessions for the management of several strategic ports in the Horn of Africa (Sherwood, 2017; Vidal Ribé, 2020).

The UAE's involvement in Africa has also been shaped by its concern over the spread of terrorism and regional instability. It has actively supported counter-terrorism efforts in countries like Somalia and has engaged in military interventions, notably in Yemen, where it has sought to counter the influence of the Houthi rebels, whom it perceives as being supported by Iran (Cochrane, 2021; Shahrour, 2020; Vidal Ribé, 2020). The UAE's engagement in Africa is also driven by a desire to expand its geopolitical influence and compete with regional rivals, particularly Turkey and Qatar. This competition has played out in various arenas, including vying for economic opportunities, supporting different factions in regional conflicts, and seeking to build alliances with key African governments (Vidal Ribé, 2020). Furthermore, the UAE has continued to leverage soft power tools, including humanitarian aid, development assistance, and cultural diplomacy, to cultivate positive relationships and enhance its image in Africa. It has also sought to position itself as a mediator and facilitator in regional conflicts, leveraging its diplomatic networks to promote peace and stability (Cochrane, 2021).

Some observers have lauded its contributions to economic development and its efforts to counter terrorism and piracy. However, others have raised concerns about its motives and the potential negative consequences of its interventionist policies. Critics argue that the UAE's approach towards Africa is driven by self-interest and a desire to exploit the continent's resources. They point to the UAE's focus on securing strategic assets, like ports, and its support for authoritarian regimes that align with its interests. These critiques draw parallels with historical patterns of colonial exploitation and raise concerns about the UAE's commitment to genuinely supporting African development and self-determination (Rinaldi, 2024). The UAE's involvement in regional conflicts, particularly in Yemen and the Horn of Africa, has been accused of exacerbating tensions and hindering peace efforts. Its support for various armed factions and its military interventions have been criticized for contributing to instability and prolonging conflicts. Additionally, there

are concerns about the lack of transparency and accountability surrounding the UAE's activities in Africa. Its investments and military interventions are often shrouded in secrecy, making it difficult to assess their impact and hold the UAE accountable for potential human rights violations or other negative consequences.

Additionally, the UAE expressed concerns about the rise of extremist groups in Africa, especially in the Sahel and Horn regions, and has sought to counter these threats through military partnerships and support for local paramilitary groups. The UAE's involvement with the RSF can be viewed as part of this broader effort to bypass its security agendas in key areas of Africa while simultaneously projecting its power in a region increasingly subject to global geopolitical competition (Rinaldi, 2024).

- UAE's Relations with the RSF

The UAE's relationship with the RSF is rooted in shared strategic interests, particularly regarding shaping and controlling the political reality of Sudan along with its resources. The RSF, originally formed from the Janjaweed militia that played a central role in the Darfur conflict, has long been a powerful actor within Sudan. Over time, the RSF evolved into a more formalized and state-sanctioned paramilitary force with extensive reach across the country. The UAE's support for the RSF can be traced to the group's increasing importance in Sudan's political and military landscape, as well as its potential to influence the broader region.

Two major turning points solidified the UAE's relationship with the RSF and contributed to their emergence as proxies for Emirati interests. The first was the Yemen war, where the Sudanese government deployed troops from the Sudanese Armed Forces SAF and the Rapid Support Forces RSF which played a key role as part of the Saudi-led coalition as a way to portray their support and alliance and a gesture to save the deteriorating relations between the years 2016 - 2019. By providing thousands of troops for deployment to some of the most dangerous frontlines, and after a short while the RSF became an indispensable military partner for the UAE and Saudi Arabia. In return, the UAE deepened its ties with

the RSF leadership, particularly Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti), who began frequent personal visits to the UAE, signaling a deepening relationship that bypassed official Sudanese representation. The relations evolved in a different manner by the UAE providing financial and logistical support to solidify their alliance, A leaked spreadsheet revealed payments exceeding 150 million dirhams (approximately US$40 million) for "technical support". (Richard Kent, 2019; Middle East Eye, 2024).

The RSF's financial strength expanded significantly when it seized control of the Jebel Amer gold mine in Darfur in 2017 and other mines in South Kordofan, it was able to smuggle and launder Sudanese gold through the support of the Emirates. By 2018, the UAE was importing 99.2% of Sudan's gold exports, with Dubai serving as a hub for laundering trafficked Sudanese gold. These exports financed the RSF's operations, with Hemedti's family-owned Al Gunade Corporation based in the UAE facilitating the trade through UAE-based financial institutions such as the National Bank of Abu Dhabi (Patrick Smith, 2021).

The second turning point was the Sudanese Revolution, which began in December 2018 and ultimately led to the ousting of President Omar al-Bashir in April 2019, which the RSF played a major role in. During the transitional period, the UAE threw its support behind the heads of the military council and specifically backed Hemedti. This move was part of a broader strategy to counter the influence of Islamist factions and ensure that Sudan's new political order aligned with Emirati interests. The RSF's lucrative gold mining operations and their role in maintaining internal and border security further strengthened the UAE's reliance on them as a key partner in Sudan (POMPETS, 2023). By 2019, the UAE's support extended to direct financial contributions. For example, Abdul Rahim Dagalo funneled approximately 50 million dirhams ($11 million) to the RSF via UAE-based Tradive General Trading LLC. These funds were used for military procurement, including over 1,000 vehicles converted into armed "technicals" The RSF also used Emirati procurement agents for advanced military supplies (Richard Kent, 2019).

In today's war in Sudan, the RSF has evolved into a full proxy of the UAE, reflecting the deepening of this relationship over time. The UAE provided the RSF with vital financial and military support, including training and equipment. It enabled the group to challenge the Sudanese government and secure its position as a central actor in Sudan's ongoing conflict. The UAE's involvement aligns with its broader regional goals of maintaining influence in the Horn of Africa, countering rival powers, and safeguarding its economic and security interests in the region (Gulf Research Center, 2024). The UAE's efforts to support the RSF expanded regionally, including constructing an airport in Amdjarass, Chad, near Sudan's border. Officially for humanitarian aid, the airport reportedly facilitated arms shipments to the RSF, with video evidence showing UAE-labeled crates believed to contain military supplies. A U.N. investigation corroborated claims of UAE support for the RSF's military capabilities (ROAPE, 2024).

Beyond military and financial backing, the UAE provided media and propaganda support through Dubai-based experts shaping the RSF's international image. The UAE also facilitated a lobbying contract for Hemedti with Dickens and Madson, a Canadian firm, to enhance the RSF's global standing, secure additional funding and acquire weapons. The UAE's assistance also included media and propaganda management, with Dubai-based experts shaping the RSF's international image. Connections to regional players such as Libya, Chad, and General Khalifa Haftar's forces facilitated arms shipments and strategic alliances. The UAE's involvement has entrenched the RSF's power, enabling it to operate independently of Sudan's central bank and strengthening its political and military position. (Darwich, 2024).

The UAE's backing of the RSF highlights how foreign sponsors shape the behavior and capabilities of paramilitary groups. By providing financial, military, and political backing, the UAE empowered the RSF to challenge the Sudanese government and reinforced their status as a key actor in Sudan's political future. This external support played a pivotal role in the RSF's rebellion, demonstrating the interplay between foreign policy and paramilitary behavior, and showing how external actors can tip the balance of power within conflict zones.

In conclusion, the UAE's support for the RSF illustrates the profound impact of foreign policy strategies on paramilitary rebellion. Through a combination of financial, military, and political backing, the UAE played a crucial role in enabling the RSF to evolve into proxies for Emirati interests. From their involvement in the Yemen war to their role during the Sudanese Revolution and the current war in Sudan, the UAE's relationship with the RSF underscores the broader pattern of states using paramilitary groups as instruments of geopolitical influence. This case demonstrates the importance of understanding the connections between foreign policy, external sponsorship, and the dynamics of paramilitary rebellion in conflict zones.

### 4.4.2. Cases of Loyalty

The internal structure of the NDF made it uniquely suitable for Iran's strategic objectives in Syria. Unlike in Iraq, where Shiite populations and ideological ties made sponsorship more natural, the Syrian context required Iran to construct a loyalist force embedded within the country's sectarian and communal landscape. The NDF's organizational model, locally embedded, ethnically mixed but dominantly Alawite, and structurally accountable to the Syrian Ministry of Defense, ensured that Iran's support did not result in fragmentation.

Iran's backing of the NDF also served its long-term goal of maintaining a land corridor through Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, linking Tehran to Hezbollah. Given that Syria's Shiite population is relatively small, Iran invested in creating ideological infrastructure through cultural centers, religious education, and militia training that embedded loyalty to Iran's model of Shiism. Although the NDF itself is not overtly Shiite, many of its units received religious instruction consistent with Iranian narratives, reinforcing soft-power influence. The sustained presence of IRGC-Quds Force advisors in Syria, operating not only with the NDF but also coordinating with Hezbollah and Liwa Fatemiyoun (an Afghan Shia militia), ensured that the NDF remained strategically aligned with Iran without threatening Assad's regime. In this context, Iran's support for the NDF was not merely about military necessity, but about reshaping the ideological landscape of Syria's security sector. Despite

the regime's secular Ba'athist nature, the alignment of survival interests between Assad and Tehran allowed this integration without ideological contradiction.

On the other hand, the PMF's appeal to Iran is rooted in its sectarian alignment and ideological proximity to Tehran's clerical regime. Many PMF factions, such as Kata'ib Hezbollah and Harakat al-Nujaba, explicitly endorse Wilayat al-Faqih, the doctrine of the Islamic jurist, which places Iran's Supreme Leader at the apex of Shiite religious authority. This aligns with Iran's self-image as the protector and leader of global Shiism.

However, this position is contested within Iraq. A powerful Shiite clerical network centered in Najaf, represented by figures like Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, emphasizes quietism and Iraqi sovereignty. These clerics do not accept the Iranian model of political Shiism and instead highlight Iraq's historical and genealogical claim to Shiite legitimacy. This ideological fault line, though rarely addressed publicly to avoid schism, manifests in subtle institutional rivalries. For instance, Quwat al-Shaheed al-Sadr and Sistani-aligned units within the PMF prioritize Iraq's autonomy and reject external control, occasionally clashing with Iran-backed factions over recruitment, territorial control, and policy alignment. The unresolved tension between Najafi and Qom-centered Shiism has long-term implications. If this divide were to become explicit, it could fracture the PMF and erode the transnational Shiite axis Iran relies on. This explains Tehran's careful balancing act, offering support without provoking open ideological confrontation within Iraqi Shiism.

Recent geopolitical events have further strained this balance. During the 2024 regional crisis involving Israeli strikes on Iranian territory, Iraq's government notably refrained from intercepting Israeli missiles, despite having the legal and logistical means to do so. This passivity, contrasted with Jordan's active defense of its airspace, was interpreted by many Iranian-aligned actors as a signal of wavering loyalty. While PMF groups issued rhetorical condemnations, no coordinated military response followed. This hesitation raised concerns in Tehran about the reliability of PMF factions in future regional escalations. Internally, Iraq's post-ISIS political instability has fueled competition between

PMF factions for resources and legitimacy. Economic patronage from Iran is no longer sufficient to ensure loyalty, especially as U.S. sanctions and domestic crises have weakened Tehran's regional spending. Consequently, PMF groups have deepened their economic entrenchment in Iraq, operating smuggling routes, construction firms, and telecommunications ventures. These commercial interests offer autonomy from both the Iraqi state and Iran, reinforcing a trend of hybridization rather than clear subordination.

While both PMF and NDF have remained loyal to their respective regimes, the conditions underpinning their loyalty differ substantially. The NDF's loyalty is derived from institutional integration, demographic composition, and alignment with regime survival. The Assad regime embedded the NDF within the official security apparatus, limiting the risk of defection. Iran's role was auxiliary but influential, ensuring operational effectiveness while preserving Assad's central authority. In contrast, the PMF's loyalty to the Iraqi state is more fragmented and conditional. While Iran played a foundational role in building the PMF, its influence is mitigated by internal factionalism, ideological pluralism, and nationalist currents. Whereas the NDF is unified under a national command, the PMF functions as a federation of militias with overlapping allegiances, to Iran, to local clerics, to political parties, and to financial interests. Loyalty in the PMF is transactional, maintained through access to state resources and political power. In the NDF, it is structural and ideological, embedded in the logic of regime preservation.

In terms of regional strategy, Iran's support for the NDF reflects a long-term investment in creating loyal infrastructure in Syria without altering the regime's identity. In Iraq, by contrast, Iran's approach is riskier, seeking ideological dominance through proxies in a pluralistic and contested political space. This makes the PMF both a powerful tool and a potential liability. The comparison illustrates how paramilitary loyalty is shaped not only by sponsorship, but by the structure of the host state, the nature of sectarian politics, and the strategic depth of sponsor-state relations. The cases of PMF, NDF, and RSF reflect a spectrum of outcomes in paramilitary-state relations, from enduring loyalty to outright rebellion. By comparing these three groups through the tripartite framework of external

support, internal structure, and interstate relations, we can unpack the distinct pathways that led to these outcomes.

In the case of the NDF, loyalty was rooted in its structural integration with the Syrian regime and its functional dependence on Iran's technical and advisory support. The group's formation responded to the Syrian state's need for manpower during an existential crisis, and its operations remained largely within a state-aligned framework. Iran's involvement was carefully calculated: it empowered the NDF without challenging Assad's authority, ensuring regime continuity. The NDF thus emerged as a hybrid force that never deviated from the national interest as defined by the regime, even as it absorbed Iranian ideological and logistical support. Its loyalty can be understood as a product of both material dependency and structural fusion with state security forces.

The PMF's case is more complex. It exhibits enduring loyalty at the surface level, but its internal fragmentation reveals competing allegiances. While many factions uphold ideological alignment with Iran, others retain nationalist or even clerical autonomy. This pluralism reflects Iraq's heterogeneous Shiite political landscape and the competing visions of Shiism emanating from Najaf and Qom. Iran's approach in Iraq has been more ambitious, attempting not only to support a partner but to shape Iraq's security and religious hierarchies. The result is a dense web of loyalties that Iran cannot fully control. Despite this, the PMF has not rebelled against the state. This may be attributed to its access to institutional resources, legal legitimacy, and continued stakeholder status in Iraq's political economy. Its loyalty is thus conditional and transactional, sustained not by ideology alone, but by embeddedness in the post-ISIS state order.

In stark contrast, the RSF presents a case of complete rupture. Originally created by the Sudanese regime to suppress insurgencies and protests, the RSF became increasingly autonomous. It developed independent revenue streams through gold mining and foreign deployment (notably in Yemen), and received strategic backing from the UAE. Unlike the PMF and NDF, the RSF's ties to the state eroded rather than deepened. It operated as a parallel military with limited institutional accountability and growing distrust of the

Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF). This autonomy, coupled with international legitimacy and divergent regional alliances, enabled the RSF to challenge the state outright. Its rebellion in 2023 was the culmination of a trajectory of increasing divergence, empowered by external support and unbound by national command.

What differentiates RSF from PMF and NDF is the absence of institutional incentives for integration and a more competitive sponsor environment. The UAE's strategic calculus diverged sharply from Khartoum's, fostering a paramilitary with regional ambitions and a vision of political dominance. While Iran integrated its proxies within a broader regional security doctrine centered on anti-Western resistance, the UAE's support of RSF was driven by transactional security and commercial interests, without a unifying ideological doctrine. This lack of ideological mooring contributed to the RSF's opportunism and eventual rebellion. Thus, we see three distinct modes of paramilitary loyalty: Structural Loyalty (NDF): where integration and regime alignment prevent defection. Transactional Loyalty (PMF): where continued relevance and negotiated power-sharing sustain allegiance. Strategic Defection (RSF): where autonomy, distrust, and external ambition culminate in rebellion. The RSF case also complicates the assumption that external support inherently stabilizes proxy behavior. When the sponsor's interests misalign with the state's, and the proxy gains enough resources and legitimacy, rebellion becomes not only possible but strategically viable.

In contrast to the NDF and PMF, the RSF's trajectory reveals a paramilitary group that gradually shifted away from regime reinforcement toward autonomous rebellion. Although initially created and legitimized by the Sudanese state under Bashir, the RSF's strategic alignment with the UAE evolved beyond the oversight of Khartoum. Unlike Iran's ideological commitment to regime preservation in Syria and Iraq, the UAE's support for the RSF became increasingly transactional and strategic. As diplomatic relations between Abu Dhabi and Khartoum deteriorated, the RSF emerged not as a tool of state preservation but as a challenger to state authority. This trajectory illustrates the dangers of external sponsorship in the absence of ideological or strategic cohesion between sponsor and home state.

By contrast, the NDF and PMF illustrate how loyalty can be preserved when external support is managed within national frameworks and when the sponsor respects internal ideological boundaries. In Iraq, Iran's support for the PMF was embedded in a shared ideological framework of Shi'a resistance and anti-Western alignment. The trajectory of PMF thus reflects a paramilitary created with state consent, backed by a sponsor whose long-term objective was the reinforcement not undermining the home state authority, this reduced the likelihood of strategic divergence. Similarly, Syria's NDF operated within an Iran–Assad alliance grounded in mutual regime survival, making rebellion both unthinkable and counterproductive. A key structural difference among the three cases lies in the degree of ideological alignment between the paramilitary groups, their home states, and external sponsors. In both the NDF and PMF cases, Iran shared long-standing ideological bonds with Syria and Iraq, rooted in anti-Westernism and Shi'a resistance frameworks. These bonds reinforced regime cohesion and reduced the likelihood of paramilitary divergence.

In contrast, the UAE–Sudan relationship lacked such ideological overlap from the outset. Abu Dhabi's firm opposition to political Islam and the Muslim Brotherhood was at odds with Sudan's Islamist-tinged security structures, especially during the RSF's rise. However, this ideological misalignment intensified under the leadership of Mohamed bin Zayed, who adopted a firm anti-Islamist foreign policy doctrine and pursued normalization with Israel. These shifts, combined with the broader regional polarization following the Arab Spring, marked a turning point in UAE foreign policy, transforming it into a more proactive, interventionist force. As a result, diplomatic divergence between Khartoum and Abu Dhabi deepened, contributing directly to the external support dynamics that underlie the RSF's defection. This ideological and strategic realignment reinforces the thesis' core argument: that diplomatic deterioration between home state and sponsor creates conditions ripe for paramilitary rebellion.

In conclusion, this comparative analysis highlights how state–proxy relations are not merely a function of external patronage or internal cohesion, but are deeply shaped by the geopolitical positioning of the sponsor, the ideological structure of the proxy, and the

political economy of loyalty. These findings challenge simplistic categorizations of paramilitaries as either loyalist or rebel, underscoring the fluid and contingent nature of their trajectories.

# CHAPTER V

# CONCLUSION

This study examined the role of external sponsorship in shaping the behavior of paramilitary groups through a comparative analysis of three key cases: the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in Sudan, the National Defense Forces (NDF) in Syria, and the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in Iraq. The core contribution of this study lies in proposing a tripartite framework that interrelates paramilitary organizational behavior, the nature of interstate relations, and the logic of external support. This framework offered a more nuanced understanding of paramilitary behavior beyond the conventional binary of state versus non-state, and a new lens to view proxy warfare, foreign policy and Paramilitary behavior.

The case of the RSF in Sudan illustrated how external support can enable a paramilitary group to evolve from a state-aligned force into an autonomous rebel actor. The RSF's access to independent financial resources, particularly through gold smuggling, and its ties to the UAE allowed it to develop not only tactical autonomy but also a political agenda of its own. The fragmentation of Sudan's political institutions and the absence of robust mechanisms of security sector integration allowed the RSF to expand its influence unchecked. The result was a dramatic rebellion in 2023, marking one of the most significant intra-state ruptures in contemporary Africa.

In contrast, the NDF in Syria demonstrated a different pathway. While it was also a product of civil war exigencies and received significant external backing, it remained firmly under regime control. Its localized, defensive posture and integration into the official command structure made it a durable adjunct to state power. Iran's role in shaping the NDF was significant but calibrated, ensuring that its support strengthened Assad without creating a parallel power center. The NDF exemplifies structural loyalty, a model

where external support, rather than destabilizing the state, consolidates regime control in a hybrid warfare environment.

The PMF in Iraq presented a hybrid model. Although it emerged from a popular mobilization against ISIS, its evolution was quickly influenced by regional geopolitics, particularly Iranian strategic interests. The PMF became a pluralistic umbrella organization with competing internal allegiances, some ideologically loyal to Tehran, others aligned with Iraqi nationalism and Najaf's clerical authorities. The PMF's ongoing loyalty to the state is less a function of ideological alignment and more a product of political accommodation. By absorbing PMF factions into Iraq's formal political economy, the Iraqi state has kept them engaged and incentivized their loyalty through access to budgetary resources, political offices, and security portfolios. However, this loyalty is contingent and potentially unstable, as recent tensions over Iran–Israel dynamics and Iraqi inaction in regional crises have demonstrated.

When viewed comparatively, these three cases reveal that paramilitary loyalty is not predetermined by external support or initial state alignment. Rather, loyalty is a dynamic and context-contingent outcome shaped by institutional, geopolitical, and ideological factors. The RSF's defection exposes the risks of fostering paramilitaries without embedding them in institutional accountability structures. The NDF shows how paramilitaries can be successfully integrated when state and sponsor interests converge. The PMF reveals the ambiguity and fragility of loyalty when multiple allegiances intersect and state capacity is fragmented.

This study also challenges dominant theoretical perspectives that view proxy forces primarily through the lens of strategic utility for sponsor states. While strategic alignment matters, this research shows that long-term outcomes are deeply embedded in the internal logic of state-building, political legitimacy, and resource distribution within the host state. The sponsor's intent is only one part of the equation; how the state manages, co-opts, or resists paramilitary autonomy is equally critical. The findings reveal that external sponsorship plays a pivotal role in enhancing the operational capacity and political

positioning of paramilitary groups, particularly when diplomatic relations between the sponsoring state and the home state begin to deteriorate. By tracing these dynamics, the study demonstrates how shifts in inter-state relations can significantly alter the trajectory of paramilitary groups, from state-aligned actors to autonomous or rebellious forces.

In practical terms, external actors supporting paramilitary forces must assess not only the immediate utility of these groups but also the long-term consequences of enabling actors that can outgrow state control. Similarly, fragile states facing civil conflict should prioritize the institutional integration of auxiliary forces, ensuring that loyalty is tied to legitimate political and security frameworks. Where integration is not feasible, strict regulation and oversight mechanisms must be applied to prevent the emergence of parallel militaries, and most importantly the creation of such systems and organizations must be viewed within the overall context of internal and international dynamics, a weapon that can backfire or is likely to backfire with the right mix of internal conditions and external backing.

In the case of the RSF, support from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) escalated notably during a period of rising tensions between Sudan and the UAE. As bilateral relations declined, the UAE increasingly leveraged the RSF as a proxy tool, resulting in the RSF's eventual rebellion against the Sudanese government in 2019 ousting the regime head and following it with a full-scale war against the Sudanese Armed Forces in 2023. This case exemplifies how a breakdown in diplomatic relations can prompt a sponsor to escalate material and logistical support to a paramilitary group, effectively empowering it to challenge its home state.

In contrast, the PMF in Iraq and the NDF in Syria did not follow this path. In both cases, despite significant and ongoing external support from Iran, the paramilitary groups remained loyal to their respective governments. This outcome can be attributed to the absence of a breakdown in state–sponsor relations. Iran maintained stable and cooperative relations with both the Iraqi and Syrian states, directing its support toward the consolidation of allied regimes rather than destabilization. As such, the loyalty of these

groups was preserved, and their integration within the state structure continued despite their increasing autonomy and military capacity.

The study underscores the importance of the tripartite relationship between the external sponsor, the home state, and the paramilitary group. It highlights how deterioration in sponsor–home state relations serve as a trigger for escalated support and increased paramilitary autonomy, often culminating in rebellion. When relations remain stable, however, external sponsorship tends to reinforce loyalty and regime strength, rather than challenge it. This research contributes to the literature on non-state armed groups and proxy warfare by offering a structured framework for understanding the strategic conditions under which paramilitary groups may turn against the state. The comparative approach adopted here enhances the understanding of how external sponsorship operates differently across cases depending on the geopolitical and diplomatic context. It emphasizes that the presence of external support is not inherently destabilizing. Rather, it is the nature of the sponsor–state relationship that determines whether such support will empower rebellion or entrench regime stability.

For future research, the tripartite framework presented here can be tested in other regional contexts, such as Libya, Yemen, or Afghanistan, where state and proxy dynamics continue to shape conflict outcomes. Additionally, more empirical work is needed on the evolving nature of sponsor-proxy relationships in a multipolar world where powers like the UAE, Iran, and Russia have increasingly blurred the lines between statecraft and subcontracted violence. Ultimately, this thesis argues that the behavior of paramilitary groups must be understood not in isolation, but in their relational positioning within broader political systems and transnational alliances. The loyalty or rebellion of these actors is not a fixed identity, but a political choice shaped by evolving calculations of power, legitimacy, and survival. Understanding these calculations is essential to anticipating the future of violence and order in the MENA region and beyond.

This understanding carries significant policy implications. First, fragile states must work to insulate their security institutions from foreign influence by strengthening civilian

oversight, institutional coherence, and military professionalism. Second, international and regional actors should monitor and respond to early signs of deteriorating inter-state relations that might incentivize external actors to escalate support for paramilitary proxies. Diplomatic engagement with potential sponsor states is essential to prevent them from redirecting support in ways that undermine state authority. Third, multilateral mechanisms should be developed to regulate the flow of arms, training, and financial resources to non-state armed groups. This includes stricter enforcement of arms embargoes, targeted sanctions, and transparency mechanisms on security assistance. Finally, peacebuilding and post-conflict reintegration programs must address not only the demobilization of paramilitary groups but also the political and economic structures that allowed them to thrive in the first place.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that paramilitary rebellion is not merely the result of group-level characteristics or internal state weakness, but is often catalyzed by shifts in international alignments. Understanding the dynamic interaction between external support and inter-state relations is essential for preventing paramilitary uprisings and managing the long-term risks posed by non-state armed actors in volatile regions such as the Middle East and North Africa.

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Publications:

1. Tayseer Mohamedali (2025, March 21). *Jihadi Politics: The Global Jihadi Civil War 2014–2019*. Al Sharq Strategic Research.

2. Tayseer Mohamedali (2024, December 30). *Misinformation or Tactical Diversion: The Alleged Hit on the UAE's Diplomatic Post in Sudan*. Al Sharq Strategic Research.