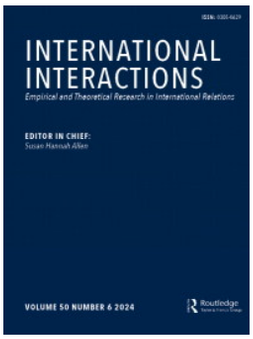

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International Interactions

Empirical and Theoretical Research in International Relations

ISSN: 0305-0629 (Print) 1547-7444 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/gini20

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To cite this article: Natalia Tellidou (2024) Unraveling proxy wars: A comparison of state sponsorship decisions in Afghanistan, Syria, and Yemen, International Interactions, 50:6, 1031-1063, DOI: 10.1080/03050629.2024.2421502

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/03050629.2024.2421502

INTERNATIONAL INTERACTIONS
2024, VOL. 50, NO. 6, 1031–1063
https://doi.org/10.1080/03050629.2024.2421502

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Unraveling proxy wars: A comparison of state sponsorship decisions in Afghanistan, Syria, and Yemen

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explain the pattern of state sponsorship of civil wars in Afghanistan, Syria, and Yemen. Recent studies have improved our scholarly understanding of decisions regarding intervention and sponsorship. Yet, our understanding of state sponsorship decision in conflict that precedes an escalation remains limited. Herein, I develop a multicausal framework to analyze state sponsorship decisions, employing fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis to account for state support. The results suggest novel insights into how strategic interests drive states to influence civil war dynamics for desired benefits. Contrary to conventional wisdom, bilateral rivalry alone does not guarantee a sponsorship decision. States tend to support when they perceive opportunities that are aligned with their economic interests or when countering transnational threats from violent non-state actors who are backed by another state. These findings elucidate how initial state sponsorship decisions might relate to conflict escalation over time.

KEYWORDS

Afghanistan; proxy war; state sponsorship; Syria; Yemen

RESUMEN

Este estudio tiene como objetivo explicar el patrón que sigue el patrocinio estatal en las guerras civiles en Afganistán, Siria y Yemen. Existen estudios recientes, los cuales han mejorado nuestra comprensión académica con respecto las decisiones en materia de la intervención y el patrocinio. Sin embargo, nuestra comprensión de las decisiones en materia de patrocinios por parte del Estado en un conflicto que precede a una escalada sigue siendo limitada. En este artículo, desarrollamos un marco multicausal con el fin de analizar las decisiones en materia de patrocinio estatal, empleando, para ello, un análisis comparativo cualitativo de datos difusos (fsQCA, por sus siglas en inglés) que nos permite cuantificar el apoyo estatal. Los resultados sugieren nuevos conocimientos con relación a cómo los intereses estratégicos impulsan a los Estados a influir en la dinámica de la guerra civil con el fin de obtener los beneficios deseados. En oposición a la idea generalizada en la sabiduría convencional, la rivalidad bilateral por sí misma no garantiza

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Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at https://doi.org/10.1080/03050629.2024.2421502.

una decisión de patrocinio. Los Estados tienden a apoyar el patrocinio cuando perciben oportunidades que están alineadas con sus intereses económicos o cuando estas oportunidades contrarrestan las amenazas transnacionales por parte de agentes no estatales violentos que están respaldados por otro Estado. Estas conclusiones aclaran cómo las decisiones iniciales en materia de patrocinio estatal podrían relacionarse con la escalada del conflicto a lo largo del tiempo.

RÉSUMÉ

Cette étude vise à expliquer le schéma de soutien des États aux guerres civiles en Afghanistan, en Syrie et au Yémen. Des études récentes ont enrichi notre compréhension académique des décisions en matière d'intervention et de soutien. Toutefois, notre compréhension des décisions étatiques de soutien dans des conflits qui précèdent une escalade reste limitée. Dans cette étude, je développe un cadre multicausal afin d'analyser les décisions de soutien des États à l'aide d'une analyse qualitative comparative « fuzzy-set ». Les résultats nous renseignent plus avant sur l'influence des intérêts stratégiques sur les États quand il s'agit d'agir sur les dynamiques de guerre civile en vue d'obtenir certains avantages. Contrairement à la pensée majoritaire, la rivalité bilatérale à elle seule ne garantit pas une décision de soutien. Généralement, les États accordent leur soutien quand ils perçoivent des opportunités correspondant à leurs intérêts économiques ou quand ils font face à des menaces transnationales de la part de violents acteurs non étatiques soutenus par un autre État. Ces conclusions mettent en lumière comment les décisions initiales de soutien étatique peuvent avoir un lien avec l'escalade d'un conflit dans le temps.

Introduction

Why do sponsorship relationships between an external state and a warring party emerge during civil wars? When describing proxy relationships between states and proxies, the literature on proxy wars posits three main explanations for states' motivations for avoiding military intervention in civil wars: deniability (Berkowitz 2018; Karlén and Rauta 2023; Wyss and Michel 2023), risk avoidance (Uzonyi and Rider 2017; Ives 2019; Saunders 2021; Karlén et al. 2021) and cost-efficiency (Bergen et al. 2022; Carson 2018). Yet, despite assertions of deniability, risk avoidance, and cost efficiency, examples like the Yemen proxy war of 2009 escalating into full-scale military intervention within a few years challenge these claims. Specifically, in 2015, Saudi Arabia escalated the conflict by transitioning from state sponsorship to direct military intervention against the al-Houthi insurgents. A similar pattern can be observed with proxy wars in Afghanistan (1996–2001) and Syria (2012–2014). Foreign states already engaged in proxy wars rapidly increased their support towards their proxies with little

consideration for how the international community would react to this provocation, hence they did not comply with deniability explanations.[1]

Similarly, risk avoidance cannot explain cases such as Pakistan, which equipped and trained the Afghan Taliban in 1995. This action not only exacerbated regional tensions but also prompted Iran, Russia, and India to support the opposing warring party in the proxy war. To make matters worse, for states that want to avoid costs, proxy wars that develop among great powers and regional states can have a high level of casualties –as the Syrian civil war did – and negotiations may fail in prolonged conflicts, mainly because the warring parties are confident of securing support from their external supporters - as was the case in Yemen (Aydin and Regan 2012; Basedau, Deitch, and Zellman 2022; Cunningham, Skrede Gleditsch, and Salehyan 2009). When states choose to engage in a proxy war believing it to be a "risk-free and low cost" alternative, they are either severely miscalculating, risking an increasing outpour of resources to the proxy, entrenching regional rivalries, and simultaneously exposing national security, or more convincingly, have a foreign policy that goes beyond these explanations.

This article makes a twofold contribution to the literature on state sponsorship and proxy wars. Empirically, it provides a comprehensive analysis of state sponsorship decisions in the proxy wars in Afghanistan, Syria, and Yemen. These cases all occurred after the end of the Cold War, which emphasizes the ongoing relevance of state sponsorship in contemporary international security. Analytically, this article portrays state sponsorship as a foreign policy endeavor in which a state evaluates its strategic setting, incorporating domestic and international constraints, along with its foreign policy interests in an integrative theoretical framework tested with fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA). These conditions incorporate the rivalry between external states supporting their proxies in the conflict, the perception of a transnational threat posing risks to national security, economic interests associated with the conflict presented as opportunity, and the existence of a credible ally that is capable of deterring escalation. As a set-theoretic comparative method, QCA is ideally suited to account for complex causation, indicated by the presence of multiple paths (equifinality) and combinations of conditions (conjunctural causation) leading to an outcome (Haesebrouck 2017 for a similar research design; Mello 2022a; 2022b; Rihoux and Ragin 2009). This renders it an appropriate methodological selection for this study, as none of the explanatory

[1]In this article, I use the term sponsorship relationship to describe the relationship between a state sponsor and its proxy. The term proxy war describes a civil war in which at least two opposing warring sides are receiving external support.

conditions are anticipated as individually necessary and/or sufficient. On the contrary, theory and prior work suggest that combinations of different conditions and alternative paths contribute to the outcome.

The result of this analysis offers novel insights into the interplay of strategic interests and the benefits that states seek to attain by shaping the dynamics of civil wars. First, states support proxies based on their economic interest when no rival is present in the conflict or when they do not perceive a transnational threat to their security. Second, regional states may form sponsorship relationships based on their security interest, even without direct economic interests in the conflict, by leveraging the support of their allies. Third, great powers might participate in a proxy war involving their rivals, aiming to maintain the regional status quo, as these sponsorship relationships help them achieve their foreign policy goals. Lastly, regional states with rivals in the proxy war might also develop sponsorship relationships, as long as these rivals do not pose a transnational threat through a VNSA within their own territories.

This article proceeds in three parts. The next section develops an integrative theoretical framework for analyzing state sponsorship decisions. The second section details the study's method and data. The third section contains the set-theoretic analysis of state sponsorship decisions in Afghanistan, Syria, and Yemen accompanied by a discussion of the analytical results. The conclusion summarizes the findings, providing a detailed understanding of state behavior in sponsoring proxies. It shows how economic interests, security concerns, and standing interests influence these decisions in complex geopolitical contexts. Finally, it outlines their relevance for studies on international security and conflict resolution, acknowledges the inherent limitations of the present study, and proposes avenues for future research.

Explaining state sponsorship as foreign policy

Many scholars portray proxy war as a low-cost strategy (Duner 1981; Bar-Siman-Tov 1984; Loveman 2002; Salehyan 2010; Hughes 2014; Mumford 2013). The argument goes that the immediate costs of war, that is, the burning of resources and increasing casualties, hinder direct military interventions, while the secondary costs, such as fear of international and domestic criticism and fear of retaliation by the enemy or its allies, render direct intervention a politically risky strategy. Contemporary studies have debated the appeal of proxy wars and why states prefer to enable proxies in conflicts. Pattison (2015) and Salehyan (2010) argue that arming rebels is a less costly strategy for the sponsoring state, and it is often achieved without the knowledge of the international community.

Paradoxically, proxy wars may undermine diplomatic efforts for conflict resolutions and enthrall states in protracted conflicts that eventually become

deadlier and lengthier for the warring parties. In other words, the costs and risks of a possible intervention depend greatly on how other states perceive a specific action in each circumstance. Undeterred by these costs, states carry on supporting proxies in conflicts. One example is the Darfur Civil War. This conflict has the characteristics of a proxy war, in which various groups in the conflict are supported by states including Chad, South Sudan, Eritrea, Libya, and until recently, Uganda, and chronicles one of the bleakest conflicts in the African region, having gone on for more than a decade.

Plausible deniability has often been used to explain why states join proxy wars. Plausible deniability is the notion that the sponsor will not have to pay any of the costs that would be linked with direct intervention. Furthermore, as the theory goes, they will not have to pay the costs of defeat but may benefit from the gains associated with victory. Avoiding possible condemnation by international and domestic audiences motivates states to engage in proxy wars covertly rather than having to bear the consequences that direct interventions may ascribe to the interveners. This holds, in particular, in cases in which states are willing and able to wage secret wars (Carson 2018). However, it is becoming increasingly difficult to keep high-level support for a proxy a secret from the international community. For example, the US decision to provide training to the Free Syrian Army did not remain a secret for long ('AP: U.S. Training Syria Rebels in Jordan - CBS News' 2013) and even plausible deniability cannot explain why states would choose this option over other strategies.

Furthermore, the third-party intervention literature has pointed out how this connection manifests the perfect conditions for the creation of sponsorship relationships. Moreover, it is the same criterion that plays a prominent role in how states decide which proxies to support in any given conflict. The core argument of religious or ethnic ties is that the higher the state's affinity with a group is, the higher the probability that the state will support it in a proxy war. In the proxy war literature, both Hughes and Mumford refer to the "special relationship" between the social group and the proxy, highlighting that the notion of "backing kith and kin" is well established in the empirical record (Hughes 2014; Mumford 2013). Therefore, this causal explanation draws on the political reasons that states have for participating in proxy wars. However, the question remains whether this is enough to justify a sponsorship decision.

In the course of my analysis, I decided to exclude the co-religion variable from further consideration. Despite initially incorporating this variable into the dataset, it did not significantly influence any of the outcomes. This empirical finding aligns with the specific contexts of the case studies. In Syria, the Free Syrian Army functioned as an umbrella VNSA and presented itself as inclusive of various groups, diminishing the relevance

of co-religion. Similarly, in Afghanistan, the Northern Alliance was comprised of multiple ethnic groups rather than being dominated by a single religious identity. In the case of Yemen, the variable was entirely absent. Thus, its exclusion is both methodologically sound and contextually justified.

Prior studies have emphasized the importance of rivalry (San-Akca 2017; Prunier 2004), transnational threat (Tamm 2016), opportunity based on economic interests (Findley and Marineau 2015), and the existence of a credible ally (Johnson, Leeds, and Wu 2015). States considering intervening in a civil war are conscious of the costs and risks that could result. The difference between state sponsorship and foreign intervention lies in each state's preference for discreet involvement, particularly in the initial stages, and avoiding direct frontline engagement as a warring party. However, for all the dilemmas regarding whether to intervene in a conflict, states' preferences are formed in terms of their perceptions of the behaviors of other states. In other words, the preference for state sponsorship lies in the assumption that there is a competitive environment. Indeed, in 1997 Iran took a prominent role in the settlement of the Afghan civil war, supporting the Northern Alliance (NA) alongside other regional states including Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Pakistan increased its influence in the region with the establishment of the Taliban in Kabul, while Russia acted with restraint towards the Afghanistan civil war, as it was already involved in the Tajikistan civil war from 1992[2] (Chufrin 1999).

My argument suggests that initial state sponsorship decisions during the proxy war phase of a conflict might be closely tied to subsequent decisions to escalate military involvement. Bremer (1992) suggests that one state intervention sets the stage for another. This concept was at the core of Corbetta and Dixon (2005) research. They note: 'Military historians have long recognized the idea that conflict initiation involves steps of increasing intensity, ranging from nonmilitary action toward the use of full-scale military force (Corbetta and Dixon 2005, 42).' Therefore, it is crucial to study how sponsorship relationship form, particularly in cases where a proxy war led to military escalation, such as in Afghanistan, Syria, and Yemen. Building on these assumptions, this article formulates an integrative theoretical framework to explain state sponsorship decisions in Afghanistan, Syria, and Yemen, as outlined in the following sections.

[2]The absence of Western powers indicates that, with the withdrawal of the Soviets from Afghanistan, the region decreased its relevance to the foreign policy of European states but to the US to a great extent as well, at least until 2001. As an exception, France and to a lesser degree the United Kingdom had some lingering interests in the region, however, they did not seem to actively participate in the proxy war. According to some reports, both France and the UK might have turned a blind eye to the shipment of weapons destined for Afghanistan and did not impose sanctions on arms deals with the Taliban. However, their engagement seems to not have exceeded these actions.

Rivalry

Proxy war scholarship has paid considerable attention to the rivalry of dyads like Saudi Arabia and Iran or India and Pakistan and the state sponsorship decisions made in the MENA region (Mabon 2013; Martin 2013; Ladwig 2008). In the meantime, cases such as Afghanistan, which are important for US policymaking, have received scholarly attention pointing toward the instrumental presence of external rival actors (Rashid 1996; Rubin 1997; Hager 1998; Prunier 2004; McFarland 2010). From a realist perspective, a primary driver of why states provide support to proxies is because their rival is supporting the opposite side and seeking to alter the balance of power in the region (Maoz and San-Akca 2012; San-Akca 2017). Drawing more attention to the possibility of states joining in a civil war because their rivals are present as well, Vasquez (1996) and Goertz and Regan (1997) understand that states with a 'contiguous' rivalry are more likely to join a conflict than initiate one. This is the case when their rivals are also drawn into conflict by other states. Hence, the rivalry hypothesis expects that a state with an intense rivalry with a particular warring party is likely to develop a sponsorship relationship with that party's opposition in a conflict.

Transnational threat

Another explanation for state sponsorship decisions relates to the transnational threat. This has emerged from existing research on the Congo Wars and the transnational threat emanating from a violent non-state actor (VNSA) active in their territory who are receiving support from external states (Tamm 2016; Salehyan 2011; Hendrix and Salehyan 2017; Salehyan, Siroky, and Wood 2014). State sponsors establish a relationship with their proxies due to a perceived or actual threat that another state is already supporting proxies within their territory. Notably, Tamm (2016) observes the existence of a double triangle – a connection between a sponsor state, a target state, and a VNSA that opposes the government. This double triangle explains the formation of a revenge triangle, where the state responds to the threat by supporting a VNSA that fights its adversary. These empirical observations, which Tamm (2016)theorizes as transnational alliances, are derived from civil wars in Africa, particularly during the 1990s.

I argue that transnational threats are present in the cases of Afghanistan, Syria, and Yemen. For example, the Arab Spring uprisings reached Saudi Arabia, specifically in the Eastern Province where the residents of the province are mostly Saudi Arabian "Twelver" Shi'a citizens and also Sunni citizens (Wehrey 2013). Iran could not gain the influence it desired through

the local support in Saudi Arabia and, therefore, created and funded a militant group inside Saudi Arabia named Hezbollah al-Hejaz that was responsible for the Khobar Towers bombings (Kirkpatrick 2015). The Kingdom perceived the uprising in the Eastern Province as Iranian 'actions to disrupt security at the behest of a foreign country which tried to undermine the security of the homeland in a blatant act of interference' (Minister of Interior Naif bin 'Abd Al-'Aziz, Yehoshua 2011). The perception of a transnational threat was also evident in the way that Saudi Arabia's state press framed the protests as only Shi'a-related despite the presence of Sunni citizens at the protests. In this instance, the link to Iran was straightforward. Amidst the revenge triangle dynamics, Saudi Arabia openly supported the Free Syrian Army in Syria, which was engaged in combat against the Assad regime, supported by Iran.

To connect it with a strategy relevant to proxy war, Hughes (2014) mentions that states often use 'bait and bleed' strategies to destabilize their opponent by diverting their resources to respond to multiple security threats. Similarly, Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham (2011) argue that in a civil war when there is already support for the government, the probability that the rebel side will also receive external support rises exponentially. This empirical finding is based on transnational linkages. The transnational threat hypothesis anticipates that states which perceive a national security threat from a VNSA funded by a third state on their territory, will develop a sponsorship relationship with a proxy that confronts that third state.

Credible ally

Having a great power as an ally is central to the decision-making of a sponsor state. Recent research has shown that the presence of an ally on the side of the enemy, decreases the possibility of further continuing a proxy war as the state–sponsor is afraid of inadvertent escalation (Maoz and San-Akca 2012). In other words, no leader wants to be in an open war against a great power if it does not have the backing of another great power itself. In proxy wars, alliances have numerous ways of influencing the behavior of states (Ashford 2017; Erkomaishvili 2019; Kinne 2020; Sorokin 1994). In the first scenario, research has shown that the existence of allies, whether within or beyond a state's region, bolsters its willingness to pursue foreign policies that challenge its enemies. Following that reasoning, a state that has a great power as an ally has considerable standing in the region, especially if the alliance is publicly reinforced with the good relationships of leaders and is legally bound by bilateral military agreements. The credible ally hypothesis expects that sponsor states which are in active military cooperation with a great power will develop sponsorship relationships with a proxy in a conflict when facing a threat to their national security.

Opportunity

Opportunity structure is a concept that has a hybrid meaning that can be understood through different characteristics (Uzonyi and Rider 2017; Rooney 2018; Rider and Owsiak 2015). In proxy wars, opportunity is broadly perceived as the economic interest of sponsor states in relation to the states in conflict (Byman et al. 2001). Indicators of opportunity are (i) the presence of lootable resources and (ii) trade. Economic interests were also instrumental motivators during the Cold War. Bar-Siman-Tov (1984), one of the few pioneers of proxy war, contested that the motivations that drove the US and the USSR to proxy wars instead of intervening militarily and triggering a possible conflict escalation that would have led to a nuclear clash between them had two characteristics: (a) there were no vital interests in a conflict that could justify a direct intervention, hence they were mostly based on economic dependence of states with the USSR and the US; and (b), even if there were vital interests in a conflict, the risk of direct intervention was too high. These characteristics still dominate the behavior of sponsor states (Regan and Aydin 2006; Aydin and Regan 2012; Stojek and Chacha 2015; Ogutcu-Fu 2021). The opportunity hypothesis expects that states are likely to develop sponsorship relationships with proxies in a conflict when they perceive an economic opportunity within that conflict, such as lootable resources or trade, in the absence of a transnational threat.

An integrated model for state sponsorship decisions

The pattern of state sponsorship decisions in Afghanistan, Syria, and Yemen is expected to result from a complex interplay between each state's interests, which is summarized in Figure 1. More precisely, I categorize a sponsorship decision based on security interest, economic interest, and standing interest (Lebow 2010). States that feel threatened by an active VNSA and have secured a Credible Ally in the region will support a proxy based on their security interest. States that perceive an Opportunity based on their economic interest will support a proxy only when there is no threat to their national security. Lastly, states aiming to preserve their standing in the region and maximize their gains against a rival will support a proxy.

The presence of interests, have dominated the narrative[3] (Karlén et al. 2021). A proxy war starts and ends with the intervener's interest (Aydin

[3]The same observation can be traced to the external intervention literature, where realists' perceptions of interest derive from balancing or alliance formation strategies prioritizing national interests that seek to maximize their payoffs and minimize the costs (Welz 2022).

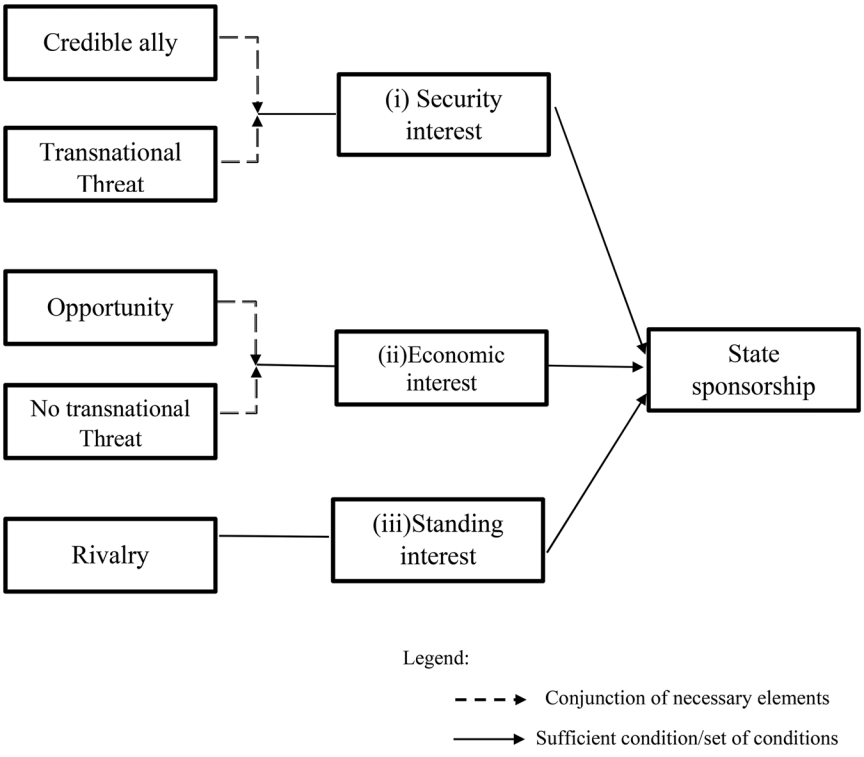

Figure 1. Hypotheses for state sponsorship in Afghanistan, Syria and Yemen.

2010; Aydin and Regan 2012; Linebarger, Nichols, and Enterline 2019; Mullenbach and Matthews 2008; Regan 2000). My approach integrates factors that previous studies have identified as important in explaining state support to proxies, yet whose interaction have largely gone unobserved.

In doing so, I bridge the existing gap of a state's foreign policy being analyzed only on the bilateral level and not on the international level[4]. This is crucial because an intervening foreign policy cannot be seen in isolation from the international and regional environment in which a state act[5]. Moreover, this integrative framework bolsters the Qualitative

[4]Salehyan and Gleditsch, pioneers of the field mention "while states may certainly sympathize with opposition groups that share similar goals, they are unlikely to provide direct aid unless they have some incompatibility or dispute with the state in question." p.712 and also "Regardless of the nature of the international conflict, empowering rebel organizations is a tactic that states may employ in weakening their enemies.".

[5]Salehyan et al. (2011) present the "supply" and the "demand" sides to explains external support for insurgents. In this article, I focus on analyzing the "supply side" as the main purpose of the study is to understand the foreign policy of states and determine why a state decides to support a proxy. While the "demand side" is important for assessing the success and longevity of the relationship, the reasons why a proxy decides to receive support from a sponsor are not consider in this analysis.

Comparative Analysis (QCA) approach that I follow in my research design to combine states' interests.

Finally, this analysis sheds light on states' interests by examining why and how they choose to intervene in proxy wars. We often consider state support to proxies to be a preferable alternative to direct military intervention without fully exploring the underlying reasons why states choose to intervene in a conflict initially. I argue that examining why states support a proxy, whether based on security, economic, or standing interest, can provide insight into their foreign policy in a civil war and how it might lead to escalation over time.

Research design

The theoretical framework was tested with fsQCA. QCA allowed me to examine a complex combination of possible explanations following my ontological assumption that there is no monocausal explanation that impacts my outcome (Schneider and Wagemann 2010). Fuzzy set QCA is a set-theoretic method that is based on the principles and logic of Boolean algebra that explains the necessary and sufficient conditions for an outcome to occur. This is often referred to as the causes of effects (Ragin 2014; Rihoux and Ragin 2009).

Causal complexity is a central feature of QCA. Three assumptions account for causal complexity in QCA, conjunctural causality, equifinality, and causal asymmetry. That is the reason why, in this article, I examined various state interests as they allowed me to develop a better understanding of the different conditions that work on state sponsorship decisions. Configurational causality expresses this relationship between conditions that produce either positive or negative outcomes. Many studies that use varieties of QCA have pointed to the different pathways to producing an outcome. In terms of QCA vocabulary, this is understood as equifinality. Finally, causal asymmetry refers to when the negative outcome is not the mirror image of the positive outcome. In such cases, the states that decide to support a proxy cannot also decide, under the same configuration of conditions, not to support a proxy. QCA is a novel approach in international relations and conflict research in particular (Mello 2022a). In the research field of conflict studies, set-method approaches have recently started to wield empirical results that can provide theoretical contributions to the study of conflicts (Ide and Mello 2022; Bara 2014; Mello 2014; Metelits 2009; Bretthauer 2015; Basedau and Richter 2014). My analysis bridges the novelty of set-theory approaches and detailed case studies to analyze changes in states' foreign policy.

This article applies the fuzzy set variant of QCA, which allowed me to take into account the degree to which a variable is present in a case

(Haesebrouck 2017). The reason I used this procedure is that it allows the researchers to use their theoretical knowledge to work with empirical anchors, meaning that they can use their knowledge of a case to calibrate the conditions accordingly by working with a coding scheme that applies to all cases. In this way, fuzzy sets introduce a 'graded set membership' that differs from crisp sets as it is up to the researcher to set the empirical anchors and set the 'point of maximum ambiguity', that is, the score of 0.5, according to the cases that are specifically linked to the study (Schneider and Wagemann 2010; Rihoux and Ragin 2009; Mello 2022b). In essence, it is up to the researcher to solve the dilemma of when we know that there is a difference-maker in a concept and flag one case that is out if it is missing specific characteristics from the concept. Membership scores in a fuzzy set can vary between full membership (value of 1) and full non-membership (value of 0). A score of 0.5 indicates the point of maximum ambiguity. The assignment of fuzzy membership scores, or calibration, is described in the following subsections.

Case selection

I focus on the state sponsorship relationships in Afghanistan, Syria, and Yemen for several reasons. First, these three civil wars present critical cases of sponsorship relationships. All three conflicts are marked by prolonged proxy wars, where multiple states establish sponsorship relationships with both warring parties, leading to eventual escalation overtime. In each case, the sponsors involved in the proxy wars become key players in the conflict by leading or participating in the military escalation. Thus, these cases illustrate how sponsorship relationships precede intervention and persist, indicating that the foreign policy decision to support a proxy influences the subsequent phase of the civil war.

Another reason is the clear demarcation between the Cold War and the post-Cold War periods for all three cases. During the Cold War, the US and USSR established sponsorship relationships in civil wars as an outcome of their intense competition. Marxist groups received support from the USSR and anti-Marxist groups received support from the US (Mumford 2013; Hughes 2014; Rauta 2021a). These three cases are representative of contemporary proxy wars, where the bilateral competition between superpowers is not present.

Third, since all the civil wars are in the same region, it enhances cross-case comparability for both regional actors and great powers. Most states have developed sponsorship relationships in at least two of these cases. Therefore, these three conflicts are representative of sponsorship relationships in the broader Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Additionally, these sponsorship relationships are long-lasting, indicating

they are not mere reactions to conflicts but rather deliberate foreign policy choices.

Fourth, the final criterion for case selection was the ability to access the data necessary to code key variables. In other cases of proxy war, the study of sponsorship relationships remains limited due to the clandestine nature of these decisions (Hughes 2014; Carson 2018). However, in these three cases, the reporting of the support that proxies received was consistent and regularly updated. By choosing contemporary cases, I was able to focus my inquiry on the specific types of support these states provided, allowing for an analysis that examines different levels and combinations of support.

This study investigates state decisions to support proxies in the conflicts in Afghanistan, Syria, and Yemen. These civil wars span over decades, but I focus on the period of the proxy war, which begins with the onset of the civil war (1996, 2011, and 2009 respectively) and ends with the official military intervention of a third state. These interventions are the US-led intervention in Afghanistan on October 7, 2001, the Russian intervention at the request of Bashar al-Assad's government on September 30, 2015, and the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen on March 26, 2015. The decision to study this period, from the onset of the civil war until the military escalation, aims to examine proxy wars where states have not committed fully to ground or air operations[6].

To identity the sponsors present in the conflict, they must fulfill three criteria: (i) be a state, (ii) provide support to a party in a conflict, either the government of a state or an opposition organization, (iii) not be a primary warring party in that conflict. The fourth criterion concerns the proxy which must be (iv) a warring party in the conflict, either the government of a state or an opposition organization.

In all conflicts, and especially in Syria, the creation of VNSAs was a frequent occurrence (Phillips 2021). This analysis aims to study sponsorship decisions based on the proxy war between the two main parties: the government and the opposition party. Therefore, I include a fifth criterion (v) focusing on the VNSAs that the government primarily targets in its fighting. This decision accounts for the presence of multiple opposition parties in Syria, which vary in the threat they pose to the government and the extent the government engaged in battle with them. For that

[6]Notably, I use the definition of civil war from Fearon and Laitin (2003) to identify all the civil wars that have a start date after 1990, the end of the Cold War. The list of civil wars does not include low-intensity conflicts but only conflicts that meet the criteria of a civil war, and therefore their list of civil wars fits with my research aims to investigate only civil wars. I cross-reference the list from the UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset to minimize concerns over heterogeneity of cases, to not include instances of low-intensity intrastate conflicts, for example, coups, and not include cases where there was military intervention, either biased or non-biased, from the start of the civil war.

reason, I analyze the sponsorship relationships that were developed with the Free Syrian Army as an umbrella organization and Syrian insurgents[7]. I do not include here the SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces), which engages minimally in fighting with the government (only 2 percent from their side and only 0,1 percent from the government side) (Szekely 2023). Additionally, I do not consider ISIS, as the conflict involvement is 8 percent from the government side and 38 percent from ISIS[8] (Szekely 2023).

Finally, the coding of the sponsorship relationship is accumulated for the years under observation. This approach serves to evaluate the overall extent to which a specific foreign policy was consistently followed throughout the proxy war, rather than analyzing the decision-making process on a yearly basis.

QCA seeks to balance complexity and generalizability by identifying data patterns that reveal or approximate set-theoretic relationships (Ragin 2014, 88). Therefore, cases must be selected to be analytically comparable and to serve as empirical examples of the same analytical concept (Ebbinghaus 2005). In this paper, the conflicts where the sponsorship relationships occur are comparable, as they are all situated in the same region, experienced a proxy war phase, and culminated in military escalation. At the same time, the more diverse the cases, the better their configuration can be generalized, since it suggests that all observed empirical differences between cases are logically redundant (Rutten 2022). The state sponsors leading these sponsorship relationships are quite diverse, including great powers, regional powers, and small states.

Outcome: state sponsorship

The outcome to be explained is the state sponsorship decision in the conflicts of Afghanistan, Syria, and Yemen. How much support does a state have to provide for it to constitute a sponsorship relationship? I approach this question by first making a qualitative distinction between the types of support.

I present support to a proxy as part of the concept of intervention, laying out the different forms that it can manifest Display of Support, Technical and Economic Commitment, and Limited Ground and Air Commitment (Table 1). I understand that support is a concept that is part of a continuum that starts with low levels of support and reaches high

[7]Like the Ahram al-Islam among others.

[8]Szekely (2023) present the patterns of violence between the government, SDF, FSA, and ISIS in pp. 116-120. To measure the military violence between these actors, she used data from UCDP Georeferenced Event Dataset. Ralph Sundberg and Erik Melander, "Introducing the UCDP Georeferenced Event Dataset," *Journal of Peace Research* 50, no. 4 (July 1,2013): 523–32, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343313484347.

Table 1. Types of proxy support.

Display of support	Technical and economic commitment	Limited ground and air commitment
Diplomatic support (in the form of recognition)	Financial support	Access to territory
Political support (in the form of ideological support)	Intelligence sharing	Drone attacks
	Provision of logistics	Incognito military personnel
	Training	Border control military personnel (limited purpose engagement)
	Advisors to the proxy	Military personnel (limited purpose engagement)
	Weapons	

levels of support (Rauta 2021b). Furthermore, there are different ways a state can support a proxy. For example, states that want to provide *intense support* will deliver abundant Technical and Economic Commitment as well as Limited Ground and Air Commitment in combination with displaying their support to the international community, either by recognizing a new state or the right to self-declaration of a group. In the opposite scenario, when states want to have *low* support, then they will only provide Technical and Economic Commitment and not send any support from the Limited Ground and Air Commitment. This is what fuzzy sets can contribute to measuring a concept with a gradual measurement that varies from intense support to low support and can take into account all the different forms of support[9].

I start my typology with the Display of Support. States display support by providing political support, such as recognizing a group or providing ideological support for a group. Such support is low level because it has a low risk for the sponsor state, and it is often perceived as an indication of the intentions of a state that may or may not offer support to the proxy. Therefore, states can deny their involvement in a civil war since they are primarily offering only political support.

I continue with the level of Technical and Economic Commitment in which a sponsor state commits to providing support for a proxy without having to deploy any of its armed forces. That is usually the most common type of proxy war support provided because, again, a sponsor state can easily deny its participation in the civil war. It costs relatively little for the sponsor state, and it is, technically speaking, easy to provide. It also has a moderate impact on the fighting as it is not enough to bring continuous and decisive victories for the proxy.

The next level of support is the Limited Ground and Air Commitment, according to which the sponsor state provides military means to the proxy. It may also provide sanctuary, incognito military personnel, and in some cases, drone attacks. It is a more active commitment, the closest to direct

[9]In supplementary appendix, Table A2 presents the coding scheme for State Sponsorship (SUP).

Table 2. Sponsorship relationships and support to proxies.

State (Conflict) Proxy	Fuzzy value	Display of support	Technical & economic commitment	Limited ground & air commitment
Iran (A) Gov	0.9	Full	Full	Full
Pakistan (A) Taliban	0.9	Full	Full	Full
Iran (S) Gov	0.9	Full	Full	Full
Russia (S) Gov	0.9	Full	Full	Full
Saudi Arabia (Y) Gov	0.9	Full	Full	Full
Saudi Arabia (S) Syrian Insurgents	0.8	Full	Full	Partial
Russia (A) Gov	0.8	Partial	Full	Partial
Turkey (S) Syrian Insurgents	0.8	Full	Partial	Partial
US (S) Syrian Insurgents	0.8	Full	Full	Minor
India (A) Gov	0.7	Full	Full	None
Tajikistan (A) Gov	0.7	Partial	Partial	Minor
Uzbekistan (A) Gov	0.7	Partial	Partial	Partial
Saudi Arabia (A) Taliban	0.7	Full	Full	None
US (Y) Gov	0.7	Partial	Full	None
Iran (Y) Al Houthi	0.7	Partial	Full	Minor
Jordan (S) Syrian Insurgents	0.3	Full	Minor	None
China (A) Gov	0.1	Partial	Minor	None
Kyrgyzstan (A) Gov	0.1	None	Minor	None
Turkmenistan (A) Gov	0.1	Partial	None	None
US (A) Taliban	0.1	Partial	Minor	None
France (A) Gov	0.1	Minor	None	None
Jordan (Y) Gov	0.1	Partial	Minor	None

Note: Full indicates =1, partial indicates >0.7 support, minor indicates <0.3 and none is the absence of support. A = Afghanistan, S = Syria, Y = Yemen, Gov = Government side

intervention, yet it remains limited. This type of support is usually observed as we approach a more full-scale intervention. It is a more active kind of support, but the state can continue to dispute its involvement in the civil war. However, this support drains the resources of a state, and thus, is costly. It can affect the fighting between the warring parties more decisively, and the sponsor state seems to provide this commitment in order to gain more control of its proxy. To demonstrate, Table 2 summarizes the state support in Afghanistan, Syria, and Yemen.

Essentially, there are four groups of state sponsors. The first group involves those who provide intense support to their proxy across the spectrum of support. This group includes Saudi Arabia, who led the coalition intervention in Yemen on 26 March 2015 allowing for Saudi Arabia to build up its presence in the conflict with 150,000 soldiers and airstrikes. Also included in this category, the sponsorship relationship between Russia and the Assad regime is characterized as intense support. The second group of countries contains those who limited their involvement to Limited Air and Ground Commitment, meaning that they provided predominantly access to territory or drone attacks in the conflicts (Turkey and the US in Syria). The third group contains countries that supported their proxy up to a point, meaning that they preferred to not provide any support related to Limited Air and Ground Commitment. This decision may have

been related to these states' careful consideration of the risk of potential escalation. Finally, a fourth group of countries provided no material support (Kyrgyzstan, included here, did provide support but it was primarily a transit state rather than the provider of the support). Many of these countries provided a Display of Support predominantly through diplomatic means.

Explanatory conditions: data and calibration

The set-theoretic analysis contains four explanatory conditions: Rivalry (RV), Transnational Threat (TT), Opportunity (OP), and Credible Ally (CA)[10]. Table 3 lists the state sponsors and their proxies in the conflict and provides calibrated fuzzy values for the conditions included. This section summarizes the fuzzy-set calibration of the included conditions and outcome, that is, the transformation of qualitative and/or quantitative raw data into set-theoretic membership scores used for QCA (Mello 2022b; Ragin 2014; Schneider and Wagemann 2010).

Rivalry indicates the degree to which a state's rival is supporting a proxy in a conflict. This data is based on the peace scaly by Diehl, Goertz, and Gallegos (2021) which offers peace scale levels[11]. I used the "peace data" for this study as the existing prevalent datasets on rivalry are geared towards analyzing the relationship between states that have a history of conflict and, thus, have a precondition of rivalry. I measured rivalry at the bilateral level of the states that are external to the conflict, meaning that in the case of Syria I measure the rivalry between Saudi Arabia, who supported the Free Syrian Army, and Iran, who supported the opposing side. However, the peace data focuses on measuring how amicable state relationships are (or are not) allowing me to not only look at the negative side of the concept but also the positive. In this way, I avoid any issues with having a framework that leads to interstate war being present in the majority of cases. Additionally, this dataset contains more recent dyads as well as my cases.

Turning to measurement, as I mentioned, I focus on dyads that are on opposite sides. However, there are usually more external states than one. For example, in Afghanistan, there were nine state sponsors on the government's side and three on the VNSA side. In this case, I examine all the dyads from both sides for each state sponsor and determine whether their rival was involved in this proxy war. If one state, such as Pakistan,

[10]In supplementary appendix, Table A1 summarizes the calibration of conditions and outcome and Figure A1 the histograms of calibrated sets.

[11]The peace scale indicators are "Rivalry" that breaks into "Severe rivalry" and "Lesser rivalry", followed by "Negative peace" followed by "Positive peace" that breaks into "Warm peace" and "Security community" (Diehl, Goertz, and Gallegos 2021).

Table 3. States sponsors and explanatory conditions.

Case/State (Conflict) Proxy	Rivalry	Transnational Threat	Opportunity	Credible Ally
China (A) Gov	0.18	0.81	0.18	0.18
France (A) Gov	0.05	0.81	0.18	0.18
India (A) Gov	0.81	0.81	0.18	0.81
Iran (A) Gov	0.81	0.18	0.81	0.18
Kyrgyzstan (A) Gov	0.18	0.05	0.18	0.95
Russia (A) Gov	0.18	0.18	0.81	0.05
Tajikistan (A) Gov	0.18	0.81	0.18	0.95
Turkmenistan (A) Gov	0.18	0.05	0.18	0.18
Uzbekistan (A) Gov	0.18	0.81	0.18	0.95
Pakistan (A) Taliban	0.81	0.05	0.95	0.18
Saudi Arabia (A) Taliban	0.81	0.05	0.05	0.95
US (A) Taliban	0.18	0.95	0.18	0.05
Iran (S) Gov	0.81	0.18	0.18	0.05
Russia (S) Gov	0.81	0.18	0.95	0.05
Jordan (S) Syrian Insurgents	0.06	0.18	0.95	0.81
Saudi Arabia (S) Syrian Insurgents	0.81	0.05	0.18	0.81
Turkey (S) Syrian Insurgents	0.81	0.81	0.18	0.81
US (S) Syrian Insurgents	0.81	0.18	0.05	0.18
Jordan (Y) Gov	0.05	0.18	0.18	0.05
Saudi Arabia (Y) Gov	0.95	0.95	0.18	0.81
US (Y) Gov	0.81	0.18	0.18	0.81
Iran (Y) Al Houthi	0.05	0.18	0.81	0.05

Note: A: Afghanistan; S: Syria; Y: Yemen; Gov: Government side.

which supported the Taliban, has at least one dyad classified as a "severe rivalry" and more than one dyad classified as a "lesser rivalry", and no other dyad have "negative peace" scores, then it receives the highest point. If Pakistan had no dyad classified as a severe or lesser rivalry, and even if it had negative peace scores, it would receive bellow the threshold values[12]. For the cases that have been omitted, I used secondary literature detailing the relationship during the period under investigation.

Transnational threat (TT) reflects the degree to which a state perceives a transnational threat to its national security. To measure the TT condition, I developed a coding frame based on three criteria: the presence of VNSAs in the territory of the sponsor state, funding from an external state to the VNSAs, and the perception of a link between the external state and the VNSAs by the leader of the sponsor state. For example, Saudi Arabia's Minister of the Interior, Naif bin 'Abd Al-'Aziz, perceived that Iran was meddling with Saudi Arabia's internal affairs and accused Iran of backing the protests in the eastern city of Qatif (Peel 2011): "Evil surrounds Saudi Arabia from every direction. We have the problems of Iraq to the north, Yemen to the south, the problems of Iran, which is threatening Saudi Arabia, [to the east], and the problems of Africa to the west. But, praise God, despite all this, we are experiencing stability and progress." (Yehoshua 2011)

To code for the leader's perception, I examined official statements to determine the leader's perception in each case. These were cases where

[12]In supplementary appendix, Table A3 presents in detail the coding scheme for RV.

the Head of State or other officials discussed the VNSA and its actions within their territory in archival newswires, as exemplified above. Scores range from 0 (no mention at all) to 3 (a leader categorically accuses and condemns the actions of the third state in its territory). Hence, states with a score of 2 or higher are considered more aligned with the transnational threat value, whereas scores of 3 indicate full membership, and scores less than 1 indicate non-membership.[13]

In addition to perception, this condition also considers the material aspects of a transnational threat: the presence of a VNSA group in a country and support from an external state. Data was derived from the UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset on External Support (Meier et al. 2023), supplemented by manual coding from secondary literature for missing cases. Hence, countries with a VNSA group receiving support from an external state within their territory are considered fully within the transnational threat category, while those without such a presence are considered to be outside this category.

To measure the condition of a Credible Ally (CA), I developed a fuzzy-set coding scheme based on one necessary criterion: the ally must be a great power[14]. Then, I code for three alternative ways that a state might have a credible ally: the state sponsor and the great power having an official agreement for defense cooperation, the great power supplying weapons to the sponsor state, or the Head of State of the great power officially visiting the sponsor state. I employed this coding scheme because states may have official allies with whom they have signed bilateral defense agreements. Yet, they may also have allies who do not necessarily have agreements but maintain a security-related relationship where the great power sells military equipment to the sponsor state or where a potential alliance is developing.

To begin with, data for a formal alliance stems from the Defense Cooperation Agreement Dataset (DCAD) (Kinne 2020). In such agreements, states specify what kind of defence cooperation they want to establish (general is the most encompassing category, followed by procurement, training and exercise, research and finally commission). If a state sponsor has a defence cooperation agreement that includes general cooperation with a major power, then the respective state is coded as 1, if it has no agreement with a great power, it is assigned a score of 0[15]. The cross-over point is when a state has a defence agreement with a great power that only includes the training of armed forces, such cases are given a score

[13]In supplementary appendix, Table A4 presents in detail the coding scheme for TT.

[14]In supplementary appendix, Table A5 presents in detail the coding scheme for CA.

[15]The great powers are the US, the UK, France, Germany, Russia, China, and Japan.

of 0.5. Table 3 lists the calibrated fuzzy values for the conditions included. Then, I check dataset provided by SIPRI for any flows of weapons from any great power to a sponsor state that corresponds to the years of the proxy war. Finally, using archival newswires I code for any official visit to the sponsor state by the Head of State of the great power during the relevant years.

Opportunity (OP) refers to the degree to which economic interests are present in the conflict, as measured by trade flows and lootable resources available to the state in conflict[16]. To measure trade flows between the external state and the state in conflict, I relied on the dataset of the Correlates of War Project (Barbieri, Keshk, and Pollins 2009). Using a qualitative method of calibration, this data was converted into fuzzy values in which the decrease in the flow of trade between Afghanistan, Syria, or Yemen and an external state is considered a cross-over, resulting in fuzzy values of 0.50, an increase in the flow of trade was used as the upper boundary and no trade flow as the lower boundary. Data for the existence of lootable resources in the conflict was drawn from the dataset Lootable Resources in Conflict (Findley and Marineau 2015; Lujala 2010). Accordingly, states supporting a proxy in a conflict identified as producing lootable resources are considered fully inside the opportunity value.

Set-theoretic analysis

To interpret the results that lead to a sponsorship relationship, I begin with the analysis of the necessary conditions. Table 4 shows that none of the four conditions included passes the conventional threshold of 0.90 consistency (Schneider and Wagemann 2010) and, thus, none can be considered necessary for the outcome of state sponsorship in Afghanistan, Syria, and Yemen civil wars. This also holds for the absence (negation) of each of the included conditions.

The next stage of the analysis is the truth table which shows the individual conditions or combination of conditions that led to the outcome in each case. In Table 5, the outcome is labelled State Sponsorship (SUP), and the explanatory conditions are Rivalry (RV), Transnational Threat (TT), Opportunity (OP), and Credible Ally (CA). With its four conditions, this explanatory model entails 16 = rows of logically possible combinations of conditions. As indicated in the table, row 7 has been omitted, because it did not contain any empirical cases in this dataset. There are also logical remainder rows, that can be incorporated into the minimization to derive QCA solution terms (Mello 2022a).

[16]In supplementary appendix, Table A6 presents in detail the coding scheme for OP.

Table 4. Testing for necessary conditions.

	Presence of Condition			Absence of Condition		
Condition	Consistency	Coverage	Relevance	Consistency	Coverage	Relevance
Rivalry	0.754	0.972	0.975	0.451	0.542	0.670
Transnational threat	0.458	0.719	0.845	0.731	0.752	0.726
Opportunity	0.520	0.825	0.898	0.683	0.699	0.682
Credible ally	0.574	0.778	0.842	0.584	0.672	0.721

Table 5. Truth table for the outcome sponsorship relationship.

Conditions				Outcome				
RV	TT	OP	CA	SUP	*N*	Consistency	PRI	Cases
1	0	0	0	1	2	1	1	Iran (S), US (S)
1	0	1	0	1	3	1	1	Iran (A), Pakistan (A), Russia (S)
1	1	0	1	1	3	0.97	0.95	India (A), Turkey (S), Saudi Arabia (Y)
1	0	0	1	1	3	0.95	0.89	Saudi Arabia (A&S), US (Y)
0	1	0	1	1	2	0.92	0.79	Tajikistan (A), Uzbekistan (A)
0	0	1	1	0	1	0.83	0.37	Jordan (S)
0	0	1	0	1	3	0.82	0.66	Russia (A), Turkmenistan (A) Iran (Y)
0	0	0	1	0	1	0.80	0.24	Kyrgyzstan (A)
0	0	0	0	0	1	0.78	0.31	Jordan (Y)
0	1	0	0	0	3	0.56	0.12	China (A) France (A), US (A)

Note: RV: Rivalry; TT: Transnational Threat; OP: Opportunity; CA: Credible Ally; S: Syria; A: Afghanistan; Y: Yemen; bold cases have membership of >0.50 in the outcome, logical remainder row is omitted for presentational purposes.

Table 5 displays two key indicators of fit: 'consistency' indicating the degree to which a row (combination of conditions) is sufficient for the outcome SUP and 'PRI' (proportional reduction of conditions) which helps identify potentially ambiguous subset relationships. If PRI is significantly lower than consistency, it may signal unclear subset relations (Schneider and Wagemann 2012). In its logically minimized format, the truth table can be used to derive solution terms using a consistency cut-off point set by the researcher. The consistency threshold used here was 0.85, higher than the recommended minimum of 0.75 (Mello 2022b). The cut-off point denotes which rows are sufficiently consistent for inclusion in the Boolean minimization procedure[17]. This choice implies the inclusion of the top six in the minimization procedure, encompassing all cases with the outcome. Notably, this selection criterion ensures the absence of contradictory rows, meeting a crucial condition for the truth table analysis.

Finally, the set-theoretic analysis with QCA is the minimization of the truth table. Utilizing a Boolean minimization algorithm, the software (specifically, the 'QCA' package in R developed by Duşa 2018) generated three distinct solution terms. These solutions vary in their treatment of

[17]In supplementary appendix, Table A7 presents the truth table with logical remainders and Tables A8 and A9 present the conservative and parsimonious solutions respectively.

logical remainders, leading to solutions that range from parsimonious to more complex (Oana, Schneider, and Thomann 2021). In Table 6, I present the intermediate solution term for the outcome of state sponsorship in Afghanistan, Syria, and Yemen illustrating different combinations of conditions. I adhere to standard notation, where black circles ('•') denote the presence of a condition and crossed-out circles ('⊗') signify the absence of a condition. Beneath each pathway, the measures of fit, including coverage scores are provided indicating the extent to which the empirical data is explained by each path. Additionally, the table illustrates the state sponsor country associated with each path. The cases that are exclusively explained by a single path are indicated using bold font. The bottom section of the table provides the total solution consistency and coverage, as well as the number of models derived. The intermediate solution incorporated four directional expectations, which guide the inclusion of logical remainder rows, namely the presence of Rivalry (RV), Transnational Threat (TT), Opportunity (OP), and Credible Ally (CA) which were expected to contribute towards the outcome. The complete truth table, that indicates which logical remainders were used for the intermediate solution as simplifying assumptions is documented in the (online appendix Table A7).

Interpretation

In the interpretation of the results, QCA demands that the researcher relates the results back to the cases and the theoretical expectations when analyzing the solution (Schneider and Wagemann 2012). The results largely confirm the Rivalry, Transnational Threat, Opportunity, and Credible Ally hypotheses. What insights do the results provide regarding state sponsorship decisions?

It is evident that all solution paths include a state interest, whether it is related to standing (Path 1), security (Path 2), or economic factors (Path 3). Additionally, the absence of certain conditions also appears to influence sponsorship decisions. This is exemplified by the absence of both transnational threat and opportunity conditions in the standing-related path, the absence of opportunity in the security-related path, and the absence of transnational threat and a credible ally in the economic-related path. The analysis underscores the utility of a configurational perspective in analyzing state sponsorship decisions, as none of the state interests alone is sufficient to determine the outcome. In each of the three paths, the conditions interact with other driving factors (Path 2) and are influenced by the absence of other state interests (Paths 1 and 3).

In the case of standing interest (Path 1), a state may choose to engage in sponsorship based on Rivalry, particularly in the absence of a Transnational Threat and Opportunity. Examining the findings, we can

Table 6. Solution for the outcome SUP.

	Paths		
	1	2	3
Rivalry	•		
Transnational Threat	⊗	•	⊗
Opportunity	⊗	⊗	•
Credible Ally		•	⊗
Consistency	0.968	0.935	0.875
PRI	0.941	0.886	0.805
Raw Coverage	0.435	0.383	0.442
Un. Coverage	0.235	0.218	0.267
Covered cases/uniquely covered cases (bold)	US (S), Iran (S), Saudi Arabia (A), Saudi Arabia (S), US (Y)	Tajikistan (A), Uzbekistan (A), India (A), Turkey (S), Saudi Arabia (Y)	Russia (A), Turkmenistan (A), Iran (A), Pakistan (A), Russia (S), Iran (Y)
Solution Consistency	0.903		
PRI	0.869		
Coverage	0.924		
Model (Total)	M1 (1)		

Note: Black circles indicate the presence of a condition, crossed-out circles indicate its absence, bold cases have membership of >0.50 in the outcome.

identify two groups of states: great powers operating in regional contexts outside their immediate neighborhood (such as the US in Syria and Yemen) and regional rivals (like Saudi Arabia in Afghanistan and Syria, and Iran in Syria). For example, the US may support an opposing faction in a conflict to counteract a regional rival that is backing a proxy within the same conflict. This strategy aims not to overthrow regimes but rather to constrain regional rivals like Iran from gaining dominance in the region. The absence of a direct national threat may also explain why a great power prefers a sponsorship relationship with a proxy rather than direct military intervention. Similarly, the absence of the Opportunity condition can be attributed to economic interests ranking lower than standing interests in sponsorship decisions. Moreover, regional rivals may decide to sponsor a proxy when there is no risk of forfeiting an economic opportunity that might lead to possible escalation. Surprisingly, they also require the absence of a Transnational Threat, which may seem counterintuitive. However, a transnational threat relates to how a state sponsor perceives threats within its territory, specifically through the presence of a VNSA. This perception influences how much a conflict is seen as a threat to national security. For example, Saudi Arabia did not perceive the conflict in Syria as a national threat. Overall, this finding resonates with existing research on external support (Conrad 2011; Rooney 2018; Rudloff, Scott, and Blew 2013).

As for security interests (Path 2) becoming a factor in sponsorship decisions, the analysis suggests that this occurs in the absence of an opportunity. This finding confirms the expectation that states perceiving a Transnational Threat will choose to engage in a competitive environment, such as a conflict, against the state posing that threat only if they have

a Credible Ally to support them in case of escalation. Additionally, this decision is made even when there is no economic interest for the sponsor state in the conflict. Precisely this is what Saudi Arabia did in the case of Yemen, leading to a military escalation in 2015. In contrast, in Syria and Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia seemed to prioritize containing Iran's influence, which it perceived as a rival. However, in these civil wars, it did not perceive a simultaneous threat to its national security as it did with Yemen (Clausen 2018; Ghoble 2019; Phillips 2021). Moreover, in the Afghan civil war, the presence of a credible ally became central for many states in the region, which sought to establish military-to-military contracts with the US in the late 1990s, thereby establishing security ties with a great power that could respond to future security threats emanating from Afghanistan. This finding broadly resonates with studies that have emphasized how states in regional settings regard having a great power as an ally when facing threats to their national security as a push factor towards forming sponsorship relationships (Ashford 2017; Pande 2014).

Finally, for the economic interest (Path 3), Opportunity was associated with the absence of a Credible Ally and a Transnational Threat. This finding confirms the most prevalent narratives of sponsorship decisions, where a state decides to support a proxy based on their economic interests when there is no transnational threat to its national security. Russia's decision to support the Syrian regime against the Free Syrian Army came at a time when Russia was facing an economic crisis due to falling oil prices in the aftermath of the Ukrainian annexation. The Syrian civil war did not pose any national security threats to Russia, allowing it to explore a sponsorship relationship that was kept to a minimum ($464 million) and did not cause the defense budget to explode. Although it did not become a major economic opportunity, involvement in Syria boosted the mercenary business, particularly the Wagner Group, and provided political leverage that opened the door to increased economic cooperation with other countries in the region.

States seemed to provide more support when economic interests were involved. For example, Russia's involvement in Syria showed high levels of support with other sponsor states scoring high (three cases with a score above 0.9 and one case with 0.8) while only a few scorings lower (one case with 0.7, and one case with 0.1). This might suggest that when support is not aimed at countering a threat or a rival state, states might increase their level of support to achieve their economic interests. In contrast, when security interests were at stake, states seemed to predominantly provide lower levels of support, with three cases scoring 0.7 and only one case scoring 0.8, and another case scoring 0.9. The highest score was Saudi Arabia in Yemen likely because the conflict posed a pressuring threat due to its proximity. This observation indicates that state sponsors are more cautious when engaging in proxy wars related to their security

interests. Lastly, for standing interests, the observations are more varied, with one case scoring 0.9, two cases scoring 0.8, and two cases scoring 0.7. This suggests that support levels are more tailored to the specific conflict and its significance for the state's regional standing[18].

Sponsorship relationships are very common. In 2020, there were 56 unique conflicts worldwide, the highest number of active conflicts in a year since 1946 (Hegre and Strand 2021). More than half of these conflicts were internationalized civil wars, meaning that external states became involved by sponsoring proxies. To what extent can these findings be generalized? The theoretical framework presented here could help examine other conflicts, such as Ukraine, where sponsorship relationships were established with Russia and the VNSAs active in the conflict during its initial phase (2014-2016), leading to Russia's military aggression in 2022. Additionally, this theoretical framework can be applied to conflicts involving humanitarian interventions preceded by a proxy war phase, such as in Burundi (1993-2003) or Sudan (2001-2007). For instance, the civil war in Burundi was centered around grievances between the Hutu and Tutsi ethnic groups. Yet, states like the Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda, and France developed sponsorship relationships with opposing parties in the conflict. By 2003, the African Mission in Burundi (AMIB) began its mandate, which turned into a UN operation mission in Burundi (ONUB) the following year with some of these state sponsors present with troops in the mission. Finally, future research should also pay attention to cross-regional differences. This theoretical model could be further adopted to study sponsorship relationships in conflicts in other regions, such as Africa, providing a test for the theory.

This analysis has taken the first steps towards filling a gap in our understanding of what motivates states to support proxies in external conflicts that has been identified explicitly in previous studies but which had not yet been addressed using comparative data on sponsorship decisions in conflicts, especially in cases where military escalation occurred over time. (Karlén et al. 2021; Wyss and Michel 2023). By studying proxy wars through QCA patterns that identify which international, regional, and domestic considerations came into play in these cases, this study showcases how states are likely to reach the decision to sponsor a proxy.

Conclusion

States revel in influencing the preferences of other states. Manipulating the behavior of a third state so that it serves a specific interest or, better

[18]In supplementary appendix, Tables A10 and A11 present the robustness tests.

yet, in order to gain an amenable ally that is willing to fight for a common cause are not just desirable results that great powers strive for in particular, rather it is a recurring instance in international politics with many historical applications (Marshall 2016; Mearsheimer 2003). As the scholarship on state sponsorship demonstrated, proxy war is a type of internationalized internal war that involves international actors supporting opposing sides in a civil war (Karlén and Rauta 2023; Rauta 2021b; Tellidou 2024). In this paper, I argue that sponsorship decisions are closely tied to the formulation of foreign policies employed by states in competitive environments, such as conflicts. I present an integrative theoretical framework for analyzing contemporary proxy wars.

This paper analyzed state sponsorship decisions relating to conflicts in Afghanistan, Syria, and Yemen through a comprehensive approach that integrates research on state sponsorship with hypotheses related to Rivalry, Transnational Threat, Opportunity, and the presence of Credible Ally. By developing a multicausal model, this study aims to explain the foreign policy choices of states that support proxy actors. The findings from the configurational analysis indicate several key insights. First, states often support proxies out of economic interests when there is no active rival in the conflict or when they do not perceive a Transnational Threat to their security. This observation is consistent with existing theories that highlight economic incentives as a primary driver of state support for proxy wars, especially when no immediate security threats are apparent. Second, the analysis underscores a novel perspective on security threats in relation to the presence of Credible Ally. Regional states, for instance, may engage in sponsorship relationships even in the absence of direct economic interests in the conflict, leveraging the support of credible allies to enhance their strategic positioning. Third, great powers frequently intervene by backing proxies in conflicts involving their rivals, aiming to preserve the regional status quo. Such sponsorship decisions often serve as a mechanism for these states to balance their foreign policy objectives. Conversely, regional states may also opt to sponsor proxies when their rivals are engaged in conflict, provided these rivals do not pose simultaneous transnational threats to their own territories. Overall, this study provides a nuanced understanding of state behavior in sponsoring proxies, illustrating how various factors—economic interests, security concerns, and strategic alliances—affect these decisions in complex geopolitical environments.

These insights could have profound implications for the foreign policies of state sponsorship in civil wars. As the analysis of the conflicts in Afghanistan, Syria, and Yemen has demonstrated, states support proxies for various reasons, and rivalry is just one strategic reason among several. In light of the results of prior studies, these findings contribute to the

analysis of state sponsorship that considers the diverse range of goals and strategic realities that states may face when they decide to support a proxy.

This study has demonstrated the analytical advantage of QCA in providing analytical pathways to state sponsorship. Some prior studies about state sponsorship have tended to rely on statistical work to study the patterns that lead external states to become involved in conflicts (Anderson 2019; San-Akca 2017; Sawyer, Cunningham, and Reed 2017). In contrast, other studies about proxy wars have conducted detailed case studies of complex conflicts that enriched the empirical record and presented nuanced analyses of these conflicts (Carson 2018; Hughes 2014; Krieg and Rickli 2019; Mumford 2013). Building on QCA allowed the incorporation of innovative inferences on the specific interactions that determine state sponsorship decisions. Applying this approach in future research will contribute to the further development of a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of sponsorship relationships during proxy wars.

Prospective studies could further investigate the interaction between domestic and international factors that shape sponsorship decisions. Exploring causal mechanisms could crystallize a state's decision-making process, particularly how its initial sponsorship of a specific actor influences subsequent decisions for either de-escalation or escalation. This approach would facilitate comparative analyses of how foreign policies of sponsorship decisions evolve over time. Moreover, the theoretical framework of state sponsorship could be extended to include other actors as sponsors, such as diasporas and non-state actors that support proxies in conflict. Adapting this framework could broaden our understanding of how various entities engage in proxy relationships and contribute to conflict dynamics.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my gratitude to Ulrich Krotz for his invaluable feedback and support. Special thanks to Sabine Carey for hosting and organizing the Publication Support Series. I also deeply appreciate the encouragement and feedback of Sara Daub, Winnie Xia, Shirin Tumenbaeva, Maureen Fubara, Nadine O'Shea, Isadora Gotts, and Alina Isakova, all of whom contributed to the successful publication of this paper. As a visiting fellow at the Cluster of Excellence "Religion and Politics" at the University of Muenster, I received valuable feedback during the final stages of this work and proofreading support from Julie Davies. This article was generously supported for Open Access by the Central European University. Lastly, I am grateful to the three anonymous reviewers for their insightful and constructive feedback.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the European University Institute under the doctoral program in Political and Social Sciences by the Cluster of Excellence "Religion and Politics" at the University of Muenster under a visiting fellowship and the Central European University under the Global Teaching fellowship.

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