

Claremont McKenna College

A Slight Re-telling of the David and Goliath Story: Surprising Power Dynamics in Proxy Relationships

submitted to
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Abstract

This thesis discusses how local forces, despite being the weaker actor in a proxy relationship, manipulate external powers' support to pursue their own objectives. Three factors – practical advantage, relative will, and diverging objectives – explain this counterintuitive power dynamic. First, local forces have better local knowledge, more extensive networks, and greater legitimacy, which give them leverage and make them desirable partners. Second, local forces' involvement is often existential rather than selective; unlike external powers, local forces are thus unconstrained by domestic political vulnerabilities. This enables them to close the significant power gap with external powers. Third, local forces' objectives may diverge from their sponsors', creating incentives for exploitation and manipulation of external support to pursue their own agenda, regardless of the external powers' interests. These three factors effectively explain the dynamic between the Soviet Union and Cuba during the Angolan civil war and the relationship between the U.S. and the Kurds in the fight against ISIS. Cuba mostly operated within the Soviet strategic parameters, while at the same time manipulating Soviet support to forward its own interests in Africa. The Kurds manipulated U.S. support while fighting ISIS to acquire territories and to pursue autonomy and independence, goals inconsistent with US interests. Further research is still needed to identify under what conditions local partners will wield this counterintuitive power, since there also are cases in which this does not take place.

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Chapter 1: A Re-telling of the David and Goliath Story

The story about how David defeated Goliath, the giant, by throwing a stone at Goliath's weak spot on his head, has been frequently used by scholars to demonstrate how the weak defeat the strong. This paper, however, focuses on another intriguing question that also concerns the dynamic between the weak and the strong in the international system. In order to better illustrate the question, it is useful to apply the setting of David and Goliath to a new storyline. Instead of David challenging Goliath, David would be fighting one of his own kind. The conflict would then catch Goliath's attention and lure him to intervene through supporting David. Despite Goliath's power advantage in this relationship, he could not fully control David. In fact, Goliath is sometimes even susceptible to David's manipulation.

What happens in this story describes the relationship between external powers and local forces in a variety of intervention cases. Through supporting and relying on local forces, the external power intends to intervene and achieve certain objectives in the local sphere without deploying its own armed forces.¹ John Mearsheimer defines such strategy as offshore balancing.² Mearsheimer is a strong advocate for offshore balancing and perceives it as the best strategy to prevent the emergence of a regional hegemon at a relatively low cost, to counter the rise of terrorism, and to control nuclear proliferation.³ Richard Nixon made a similar argument in his famous "silent majority" speech about the Vietnam war in November 1969, in which he introduced a strategy shift from "Americanization" to "Vietnamization."⁴ Instead of the U.S. taking the lead to fight the war, Nixon wanted the South Vietnamese army to take control over the conflict.⁵ The U.S. would start to withdraw forces from Vietnam but

¹ John J. Mearsheimer, "Imperial by Design." *The National Interest*, no. 111 (2011): 18, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42897726>.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 31-33.

⁴ "Vietnamization," Miller Center, October 11, 2017, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/educational-resources/vietnamization>.

⁵ "Address to the Nation on the War in Vietnam - November 3, 1969 » Richard Nixon Foundation," Richard Nixon Foundation, January 19, 2018, <https://www.nixonfoundation.org/2017/09/address-nation-war-vietnam-november-3-1969/>.

increase the provision of training and equipment for the South Vietnamese army.⁶ Nixon said in his speech that this strategy was inspired by the words of a leader of another Asian country, who said “when you are trying to assist another nation defend its freedom, U.S. policy should be to help them fight the war but not to fight the war for them.”⁷ The incentive to increase support for the South Vietnamese army was that the U.S. could withdraw faster and sooner as South Vietnam became stronger.⁸

While, in theory, Mearsheimer’s offshore balancing and Nixon’s Vietnamization are designed in a way that enables external powers to effectively achieve their objectives, in reality, it is not always the case. As we have described in the modified version of the David and Goliath story, there is no guarantee that the external power has complete control over local forces, whom it intends to use to achieve its objectives. In fact, the local forces, though being the weaker actor in the partnership, could even manage to manipulate external support to forward their own interests. This paper intends to explain why and how this rather counterintuitive dynamic could happen.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

Chapter 2: The Theory Chapter

This chapter builds a theoretical foundation for this paper and argues that local forces can manipulate external powers in cases of intervention mainly due to three reasons. First, local forces have practical advantages over external powers, in terms of more extensive local presence, better knowledge and deeper understanding of the local politics, economy, and society, well-established local networks and higher legitimacy in the local sphere. Second, an internal conflict can pose an imminent threat to the survival of local forces but not to that of the external powers.⁹ The different levels of stakes involved would shape the actors' relative will to fight and subject them to various levels of political vulnerability.¹⁰ Local forces would be fighting for survival, which results in strong resolve to fight and few controversies over the necessity of fighting.¹¹ External powers, however, would only be fighting for geopolitical interests, which requires a swift victory to justify the purpose of intervention and the allocation of resources.¹² Third, it is almost impossible for the objectives of external powers and local forces to be perfectly aligned. The relationship between the two actors then faces the problem of agency slack.¹³ If the local forces' objectives significantly diverge from those of the external powers, they would have strong incentives to manipulate the external support to pursue their own objectives, which could actually contradict the external powers' interests.¹⁴ These three factors will be discussed in more detail and then applied to specific cases in the following chapters.

Compared to the external power, local forces are not only better informed about local politics, economy and society but also better connected with the local community. The

⁹ Andrew Mack, "Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars: The Politics of Asymmetric Conflict," *Power, Strategy and Security*, 1983, 132, doi:10.1515/9781400886326-008.

¹⁰ Ivan Arreguín-Toft, "How the Weak Win Wars," *International Security*, 2001, 96, doi:10.1017/cbo9780511521645.

¹¹ Mack, 132.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Idean Salehyan, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, and David E. Cunningham, "Explaining External Support for Insurgent Groups," *International Organization* 65, no. 04 (2011): 714, doi:10.1017/s0020818311000233.

¹⁴ Ibid.

possession of these crucial resources gives the local forces a practical advantage over the external power. Philipp Münch and Alex Veit argue that the access to a range of “decisive resources like information, protection or community support” makes local actors “necessary for external actors to achieve certain ends in the local sphere.”¹⁵ Local actors in possession of these resources that help external actors achieve their goals are defined as intermediaries.¹⁶ Münch and Veit also point out that external power has relied on intermediaries to project and retain power in the local sphere since the era of colonization.¹⁷ During colonization, colonial intermediaries, including chiefs, soldiers, and translators, facilitated the colonial power to rule at a relatively low cost and helped sustain the long-distance ruling.¹⁸ In contemporary efforts of peacebuilding or nation building, external powers have continued to partner with local forces both to create a sense of “efficiency and sustainability” in the minds of the western audience and to reduce costs that would otherwise be necessary to either contain the conflict or govern the territory and population.¹⁹ Similar to Münch and Veit’s arguments, Idean Salehyan, Kristian Gleditsch, and David Cunningham also argue that among many reasons why external powers support local forces, local advantage, including more legitimacy, better information sources, and less pushback from the community, has always been important in the external actor’s calculations.²⁰

While scholars mentioned above argue that local forces’ practical advantage over local resources makes them desirable partners for external powers, Jennifer Taw makes a similar argument but from a different perspective by arguing that without a thorough understanding of the local power dynamic, all foreign policies, including intervention, could only achieve a

¹⁵ Philipp Münch and Alex Veit, "Intermediaries of Intervention: How Local Power Brokers Shape External Peace- and State-Building in Afghanistan and Congo," *International Peacekeeping* 25, no. 2 (2017): 270, doi:10.1080/13533312.2017.1411808.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 267.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 270.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Salehyan et al, 714.

filtered effect in the target country.²¹ Taw argues that “no foreign policy, regardless of intent, is immune to the effects of internal politics; a policy’s success will depend to at least some extent – and sometimes entirely – on how the many actors within the country at which it is directed respond.”²² Policies that ignore the effect of the dynamic in the target state could easily result in a “distributive domestic response,” which means that the intended outcome of a foreign policy is filtered through the response of local actors competing for power and influence.²³ Local actors can influence the policy outcome through actions that “slow, block or pervert” the implementation of policies regardless of their objectives.²⁴ The extent and under what circumstances that the distributive domestic response would filter the intended outcome of a policy depend on three factors: the types of political system, the level of stability and the number of actors in the target state.²⁵ According to Taw’s model that focuses on these three factors, the policy-producing state would have the least control over the outcome of its foreign policy when the policy is implemented in a failed state, where the widespread instability can create abundant opportunities for the external power to upset the “relative balance of power among domestic actors” and the large number of actors present in the failed state can further complicate the task of distinguishing which actors are influencing the policy outcome in what ways.²⁶ The instability and power vacuum in failed states tend to lure external powers to intervene and project power.²⁷ What comes with these opportunities of exploitation, however, are local complexities and challenges, as a result of the lack of central authority and the large number of actors. These will intensely filter the external powers’ policy outcome.²⁸ In other words, if the distributive domestic response is not

²¹ Jennifer Morrison Taw, "Distributive Domestic Response," *Review of International Studies* 37, no. 03 (August 26, 2010): 1359, doi:10.1017/s0260210510000926.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 1360-1363.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 1361.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 1363.

understood, it cannot be mitigated or compensated, which makes it more likely for “internal power politics to trump international power politics.”²⁹

In the case of an intervention, the intended outcome is for the local forces to stay under the external powers’ control and utilize resources effectively to fulfill the external powers’ objectives. If the external powers have insufficient knowledge about the local politics and society, they may intervene blindly, which creates opportunities for the local actors to use their practical advantage to manipulate the resources provided by the external actors to forward their own interests.³⁰ In addition, Münch and Veit also argue that external powers tend to favor local actors that are not only more competent, in terms of intelligence and resources, but also more well connected in the society.³¹ Although more competent local actors are more likely to deliver the desirable outcome, they are also more capable and mindful of protecting their own positions, and therefore, less dependent on external support and more difficult to control.³²

The second reason that local forces can manipulate external powers despite power disadvantage is about the relative will to fight. Ivan Arreguín-Toft and Andrew Mack’s discussion on how weak actors defeat strong actors in asymmetric conflicts can provide important insights into this argument.³³ When the power disparity between the strong and the weak in a conflict is significant, the conflict is described as asymmetric.³⁴ Arreguín-Toft coded a conflict asymmetric when the strong actor’s power, which is comprised of armed forces and population, is greater than or equal to five times the weak actor’s power.³⁵ Mack describes the asymmetric relationship as “a function of the differences in level of industrial

²⁹ Ibid., 1381.

³⁰ Ibid., 1364-1370.

³¹ Münch and Veit, 270.

³² Ibid.

³³ Arreguín-Toft and Mack.

³⁴ Arreguín-Toft, 96.

³⁵ Ibid.

and technological capability of the two sides” and defines it as a “resource asymmetry.”³⁶ While it is intuitive to assume that power assures victory, and consequently, strong actors should almost always win, statistics and historical evidence show exceptions. Weak actors won around 30 percent of asymmetric conflicts between 1800 and 1998, and the percentage of the number of conflicts won by weaker actors has increased over time.³⁷ Examples in which weaker actors win wars include the first Indochina War, the Vietnam War, and the Algerian War.³⁸ To explain this rather counterintuitive outcome of these asymmetric wars, Mack and Arreguín-Toft have each proposed an argument.

Mack argues that the significant power disparity makes the conflict outcome more salient to the weak than to the strong, which results in an interest asymmetry and a difference in the level of political vulnerability.³⁹ For the strong actor, its overall power advantage guarantees its homeland security because, according to Mack, the weak actor does not have sufficient capability to launch an invasion.⁴⁰ For the weak actor, however, the strong opponent can invade and even occupy its territory, which threatens its survival.⁴¹ While the weak actor’s interest in the conflict is about survival, the strong actor’s interest depends on the conflict’s “proximity to major power centers and intense conflict zones, and the risks it poses both regionally and globally.”⁴² Similar to Mack, David Carment and Dane Rowlands also argue that the salience of the conflict to an actor is “largely exogenous and at best only marginally sensitive to policy choices or manipulation.”⁴³ In other words, even if policymakers intend to manipulate perceptions, the salience of a conflict is derived from “a

³⁶ Mack, 133.

³⁷ Arreguín-Toft, 97.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 118.

³⁹ Mack, 130.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 128.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁴² David Carment and Dane Rowlands, "Three's Company: Evaluating Third-Party Intervention in Intrastate Conflict," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 42, no. 5 (October 1998): 579, doi:10.1177/0022002798042005003.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

geostrategic context,” which should be widely known and stable in the short-term.⁴⁴ If the conflict is widely known to be of relatively low salience to the actor, the strong actor’s involvement lacks political credibility.⁴⁵ In general, Mack argues that the weak fight a “total” war whereas the strong only fight a “limited” war.⁴⁶

Due to the asymmetry in salience and interest, the two actors would adopt different methods and attitudes toward the war. The weak actor would perceive the war as a total war of survival, which then justifies the mobilization of all armed forces, population and resources.⁴⁷ Such an imminent threat would also provoke a strong sense of nationalism and unite the previously divided or even hostile domestic groups to fight against the common enemy.⁴⁸ The strong actor, however, would face a limited war, which makes a full-scale mobilization and deployment politically impossible and unnecessary.⁴⁹ Constituents would be more concerned about the opportunity cost of the resources allocated for the war when it is not an issue of survival. More importantly, given the significant power disparity, the strong actor would expect to achieve its objectives with limited commitments in a short period of time.⁵⁰ If this were not the case, and the expected outcome were continuously delayed while the strong actor kept on building up its efforts, the strong actor would face a range of criticisms and doubts from domestic political and social institutions questioning whether to continue engaging in the war.⁵¹ Facing these domestic controversies, the strong actor can either increase forces, which would generate more costs and the victory is not guaranteed, or withdraw, which may risk looking incompetent and damage its credibility.⁵² Mack points out that strong democratic actors are more vulnerable to domestic constraints because, unlike

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 580.

⁴⁶ Mack, 132.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 133.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 132.

⁵⁰ Arreguín-Toft, 105.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

totalitarian states, a democracy cannot censor the media or block information.⁵³ Although democracies would face more pressure from domestic checks and balances, the media, and the public, totalitarian states can also be forced to analyze the costs and benefits of the war when ruling elites' interests are threatened.⁵⁴

Arreguín-Toft mostly agrees with Mack that relative interests explain strong actors' domestic political vulnerability, yet he points out that Mack's argument is the "weakest when explaining actor interests as a function of relative power, and strongest when explaining strong-actor failure as a consequence of political vulnerability."⁵⁵ Arreguín-Toft challenges the connection between relative power and relative interest by arguing that although the outcome of one distant war does not pose any threat to the strong actor's survival, a defeat in an asymmetric conflict may be perceived as a signal of weakness and incompetence that would threaten its leading position.⁵⁶ If the perception of a one-time defeat is "intensified by domino logic," the strong actor might panic about the effect of cumulative loss on its survival.⁵⁷ Additionally, Arreguín-Toft argues that the strong actor's resolve to win the war would drastically increase after it enters the war even if its interests are initially peripheral.⁵⁸ In sum, the power disparity does not always result in an interest asymmetry.⁵⁹ When the conflict is perceived as being more important, the strong actor would face fewer political constraints that would otherwise weaken the actor's will to fight.⁶⁰ Since Mack's interest asymmetry argument seems to have oversimplified the problem, Arreguín-Toft introduces strategic interaction to refine Mack's theory and to better explain "the conditions under which political vulnerability causes strong actors to lose asymmetric wars."⁶¹

⁵³ Mack, 143.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 143-144.

⁵⁵ Arreguín-Toft, 99.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 99.

Arreguín-Toft's strategic interaction theory argues that weak actors are more likely to win asymmetric wars through opposite-approach interactions.⁶² He separates attack and defense strategies into direct attack/defense and indirect attack/defense, in which direct approaches target the enemy's capacity to fight whereas indirect approaches aim at the enemy's will to fight.⁶³ When the two actors interact using same approach (direct-direct, indirect-indirect), the situation favors the strong because the relative material power advantage enables it to target the weak actor's army and defeat it quickly.⁶⁴ On the other hand, when the two actors interact using opposite approach (direct attack-indirect defense, indirect attack-direct defense), the weak can manage to deflect the strong actor's power advantage and prolong the conflict, which exposes the strong to domestic pressure.⁶⁵ Statistics support this argument: strong actors won 76% of the asymmetric wars dominated by same-approach interactions between 1800 and 1998, while weak actors won 63% of the conflicts dominated by opposite-approach interactions.⁶⁶ To sum up, Arreguín-Toft builds his argument on top of Mack's theory and argues that weak actors are more likely to win asymmetric wars through opposite-approach interactions, which effectively target and attack the strong actor's political vulnerability – the main reason why the strong actors pull out of a war prior to achieving their objectives.⁶⁷

To apply Mack and Arreguín-Toft's arguments to the relationship between external powers and local forces, we would notice that the relative will and political vulnerability arguments are still applicable even though the local forces are not fighting the external powers in an asymmetric war. Instead, they form an alliance against other local powers. The local forces would still have a stronger resolve to fight because a defeat in the internal

⁶² Ibid., 110.

⁶³ Ibid., 100-104.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 112.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 97.

conflict can pose an imminent threat to their survival. The security of the external powers' territories and populations, however, are not under threat. While the power disparity does reflect the external powers' better military and technological capability, their limited interests and high expectations also make them more politically vulnerable. Just as Mack and Arreguín-Toft argued, the external powers would face pressure from their domestic political system demanding a quick victory to justify the resources and personnel allocated for the intervention. When it becomes obvious that the intervention faces significant doubts from the intervening country, the local forces would not expect a long-term relationship, and therefore, would not mind sabotaging the relationship through manipulation if given the chance.⁶⁸

Apart from the local forces' practical advantage over local resources and their stronger will to fight, the third factor that may lead to manipulation is the misalignment of objectives. Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham use the principal-agent framework to explain external support for rebel groups and argue that external support for rebel groups depends on the calculations of both the supply side – the external power – and the demand side – the rebel groups.⁶⁹ Although the focus of Salehyan et al.'s article is on external support for rebel groups, the principal-agent framework is also applicable and useful in explaining the relationship between external powers and local forces, including both rebel groups and local governments, in a broader sense. On the supply side, external powers may plan to achieve a variety of objectives through intervention, such as to project influence on other states' behaviors and policies, to promote certain values and ideologies, and to shape the outcome of an internal conflict.⁷⁰ To achieve these objectives, external powers can use coercive bargaining, including sanctions and embargo, launch an interstate war, or “delegate the

⁶⁸ Carment and Rowland, 579-580.

⁶⁹ Salehyan et al, 714.

⁷⁰ Hans J. Morgenthau, "To Intervene or Not to Intervene." *Foreign Affairs* 45, no. 3 (1967): 427-29. doi:10.2307/20039247.

conflict to local forces.”⁷¹ Salehyan et al. argue that similar to coercion and invasion, delegating the conflict to local forces is “a tactic that states may employ in weakening their enemies.”⁷² While choosing from their toolkit of tactics, states would conduct a cost-benefit analysis on each tactic because all choices “entail important trade-offs.”⁷³

Compared to an interstate war, intervention through supporting local forces provides external powers with mainly two advantages. First, delegating the conflict to local forces generates fewer costs, in terms of both economic resources and casualties, than starting a war.⁷⁴ While intervention might still lead to skepticisms over its necessity in the domestic political system, it would generate far less “domestic war weariness and discontent” than dragging a state into an open war.⁷⁵ Second, the relative secrecy of intervention protects the external power from international condemnation and pressure.⁷⁶ Since it is much more difficult to find concrete evidence to prove the link between an external power and a local force, the international society is less likely to react in a defensive way that challenges the legitimacy of the external power’s presence.⁷⁷ Additionally, it is not the external powers’ soldiers on the ground, which makes it a lot easier for the external powers to distance themselves from the local forces in cases of brutality and war crimes.⁷⁸

While these advantages seem to make delegation a desirable choice, there are always trade-offs. Different from an interstate war, where the principals – the external powers – have full control over their objectives and the means to achieve such objectives, delegation to agents – the local forces – can lead to “potential agency slack or loss of autonomy.”⁷⁹ The problem for agency slack would be the most severe if the local forces’ objectives and

⁷¹ Salehyan et al, 712.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid., 713.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 714.

preferences do not align with that of the external powers.⁸⁰ Salehyan et al. argue that in order to reduce the potential for a loss of agency, external powers should choose to support forces that have similar ethnicity, religion, language or culture.⁸¹ However, such choices are not always available, and the alignment of objectives is not guaranteed even if the principals and the agents share those characteristics. Besides, in a constantly changing fighting environment, local forces' preferences and objectives could easily change. When the problem of agency slack happens, the external powers start to lose autonomy and control over their "foreign policies and the conduct of the conflict."⁸² Local forces could use the resources provided by their external sponsors to pursue their own interests that do not necessarily align with their sponsors.⁸³ According to Salehyan et al., the agency slack can take many forms, including "devoting suboptimal effort to the conflict with the resources provided; engaging in unwelcome or egregious behavior such as war crimes; diverting resources toward other, undesired, objectives; or in some cases, using the resources supplied against the patron itself."⁸⁴ In addition, states are more likely to choose interstate war over delegation when the internal conflict is "absolutely critical to the vital interests of the state."⁸⁵ As mentioned above in the arguments of Mack, Carment, and Rowlands, the salience of the conflict affects the relative interest of the state, which is consistent with a state's geopolitical interests, and consequently, widely known and not susceptible to politicians' manipulation.⁸⁶ As a result, a state's decision to delegate the conflict to local forces is by itself a signal of lack of interests, which makes it hard to convince the local forces to obey the external powers' orders in exchange for resources in the long run.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid., 715.

⁸² Ibid., 714.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Mack, 142.

On the demand side, local forces also face a trade-off in making the decision of whether to accept support from an external power. According to Salehyan et al., local forces have two priorities that can be in conflict with each other. First, they want to maximize resources at their disposal to win the war.⁸⁷ As mentioned above, Salehyan et al. focus on the rebel organizations and they point out that compared to the national government, rebel groups are usually at a resource disadvantage.⁸⁸ To broaden the scope of this argument, almost all local forces are at a resource disadvantage compared to external powers, which means that local forces would always have something to gain from the external powers' support. Correspondingly, when the power disparity is significant, the external powers would have a lot to offer, including "access to money, equipment, training, sanctuary, and personnel."⁸⁹ These resources are especially valuable to local forces at the initial stage of the conflict, since it can be hard for the local forces to "mobilize a significant military capacity" in a short period of time.⁹⁰ And a continual supply of these resources from the external powers would still be beneficial because it would "significantly augment the resource base."⁹¹ The second thing that local forces would want is to retain autonomy over their objectives and their actions of achieving these objectives.⁹² Salehyan et al. argue that the rebel groups' objectives could range from gaining more political power, including "greater role in the national government or more territories," to acquiring more economic benefits, including "personal enrichment and material rewards."⁹³ Although the resources provided by external powers are attractive, they always "come with strings attached."⁹⁴ The principal will want "some degree of control over the rebel's agenda," which forces the rebel groups to give up "some control

⁸⁷ Salehyan et al, 715.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 716.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid., 715.

⁹³ Ibid., 716.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

over their aims and tactics.”⁹⁵ Besides, relying too much on the external power also puts the local forces at the risk of looking incompetent and losing legitimacy if the local community perceive them as “pawns of a foreign power.”⁹⁶

Due to the tradeoff between resources and autonomy, Salehyan et al. argue that local forces would prefer domestic support base over external patronage.⁹⁷ For stronger local forces that have more access to domestic resources and control over tax revenues from controlled territories, the costs of external patronage would outweigh the benefits, which gives them fewer incentives to accept external support.⁹⁸ For weaker actors that are not able to mobilize enough funding or personnel, they would be more willing to exchange autonomy for resources.⁹⁹ However, given the embedded conflict between the local forces’ two main objectives, they would always have incentives to fight for more autonomy when given the chance. The incentives would be stronger if the objectives and preferences between the external powers and local forces are severely misaligned.¹⁰⁰ In this case, the foreign sponsorship would be likely to “entail unwelcome constraints” on local forces through forcing them to act in a way that achieve the external powers’ objectives at the cost of the local forces’ benefits.¹⁰¹ While local forces endure more unwelcome constraints and gain more power through external support, they would have both the motivation and the capacity to deflect the external control and to manipulate external resources to forward their own interests at the expense of their external sponsors.¹⁰²

To sum up this chapter, there are mainly three reasons why local actors, though at a power disadvantage, could manipulate external sponsors’ support. First, local forces have a

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 717.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 716.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 717.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid., 714.

practical advantage, meaning better understanding of local politics and better local network, over external powers. As demonstrated by the alliance between external powers and local forces during colonization and state building, access to local intelligence and resources creates strong incentives for external powers to support local actors. The other side of the argument is that without sufficient understanding of the local politics, external powers' foreign policy would be filtered through the power struggle among local actors and only achieve a limited outcome. In order to achieve the intended outcome of their intervention policy, external powers are motivated to rely on local forces for intelligence and connections, which gives local forces power over external actors and exposes external actors to the risk of manipulation. Besides, external powers would prefer to partner with more competent local forces, which makes them less dependent on external support, more mindful of their own position, and therefore, more difficult to control.

Second, compared to external powers, local forces have stronger resolve to fight and suffer from fewer political vulnerability. Local forces have stronger resolve to fight because they have higher stakes involved in the conflict – a defeat in the conflict can annihilate the entire local force but pose no threat to external powers' homeland. Due to the significant power disparity between external powers and local forces, external powers would be more politically vulnerable, as their constituents would expect a swift victory to justify the purpose of intervention and the allocated resources and personnel. If external powers fail to achieve the expected outcome efficiently, they would then face pressure and doubts from their domestic political system, some of which would demand a termination of intervention. Once the local forces perceive that the alliance with external powers is not a long-term relationship, they would not put in efforts to maintain the relationship and would be tempted to sabotage it through manipulation if given the chance.

Third, the misalignment of objectives between external powers and local forces subjects the relationship to the problem of agency slack. For external powers (the principal), delegating the conflict to local actors has mainly two advantages – lower costs and more secrecy – with a drawback of less control over their objectives and the actions of achieving them. For local forces (the agent), the tradeoff is between accepting resources from external sponsors and sacrificing autonomy over their own agenda, since resources mostly come with strings attached. Given the inherent conflict between resources and autonomy in the principal-agent framework, local forces would always have incentives to break free from external control and to gain more autonomy. These incentives would be stronger if the objectives of the two groups are severely misaligned. Even though external powers could choose groups that share certain characteristics to mitigate the problem, the risk of agency slack would still be present. Additionally, states tend to choose interstate war over delegation when the conflict at hand is of vital interests. The decision to delegate the conflict to a local agent is by itself a signal of a lack of resolve, which therefore, indicates a fragile alliance.

The analysis of these three factors will be applied to two cases in the following chapters. The first case focuses on the relationship between the Soviet Union and Cuba in Angola while the second case discusses the relationship between the U.S. and the Kurds in fighting ISIS in Syria and Iraq.

Chapter 3: Cuba, An International Paladin¹⁰³

The conflict in Angola started in 1961 as a revolution against Portuguese colonization.¹⁰⁴ During the revolution, three local guerrilla forces – the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) led by Agostinho Neto, the National Front for the Liberation of Angola (FNLA) led by Holden Roberto, and the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) led by Jonas Savimbi – fought for control over Angola.¹⁰⁵ Division among these local forces was characterized by “ethnic, territorial, and language barriers,” which was then reinforced by Portuguese colonial policies, including “press censorship, travel restrictions, and constant police harassment,” in place to prevent joint indigenous opposition.¹⁰⁶ These policies significantly restricted the “ranges of action, life-spans, and political vision” of the guerrilla forces, which made it almost impossible for their leaders to overcome ethnic and regional boundaries to build an alliance that jointly fought for independence.¹⁰⁷ As a result, the Angolan local forces spent most of the time fighting each other in the first ten years of the revolution, and therefore, had few success against the Portuguese colonial power.¹⁰⁸ The situation started to change in April 1974, when the Armed Forces Movement in the Portuguese military overthrew the Caetano dictatorship in Lisbon.¹⁰⁹ The left-leaning new government in Lisbon had no interest in retaining the colonies, which were perceived as a burden and an embarrassment, and intended to gradually withdraw from Angola.¹¹⁰ While Portugal's decision to withdraw removed a major obstacle for the liberation movements, it also “set off a mad scramble for influence in Angola.”¹¹¹

¹⁰³ Edward Gonzalez, “Cuba, the Soviet Union, and Africa.” In *Communism in Africa*, edited by David E. Albright. (Bloomington & London: Indiana University Press, 1980), 147.

¹⁰⁴ Carla Anne Robbins, *The Cuban Threat* (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 1983), 209.

¹⁰⁵ Piero Gleijeses, “Moscow's Proxy? Cuba and Africa 1975-1988.” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 8, no. 2 (2006): 5. <https://muse.jhu.edu/>.

¹⁰⁶ Robbins, 209.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 210.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 212.

After the April 1974 coup, external powers, including China, Zaire, the U.S., the Soviet Union, Cuba, and South Africa started to intervene through backing local forces that supported their strategies and ideologies.¹¹² Through providing support, external powers added an ideological element to the national liberation movement, exacerbated the division among local forces, and, eventually, turned Angola into a chessboard for power struggle.¹¹³

China and Zaire started to provide arms and technical support to both FNLA and UNITA in the early 1960s.¹¹⁴ Support from China stopped during China's Cultural Revolution (1966-1970), which forced FNLA to rely completely on Zaire, while UNITA had to depend on itself.¹¹⁵ China resumed its support for both the FNLA and UNITA after the coup in 1974.¹¹⁶ While the U.S. mostly held back from intervening in Angola in the 1960s, the U.S. government, under pressure from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the then-Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, recognized Angola's importance after the 1974 coup and started to send arms and aids through Zaire to FNLA.¹¹⁷ When the FNLA and UNITA officially joined forces against the MPLA in the summer of 1975, the U.S. provided support for the FNLA-UNITA alliance.¹¹⁸ Similar to China's relationship with the FNLA, the Soviet aid for the MPLA went on and off during the 1960s.¹¹⁹ The Soviet Union stopped providing aid to the MPLA twice, once in 1963 and once in 1974, when the Soviets thought the MPLA was going to lose the war.¹²⁰ By November 1974, the Soviets resumed arms shipment to the MPLA.¹²¹ Compared to the Soviets, the Cubans were more consistent with their support for the MPLA. Cuba sent several hundred advisers to train MPLA fighters in 1966, and some

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid., 210.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 213.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 215.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 211.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid., 214.

stayed with the guerilla forces into the 1970s.¹²² After the civil war broke out in March 1975, Cuba sent in more military advisers and later armed forces to fight with the MPLA.¹²³ South Africa's intervention did not start until the eruption of the civil war.¹²⁴ In July 1975, South Africa "engaged in parallel covert operations" with the U.S. in Angola, and then directly intervened with military forces in October to remove the MPLA from the Angolan capital Luanda.¹²⁵

In order to achieve a smooth and orderly withdrawal from Angola, the new Portuguese government arranged a meeting in January 1975 for the three local force leaders to meet in Alvor, Portugal, to discuss cooperation for "a peaceful transition to independence."¹²⁶ The three leaders signed the Alvor agreement, which depicted a bright future for Angola: a transitional government until the Portuguese finished withdrawal in November 1975, a national army comprised of forces from the three groups facilitating governance, and open elections in October 1975 for a new post-colonial government.¹²⁷ Although the agreement was signed by all three leaders and officially endorsed by the external powers, including the U.S., the Soviet Union, and China, neither the local forces nor the external actors had confidence in the temporary truce.¹²⁸ Ten years' fighting during the revolution made cooperation almost impossible for the local forces.¹²⁹ Arms and aid that continued to flow from the external powers to the local forces fed into the local forces' ambition, strengthened their resolve to fight, and assured the external powers that with their support, their local partners were more likely to take control over Angola.¹³⁰

¹²² Ibid., 211.

¹²³ Ibid., 214-215.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 216.

¹²⁵ Gleijeses, 5.

¹²⁶ Robbins, 212.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 213.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

Emboldened by the external support, the local forces acted more aggressively. In March 1975, the FNLA launched an attack against the MPLA forces in Luanda and in the northern territories, which marked the outbreak of the Angolan civil war.¹³¹ After the attack, both the Soviet Union and Cuba increased their support – the Soviets increased the supply of aid while Cuba dispatched military commander Flavio Bravo to talk to the MPLA leader Neto.¹³² After Neto identified his group’s main problem as not knowing how to use the Soviet weapons, Cuba sent 230 advisers to Angola to operate four training camps for the MPLA forces.¹³³ Upon the MPLA’s request, Cuba sent in more advisers in the following months. The number of Cuban advisers in Angola reached around 1,500 in mid-October.¹³⁴ With the Soviet weapons and the Cuban advisors, the MPLA took control over Luanda on July 9, and gradually won over “twelve of the fifteen provinces.”¹³⁵ The MPLA’s control over the capital severely unnerved FNLA, UNITA, and South Africa – if the MPLA were still in control over Luanda by the time the Portuguese left, it “would be able to claim *de facto* control of Angola.”¹³⁶ Facing this dire situation, the FNLA and UNITA formally joined forces, South Africa directly intervened in the war with 5,000 to 10,000 troops, and Zaire launched an attack against MPLA from the north.¹³⁷ Even with the Soviet and Cuban aid and advisors, the MPLA was no match for the South African forces.¹³⁸ The South African forces effectively halted the MPLA’s advance and were “less than 200 miles from Luanda” on the last day of the Portuguese withdrawal.¹³⁹ Facing South Africa’s invasion, Cuba felt obliged to intervene with military forces to save the MPLA from the defeat.¹⁴⁰ Havana started deploying

¹³¹ Ibid., 214.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid., 215.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 217.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 215.

¹³⁶ Jiri Valenta, “Soviet Decision-Making on the Intervention in Angola.” In *Communism in Africa*, edited by David E. Albright. (Bloomington & London: Indiana University Press, 1980), 101.

¹³⁷ Robbins, 217.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

troops in November.¹⁴¹ The rate of deployment reached 400 troops per week by December and 1,000 per week by January 1976.¹⁴² Cuba's support proved to be efficient and successful. The MPLA stopped the "South African advance in the south and the Zairean-FNLA offensive in the north" by December 1975, pushed the South Africans across the Angola-Namibia border by January 1976, and forced the FNLA to retreat back to Zaire by mid-February.¹⁴³ Since most of the opponents were forced to leave Angola, MPLA took control over the country in March.¹⁴⁴

As demonstrated above, the conflict in Angola was extremely complicated with a variety of local actors and external actors involved. Among multiple external power-local force relationships in Angola, the following discussion will focus on the relationship between the Soviet Union and Cuba to best demonstrate this paper's argument.

The Soviet Union and Cuba: Cuba as an international paladin

This section discusses the relationship between the Soviet Union and Cuba during their intervention in Angola. Even though Cuba was not a local force in the Angolan civil war, the dynamic between the Soviet Union and Cuba has two main characteristics that make it relevant and useful in testing this paper's argument. First, the Soviet Union provided support for the Cuban ground forces to achieve a set of objectives in Angola and in Africa.¹⁴⁵ During the Cold War, when the two superpowers were competing for influence around the world, it is reasonable to assume that the Soviet Union had a set of objectives that it hoped to achieve in Africa. Whether these objectives were deliberate and expansionist in nature or reactive and opportunistic will be discussed in more detail later.¹⁴⁶ In the case of Angola, the Soviet Union

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 218.

¹⁴⁵ Gonzalez, 145.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 145-152.

was not willing to take the risk of sending in combat forces or military advisers.¹⁴⁷ Instead, it provided aid and arms to support the MPLA and the Cuban ground forces.¹⁴⁸ Cuba, on the other hand, deployed 15,000 to 18,000 troops to fight alongside the MPLA between November 1975 and March 1976.¹⁴⁹ Before intervening in Angola, Cuba had already developed a military presence in the 1960s in a number of African countries.¹⁵⁰ Given its direct military intervention during the Angolan civil war and its relatively long-term military presence in the region, Cuba could be analyzed in lieu of a local force with the Soviet Union as the external power in their relationship.

Second, a significant power disparity existed between the Soviet Union and Cuba, and the Cuban intervention would not have been possible without the Soviet support.¹⁵¹ As a developing country with a small economy, Cuba had limited industrial capacity, a narrow product and export range, and inadequate technological development.¹⁵² As a result, the Cuban economy had to rely heavily upon trade with the Soviet Union and subsidies provided by the Soviet Union.¹⁵³ Its army had to depend on the Soviet arms supply and technology support.¹⁵⁴ Without the support from Moscow, Havana would not have been able to sustain its expansive presence – around 38,000 Cuban troops by the spring of 1978 – in Africa.¹⁵⁵ Although scholars debate the dynamic between the Soviet Union and Cuba, these two characteristics are among the shared assumptions underlying the disagreements.¹⁵⁶

Edward Gonzalez, in his article ‘Cuba, the Soviet Union, and Africa,’ summarizes three main interpretations of the relationship between the Soviet Union and Cuba.¹⁵⁷ First, Cuba is

¹⁴⁷ Robbins, 216-217.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 217.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ Gonzalez, 148.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² Gleijeses, 20.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ Gonzalez, 146.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 147.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 146-149.

perceived as “a Soviet-direct *surrogate*” or “an instrument of Soviet foreign policy” in Africa.¹⁵⁸ Second, the Fidel Castro regime is appreciated as “a self-directed revolutionary *internationalist*” regime, devoted to the mission of “combatting imperialism and promoting national liberation and socialism in the Third World.”¹⁵⁹ The third interpretation argues that instead of acting as a surrogate or a completely independent internationalist regime, Cuba was “a self-motivated international *paladin* which must necessarily operate within the parameters of Soviet political and strategic interests in Africa but which nevertheless pursues its own objectives in the region.”¹⁶⁰ This interpretation is Gonzalez’s main argument, which also aligns with this paper’s position that local forces could pursue their own objectives through manipulating external support.

Scholars who perceive Cuba as “a Soviet-direct *surrogate*” argue that Cuba was directed and sponsored by the Soviet Union to intervene in Angola, in order to achieve Soviet political and strategic objectives in the region.¹⁶¹ This argument assumes an activist and expansionist Soviet strategy in Africa, through which the Soviets could implement their “grand design” and pursue their strategic interests in the region.¹⁶² The Soviet Union’s intervention in Angola was believed to be a part of the grand design, which had two main objectives.

First, the Soviet Union had high expectations for expanding its political influence in Africa through inducing direct and rapid socialist revolutions.¹⁶³ Jiri Valenta argues that Nikita Khrushchev intended to promote socialism in Africa through supporting left-leaning local forces in national liberation movements.¹⁶⁴ With Soviet support, Khrushchev hoped to turn national liberation movements into socialist transitions, which would then expand Soviet

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 147.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Valenta, 95.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

political influence in Africa.¹⁶⁵ Soviet support for the MPLA in Angola during the early 1960s has been used as an example to support this argument. John Marcum argues that Moscow noticed the Marxist origin of the MPLA and described it as a group that was “founded on the initiative of the Communist Party” in a Soviet handbook published in 1962.¹⁶⁶ In addition to the Marxist origin, Neto, the leader of MPLA, made a lot of efforts, including maintaining a close relationship with Castro and making contact with the Portuguese Communist Party, to convince Moscow that the MPLA had the intention and “potential for revolutionary transformations.”¹⁶⁷ After picking up these signals, Moscow started to send in political and material support for the MPLA in the early 1960s.¹⁶⁸ The fact that Soviet support started before the U.S.-Soviet détente and the Sino-Soviet rivalry shows that intervention in Angola was active, not reactive, planned ahead, and aimed at expanding Soviet political influence in Africa.

Second, the Soviet Union wanted to achieve a “strategic penetration of southern Africa” and to contain other external powers’ influence in the region.¹⁶⁹ Gonzalez argues that the abundance of mineral resources in southern Africa, especially in Angola, created strong incentives for the Soviet Union to monopolize access and to maximize economic benefits.¹⁷⁰ The Soviet Union could also benefit from control over Angolan ports, which would strengthen the Soviet “blue-water and airlift capabilities.”¹⁷¹ David Rees supports this argument by saying that Moscow was not only trying to “create a cluster of Marxist client states” that would do its biddings in the power struggle against the West, but also aiming at denying the West access to “strategic resources and sea routes.”¹⁷² Apart from access to ports

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ John A. Marcum, *The Angolan Revolution* (Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 1969), 28.

¹⁶⁷ Valenta, 95.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 96.

¹⁶⁹ Gonzalez referenced David Rees, “Soviet Strategic Penetration of Africa,” *Conflict Studies*, no.77 (November 1977), 2-5, in endnote.

¹⁷⁰ Gonzalez, 149.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Rees, 2-5.

and resources, Angola's geographic location also made its regime type salient to the Soviet Union.¹⁷³ If the MPLA were defeated and Angola were governed by the pro-West and South African backed FNLA-UNITA government, southern Africa would be more likely to stay under minority white control, which made it hard for the Soviets to project power in the region.¹⁷⁴ Besides, other left-leaning local forces might lose faith in Soviet support and turn to China for protection.¹⁷⁵ On the other hand, if the MPLA won the civil war and established a pro-Soviet regime, the Soviet Union could use this as an example to encourage more transitions to socialism and to recruit more allies in Africa.¹⁷⁶

Following the assumption that the Soviet Union had a “carefully thought out master plan” with two clear objectives in Africa, scholars argue that the Soviets had strong and consistent incentives to intervene in Angola and southern Africa.¹⁷⁷ Cuba, a member of the Communist camp, would then turn out to be a useful surrogate for direct Soviet presence on the African continent.¹⁷⁸ The Cubans were assumed to be in full compliance with and the established Soviet policy, which made them nothing more than an instrument at the Soviet disposal that could be used to forward the Soviet interests.¹⁷⁹ Peter Vanneman and Martin James describe the Cuban forces as “a completely new instrument for the Soviet foreign policy,” which was employed to intervene in an area that was “far from its own frontiers.”¹⁸⁰ T.B. Millar supports this argument by saying that the Cubans were “little more than mercenaries in disguise.”¹⁸¹

While the *surrogate* argument perceives Cuba as a state that had little autonomy and was in full compliance with the Soviet command during the intervention in Angola, the *internationalist* argument portrays the Castro regime as an independent revolutionary power

¹⁷³ Valenta, 107.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 116.

¹⁷⁸ Gonzalez, 149.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 147.

¹⁸⁰ Bertil Dunér, "Proxy Intervention in Civil Wars," *Journal of Peace Research* 18, no. 4 (1981): 354, doi:10.1177/002234338101800404.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

acting at its own will to fight against imperialism and to promote national liberation and socialism in Africa.¹⁸² In general, two sets of evidence have been used to support this argument.

First, Castro's strong belief in socialism, opposition to imperialism, and attention to Cuba's leading position in the Third World, created strong incentives for him to intervene.¹⁸³ Piero Gleijeses quotes the former Soviet ambassador to the U.S., who said "the Cubans sent their troops to Angola on their own initiative without consulting us," to prove that Cuba was not a Soviet surrogate.¹⁸⁴ He also quotes from the memoir of Kissinger, who used to support the surrogate argument, to show the assumption of Havana being pressured by Moscow to intervene in order to "repay the Soviet Union for its military and economic support" as invalid.¹⁸⁵ Besides, Kissinger recognized Castro's revolutionary ambition and described him as "the most genuine revolutionary leader then in power."¹⁸⁶ Valenta also argues that Castro had a revolutionary vision for the Third World and shifted his focus, during the 1960s, from Latin America to Africa, where he thought the link of imperialism was the weakest and the "possibility for fundamental changes" was the most significant.¹⁸⁷ Driven by these ideological motivations, Castro invested not only in Angola through consistently supporting the MPLA but also in other African countries, including Guinea, Tanzania, Somalia, and Mozambique, to demonstrate his readiness to deploy troops on the ground to promote socialist revolutions in Africa.¹⁸⁸ Compared to Cuba's readiness, the Soviet attitude was more cautious.¹⁸⁹ Carla Robbins points out that when Neto approached the Soviets for help after South Africa invaded Angola in August 1975, Moscow agreed to send more arms but refused

¹⁸² Gonzalez, 147.

¹⁸³ Valenta, 110.

¹⁸⁴ Gleijeses, 8

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Valenta, 110.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Robbins, 220.

to send in any military personnel.¹⁹⁰ Cuba, on the other hand, deployed “500 advisers from Castro’s personal guard” to fight alongside the MPLA.¹⁹¹

The second set of evidence that scholars use to show that Cuba acted on its own will focuses on the incoherence and even clashes between the Soviet Union and Cuba about policies and military strategies during the intervention.¹⁹² Havana made its own decision to deploy troops to Angola in November 1975.¹⁹³ Even when the MPLA was at the brink of losing control over Luanda, the Soviet Union did not send in any military personnel.¹⁹⁴ In fact, the Soviets did not provide any military aircraft to transport the Cubans troops and heavy equipments either.¹⁹⁵ The Cubans were forced to rely on their own “leaky merchant ships and obsolete commercial airplanes” to deliver troops to help the MPLA defend Luanda.¹⁹⁶ Even though the Soviets started to use transport planes to shuttle Cuban forces in early December, the support was still unstable – Moscow had to frequently suspend flights due to official protests from Washington.¹⁹⁷ Cuba, therefore, had no choice but to use its own transport facilities to provide reinforcements for the MPLA.¹⁹⁸ If Cuba were the Soviet Union’s surrogate, one would expect better coordination and more cohesion in their actions during the intervention.¹⁹⁹ In addition, there were several occasions when Cuba and the Soviet Union were in open opposition. Gleijeses argues that even with evidence suggesting that the attempted coup against Neto in May 1977 was backed by the Soviet embassy, or at least, had the Soviet consent, the Cubans chose to support Neto against the Russian’s will.²⁰⁰ Andrew Young, the then-U.S. ambassador to the UN, made a similar observation while testifying

¹⁹⁰ Ibid. 216-217.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 220.

¹⁹² Gleijeses, 32.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Robbins, 220.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 221.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Gleijeses, 32.

before the Senate by saying that “the Cubans and the Russians haven’t been always united in Angola.”²⁰¹ To sum up, the *internationalist* argument believes that the Soviet support was provided on the basis of shared ideology and Cuba had full control over its decisions and actions in Angola, which were motivated by Castro’s personal revolutionary ambition and demonstrated by the open disagreements between the Soviet Union and Cuba on strategies of intervention in Angola.²⁰²

While both the *surrogate* and the *internationalist* arguments are valid and supported by evidence, they only tell a part of the story in describing the relationship between the Soviet Union and Cuba. An alternative argument, which Gonzalez calls the *paladin* argument, acknowledges both arguments: Cuba’s actions were indeed contained within the boundaries set by the Soviet objectives and support, yet it was still operating as “a self-motivated international paladin” with motivations that were “far more complex” than simply ideology.²⁰³ If we apply the three factors identified in the theory model – practical advantage, relative will to fight, and misalignment of objectives – to the paladin argument, it becomes clear that the paladin argument provides a more comprehensive description of the relationship between the two countries in Angola.

First, Cuba’s military presence in Africa provided the Cubans with a practical advantage over the Soviet Union, which could transform into leverage. Second, the Cuban troops on the ground and its relative detachment from the Cold War *détente* gave Cuba greater resolve of intervention, fewer domestic restrictions, and stronger incentives to exploit the Soviet hesitance toward Angola.²⁰⁴ Third, the complicated nature of Cuba’s objectives created strong motivations for Cuba to exploit the war in Angola to prove its value to the Soviet

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Gonzalez, 148.

²⁰³ Ibid., 147.

²⁰⁴ Valenta, 111.

Union.²⁰⁵ Through directly and indirectly influencing the Soviet policy toward Africa, Cuba significantly tightened its relationship with the Soviet Union and increased its status in the Third World.²⁰⁶

Practical Advantage

The first factor identified in the theoretical model is about practical advantage. Local forces have a practical advantage over external powers because they have better understanding of local politics and better access to local network. Possession of these resources – local knowledge and network – makes local forces desirable partners for external powers. Taw’s distributive domestic response theory also argues that without a thorough understanding of the local power dynamic, the outcome of foreign policies would be extensively filtered through the response of local actors. Consequently, external powers choose to rely on local forces for intelligence, network, and sometimes even troops, which gives local forces power and leverage over the external powers. In the case of the Cuban-Soviet intervention in Angola, even though Cuba was not a guerrilla force fighting for control over Angola, three characteristics of the Cuban intervention – long-term military presence in the region, greater legitimacy in the local society, and military personnel on the ground during the conflict – allowed Cuba to take on the same role as a local force and enjoy practical advantages and leverage over the Soviet Union.

Cuba started developing its military presence in Africa in the early years of decolonization, through which the Cubans engaged in different types of missions and established special ties with a variety of African countries.²⁰⁷ It operated a guerrilla training base in Ghana from 1961 to 1966, engaged combat troops in Algeria’s border conflict with Morocco in 1963-65, operated an advisory military mission to help crush an army revolt in Congo-Brazzaville during 1965-66, and established “new military missions in Sierra Leone in

²⁰⁵ Gonzalez, 154.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 157-164.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 148.

1972, Somalia in 1974, and Algeria in 1975.”²⁰⁸ In addition, Jorge Domínguez argues that through a professional and specialized training program, the Cuban armed forces improved their combat capabilities and developed “a large, competent and ready military reserve” in the early 1970s.²⁰⁹ These diversified missions allowed Cuban troops to gain a better understanding of the local politics, economy and society.

Apart from a deeper understanding of the local power dynamic, Cuba also enjoyed more legitimacy in Africa than did the Soviet Union.²¹⁰ Domínguez argues that Cuban foreign policy in Africa prioritized long-term objectives over short-term rewards.²¹¹ Instead of sending just weapons and money, the Cuban foreign aid program offered “a package of services,” including weaponry training and political education for troops, Cuban-headed construction projects, and Cuban-led hospitals.²¹² Another factor that contributed to the greater acceptance was Cuba’s identity. Gonzalez argues that certain characteristics associated with Cuba – its identity as “a small, revolutionary state in the Third World,” the historical and cultural linkage between its Afro-Cuban population and the African population, and its reputation as “a committed, selfless internationalist without big-power designs on the continent” – granted Cuba greater legitimacy to operate its political, technical, and military missions in the region.²¹³ An anecdote to support this argument was President Sékou Touré of Guinea’s decision to expel the Soviet ambassador in 1961 and then invite the Cubans to set up a popular militia to be the guards of his regime in 1966.²¹⁴ Apparently, the Cubans were more welcome in Africa than the Soviets were.

As previously mentioned, Cuban support for the MPLA started before the eruption of the Angolan civil war, which then intensified after South Africa’s invasion. Close and frequent

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Jorge I. Domínguez, "Cuban Foreign Policy." *Foreign Affairs* 57, no. 1 (1978): 94. doi:10.2307/20040054.

²¹⁰ Gonzalez, 148.

²¹¹ Domínguez, 95.

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ Gonzalez, 149.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

interactions between the Cubans and the Angolans made Cuba influential in setting military strategies during the intervention.²¹⁵ Gleijeses uses the example of “the three-year saga of Mavinga”, a town in southeastern Angola and a gateway to UNITA’s headquarter, to show Cuba’s role in the decision-making process.²¹⁶ The Soviet military mission in Angola, headed by Colonel-General Konstantin Kurochkin, wanted to launch an attack to capture Mavinga in the spring of 1984.²¹⁷ The Cubans, led by Jorge Risquet, Castro’s “point man in Africa,” and General Leopoldo (“Polo”), refused to cooperate because they thought the UNITA forces in central regions of Angola posed a greater threat.²¹⁸ Kurochkin argued that the UNITA guerilla forces could be dealt with later and tried to convince the Cubans by citing the example of the Soviets still fighting the bandits in Central Asia for years after the 1917 civil war ended.²¹⁹ This argument was refuted by Risquet, who pointed out that Angola was different from Central Asia and the central regions of Angola were vital for Angola’s economy, which meant defeating the guerrilla forces there was more important.²²⁰ He then added that the Soviets would not have waited so long “if the bandits had been between Moscow and Leningrad.”²²¹ Since the Cubans were not persuaded, Kurochkin continued to put pressure on them by saying that the Soviet Defense Minister had approved the plan, which was once again rejected by Polo.²²² This debate fully demonstrates Cuba’s better knowledge of the local economy. Apart from the influence on economy, Polo was also concerned about South Africa’s air superiority around Mavinga.²²³ When the Soviets failed to persuade the Cubans, they turned to the MPLA forces.²²⁴ The MPLA eventually agreed to attack Mavinga in 1985, and the outcome turned out exactly as Polo predicted: the MPLA

²¹⁵ Gleijeses, 32.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ Ibid.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Ibid., 33.

²²³ Ibid., 34.

²²⁴ Ibid.

forces were “at the mercy of the enemy’s planes” due to Angola’s inadequate air-defense weapons.²²⁵

To sum up, Cuba’s long-term military presence in Africa gave its military not only better local resources but also greater legitimacy. Compared to the Soviet Union, a superpower directly involved in the Cold War confrontation, Cuba, a Third World revolutionary country, was more likely to be accepted in Africa. These practical advantages and resources gave Cuba power to reject Soviet orders when their judgments did not align, for example, during the Mavinga saga. The Mavinga example shows that the Soviet Union needed Cuba’s support to launch an attack and the Soviets did not have full control over Cuba’s actions. The MPLA’s failure to capture Mavinga supports Taw’s argument that without thorough understanding of the local power dynamic, the external power’s plan could easily fail.

Relative Will

The second factor discussed in the theoretical model is about relative will and domestic political vulnerability. Arreguín-Toft and Mack argue that compared to external powers, local forces have stronger will to fight and suffer from fewer domestic political vulnerabilities. For the local forces, defeat in the internal conflict threatens their survival, which makes it easy and reasonable to justify the deployment of all resources and troops. The external powers, however, face no survival threat during the intervention, which makes it politically impossible and unnecessary to deploy all the resources. Besides, if the intervention did not turn out to be a quick victory, as the power disparity between external powers and local forces suggests, constituents of the external power would question the merits of intervention and demand a withdrawal.

In the case of the Cuban-Soviet intervention in Angola, both countries were external powers, which means even if the intervention failed, neither state would face a threat to

²²⁵ Ibid.

survival. Nevertheless, the relative will argument still applies because Cuba had troops on the ground while the Soviet Union did not. As previously mentioned, the Cuban troops deployed to Angola accumulated to 38,000 by the spring of 1978.²²⁶ The Soviet Union, however, was unwilling to take the risk of sending in any military advisers or combat forces despite multiple requests from the MPLA. The fact that the Cubans had troops on the ground, which means higher stakes involved in Angola, was in and of itself a demonstration of a stronger resolve than that of the Soviet Union. The Soviet hesitancy to invest more in Angola was further demonstrated by its inconsistent support for the MPLA. Valenta argues that Moscow lost confidence in the MPLA in early 1974 when the group was struggling with a military defeat and a split group leadership.²²⁷ The Portuguese military, which was still fighting against the guerrilla forces before the April coup in Lisbon, almost defeated the MPLA and made it too weak to retaliate.²²⁸ Apart from the defeat on the military front, the MPLA leadership split into three fragments.²²⁹ Neto, the chairman of MPLA, headed one fragment while the other two were each headed by a vice chairman of MPLA.²³⁰ During this challenging time, Moscow stopped providing aid to Neto for six months and even started supporting Daniel Chipenda, one of the vice-chairmen, who was Neto's main opponent.²³¹ The Soviet support for Neto did not resume until the late summer or early fall of 1974 when Neto regained control over the organization, the Soviets lost faith in Chipenda, and Chinese influence expanded in Angola.²³²

Evidence discussed above suggests that compared to Cuba, Moscow had limited will to intervene in Angola. Though there is no consensus over exactly why the Soviet Union did not do more, scholars argue that both domestic and international considerations constrained

²²⁶ Gonzalez, 146.

²²⁷ Valenta, 98.

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ Gonzalez, 151.

²³² Ibid.

Soviet actions. Domestically, the Soviet Union's policy in Africa was selective rather than expansionist.²³³ Internationally, the Soviet Union had to consider reactions from the U.S., China, and Western Europe, especially during détente.²³⁴

Regarding the Soviet strategy toward Africa, there are criticisms against the assumption underlying the *surrogate* and the *internationalist* arguments that assume that Moscow was pursuing an expansionist and activist strategy in Africa. Instead, critics argue that the Soviet policy in Africa was selective and reactive.²³⁵ According to Richard Lowenthal, the Soviet Union focused on four regions in the Third World – North Africa, the Middle East, South and Central Asia – during the early 1970s.²³⁶ Alexei Kosygin, the Soviet Party spokesman in 1971, named a number of target countries for future “trade and economic cooperation,” including India, Afghanistan, Iran and Algeria, in his five-year plan speech on the 24th Party Congress.²³⁷ What was noteworthy was the fact that these countries were targeted “not because they had chosen a non-capitalist path of development” – as the *internationalist* argument assumes – but because of their geographic and strategic characteristics, as well as their potential to contribute to “an international division of labor.”²³⁸ Furthermore, Kosygin points out a shift of focus from using economic aid to project influence to establishing stronger economic and trade ties between the Soviet Union and the Third World countries to secure more concrete and tangible economic benefits.²³⁹ As demonstrated by the speech, southern Africa was not a high priority for the Soviet Union in the early 1970s, which explains Moscow's lack of enthusiasm about the intervention in Angola.²⁴⁰

²³³ Gonzalez, 150.

²³⁴ Ibid., 161.

²³⁵ Ibid., 150.

²³⁶ Richard Lowenthal, "Soviet 'Counterimperialism'," *Problems of Communism*, November/December 1976, 53, <https://www.unz.com/print/ProblemsCommunism-1976nov-00052/>.

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Ibid., 57.

²³⁹ Ibid., 53.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

If southern Africa was only of peripheral importance to the Soviet Union, it would be reasonable for Moscow to pursue a “selective engagement rather than expansion” policy in Africa.²⁴¹ The Soviet Union’s willingness to intervene was also further reduced by several cases of unsuccessful transition to socialism in the 1960s.²⁴² President Ahmed Ben Bella of Algeria, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, and Modibo Keita of Mali were representatives of the “revolutionary democratic regimes,” which were all recipients of the Lenin Peace Prize and promising candidates for socialist transition.²⁴³ However, all three regimes were highly unstable and soon replaced by more conservative power after the transition.²⁴⁴ Moreover, after the pro-Soviet governments in Sudan and Egypt deviated and joined the U.S. bloc, the Soviets became “more realistic if not pessimistic” and assumed that even if an African regime had a clear “socialist orientation,” it would be hard to escape from the Western economic system.²⁴⁵ Driven by these concerns, the Soviet Union only selectively engaged in a handful of African countries that were either of great economic and political value, such as Nigeria, or at a strategically important locations, including Somalia, Algeria, and Tunisia.²⁴⁶

Internationally, the Soviet resolve and actions were contingent upon the U.S., China, and South Africa’s activities in Angola and constrained by détente against the United States.²⁴⁷ The evidence used to support the *surrogate* argument – the Soviet intervention in Angola was a part of the predetermined plan to deny other powers’ access to southern Africa – can also be perceived from another perspective. The Soviet policy was actually reactive and opportunistic in the sense that it did not step up the aid until the U.S. increased its support and China started to gain momentum in Angola.²⁴⁸

²⁴¹ Gonzalez, 150.

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 151.

²⁴⁷ Valenta 103-108.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 103.

After the Cuban and MPLA forces successfully forced their enemies to retreat to their original positions, the Soviet Union became more optimistic about Angola.²⁴⁹ However, its resolve and actions to intervene were constrained by détente.²⁵⁰ The Soviet Union did not suffer from much domestic political vulnerability because authoritarian regimes gave constituents little power to affect the country's policies.²⁵¹ However, there were still debates within the Soviet government. Valenta argues that even though the hardliners in Moscow, who advocated for a more activist strategy in Angola, won the debate in 1975, concerns over intervention endangering détente continued to be voiced by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defense.²⁵² The Cubans also assumed that the Soviets would be constrained by détente and adjusted their strategies accordingly.²⁵³ For instance, during the battle of Cuito Cuanavale in 1987, Castro ordered the deployment of Cuba's best units of army and the most advanced weapons to Angola without consulting the Soviet Union.²⁵⁴ Castro said that "Gorbachev's mind was entirely focused on (the forthcoming summit in) Washington" and assumed that the Soviet Union would not do anything in Angola, which might increase the tension and sabotage the meeting.²⁵⁵ What was more interesting was Castro's decision to inform the Soviet Union eight days after his deployment, which forced Moscow to accept the *fait accompli*.²⁵⁶ The Soviet Defense Minister Dmitrii Yazov was furious at the news and said: "In any case, we don't want to do anything that the Americans can use against the Soviet Union and Cuba."²⁵⁷ This line of speech clearly shows the Soviet's mindfulness about détente and their constrained behaviors.

²⁴⁹ Robbins, 221.

²⁵⁰ Gleijeses, 37.

²⁵¹ Valenta 109.

²⁵² *Ibid.*

²⁵³ Gleijeses, 37.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 38.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

To sum up, whether the Soviet Union pursued an expansionist or selective strategy in Africa remains debatable. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge the evidence – the Soviets’ inconsistent aid for the MPLA, the five-year plan emphasizing regions other than southern Africa, and the unsuccessful socialist transitions in Africa before Angola – that supports the selective engagement interpretation. If the Soviet Union adopted a selective engagement policy, it would therefore have limited resolve to intervene in Angola. The Soviets’ constrained will and actions could be an opportunity for Cuba to exploit the uncertainties in Soviet policies and to use the resources to serve its own interests. Even if Moscow wanted to engage more in Angola in the 1970s, its resolve and actions were constrained by détente. The Soviet mindfulness of U.S. reactions became a significant political vulnerability, which made it possible for Castro to force a *fait accompli* upon the Soviet leadership.

Diverging Objectives

The third factor in the theory model uses the principal-agent framework to argue that the principals (external powers) must give up some control over their objectives and the actions of achieving these objectives when they delegate the conflict to the agents (local forces). Meanwhile, local forces also face trade-offs between resources and autonomy. In order to receive external support, local forces have to sacrifice autonomy over their actions and to prioritize the agenda of their sponsors. Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham argue that the trade-off between resources and autonomy on both sides can lead to potential agency slack, which is more likely to occur when the objectives and preferences between the principal and the agent significantly misalign. While applying this argument to the relationship between the Soviet Union and Cuba, we notice that although there was no significant misalignment in objectives, the Soviets and the Cubans still had different priorities in Angola. Evidence shows that the misalignment of objectives created incentives for Cuba to exploit the intervention to

increase leverage against the Soviet Union, prioritize its own national interests, enhance its status in the Third World, and even influence the Soviet policy in Africa.²⁵⁸

One of the main misalignments between the Soviet Union and Cuba was about their objectives and perceptions of Africa.²⁵⁹ As discussed in the *surrogate* argument section, if the Soviet Union were pursuing an expansionist strategy and implementing a carefully thought-out grand design in Africa, Cuba would be valued as a useful instrument. However, if we follow the interpretation that the Soviet Union adopted a selective and reactive strategy in Africa, which means southern Africa was only of peripheral importance and the Soviets were interested in only a handful of African countries, Cuba's value would be significantly discounted.²⁶⁰ Gonzalez argues that this interpretation would lead to an unfavorable setting for Cuba due to mainly three reasons. First, the practical advantage that Cuba enjoyed as a result of its long-term presence in Africa would diminish, which would reduce its leverage against the Soviet Union and devalue itself to nothing more than "a surrogate operating at the discretion of its patron."²⁶¹ Second, if the Soviet Union decided to only intervene in a small number of African countries that were either of great intrinsic strategic value or targets of the Soviet opponents' power projection, for example, China and the U.S., Cuba would have fewer chances to proceed with its revolutionary mission in Africa.²⁶² Third, given Africa's low priority in the Soviet strategic overview, it would be unlikely for the Soviet leadership to provide generous support for Cuba to intervene in Africa.²⁶³ Besides, even if Cuba were able to accomplish "successful ventures in Africa," it would only bring insubstantial and temporary political influence for the Soviet Union.²⁶⁴ The Cubans would therefore find it difficult to transform their efforts and achievements in Africa into power and leverage against

²⁵⁸ Gonzalez, 154-157.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 152.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*

²⁶² *Ibid.*

²⁶³ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

the Soviets.²⁶⁵ Driven by these three concerns, Cuba would have strong incentives to help the Soviet Union gain momentum in the region and persuade the Soviets to prioritize Africa, whereby Cuba could demonstrate its value.²⁶⁶

Cuba's active and consistent intervention in Angola convinced the Soviets to change their attitude from passive tolerance to cautious engagement and eventually to active support.²⁶⁷ The outcome of the Angola intervention – a left-leaning government in Luanda – turned out to be very satisfying for Moscow.²⁶⁸ Apart from the success in Angola, Cuba also facilitated and encouraged Soviet intervention in Zimbabwe and Ethiopia.²⁶⁹ With the support from the Cuban military and political advisers, the Soviet Union intervened in the liberation movement in Zimbabwe through providing “military aid to guerrilla forces based in Mozambique and Zambia,” which had previously relied heavily upon China's support.²⁷⁰ Moreover, Cuba also assisted the Soviet intervention in Ethiopia by sending combat troops to defend the regime from the Somali invasion and the Eritrean secession.²⁷¹ The Cuban military presence in Ethiopia amounted to “16,000 or more military personnel” by the spring of 1978, through which the Soviet Union secured its influence and status on the Horn of Africa even after giving up its alliance with Somalia.²⁷² Gonzalez points out that these joint Cuban-Soviet developments in Africa created “a political momentum and a military dimension that did not exist prior to Angola.”²⁷³ These developments effectively demonstrated Cuba's value, which was essential for Cuba to transform “passive leverage,” meaning Moscow chose to engage Havana after 1960 due to increasing stakes involved in Cuba, to “active leverage,” meaning

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 154.

²⁶⁷ Robbins, 221.

²⁶⁸ Gonzalez, 154.

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 153.

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

²⁷¹ Ibid., 154.

²⁷² Ibid.

²⁷³ Ibid.

Moscow had no choice but to increase support for Cuba due to its growing reliance on Cuba while intervening in Africa.²⁷⁴

Cuba's increased active leverage against the Soviet Union was evident from three aspects, which also shows that Cuba was acting like an international paladin, through which it effectively manipulated the "Soviet Union's big power interests and its military and economic resources" to forward its own national interests.²⁷⁵ First, Cuba obtained more and higher quality material support from the Soviet Union, including better economic and trade deals, and more importantly, "both symbolic and tangible rewards" for the Cuban Revolutionary Armed Forces (FAR).²⁷⁶ The FAR developed a more comprehensive naming system at the end of 1976, which created more ranks for officers, and consequently, more long-term career opportunities.²⁷⁷ Generals who made special contribution in Angola were also promoted to new positions to recognize their achievements.²⁷⁸ Apart from these symbolic rewards, the Soviets equipped the FAR with a range of more sophisticated weapons, including T-62 tanks, ZSU 23-4 self-propelled anti-aircraft guns and MIG-23F aircrafts, after the intervention in Angola.²⁷⁹ This equipment, together with the victories in Angola and Ethiopia, significantly enhanced the competence and international status of the FAR.²⁸⁰ What was more important and noteworthy was the fact that the Soviets provided these weapons at the risk of jeopardizing the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) treaty.²⁸¹ According to Robbins, although the U.S. generally believed that the MIG-23F aircrafts were not designed to deliver nuclear warheads, several Congress members still accused the shipment of directly violating "the 1962 U.S.-Soviet agreement prohibiting the deployment of offensive weapons

²⁷⁴ Ibid., 265. Note 36.

²⁷⁵ Ibid., 154.

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 158.

²⁷⁷ Ibid.

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 159.

²⁷⁹ Ibid.

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

²⁸¹ Robbins, 223.

in Cuba” and intended to use it as an excuse to impede the passage of SALT.²⁸² The Soviet Union’s willingness to take the risk of potentially harming its national interests was an unprecedented attempt to “strengthen ties with Cuba.”²⁸³ From Cuba’s perspective, we could argue that it proved a successful manipulation.

The second aspect is about Cuba’s increased independence in its relationship with the Soviet Union and higher status in the Third World.²⁸⁴ Cuba’s greater degree of independence is demonstrated by the divergences between the Soviet Union and Cuba on several occasions, such as the coup against Neto in 1977 and the decision of sending troops to Cuito Cuanavale in 1987 without informing Moscow.²⁸⁵ The Castro regime’s heightened international status can be seen from Castro’s “month-long triumphal tour” in Africa in the spring of 1977 and another trip to North Africa a year later.²⁸⁶ Castro also hosted meetings with several African leaders, started teaching and training programs in Angola, and launched more aid missions in the region.²⁸⁷ In addition, Cuba was “unanimously and publicly commended” for its achievement in Angola during the Fifth Conference of the Nonaligned Nations in Sri Lanka.²⁸⁸ This was a recover of prestige for the Castro regime because Cuba was almost kicked out of the conference three years ago.²⁸⁹

Apart from better material support and higher international status, Cuba also managed to exert direct and indirect influence on the Soviet Union regarding its policy in Africa.²⁹⁰ Gonzalez distinguishes between direct and indirect influence by arguing that direct influence was a result of the Cuban leadership’s active attempts to shape the Soviet strategy while

²⁸² Ibid.

²⁸³ Ibid.

²⁸⁴ Gonzalez, 155-156.

²⁸⁵ Ibid., 156. Gleijeses, 37.

²⁸⁶ Gonzalez, 155.

²⁸⁷ Ibid.

²⁸⁸ Robbins, 223.

²⁸⁹ Ibid.

²⁹⁰ Gonzalez, 157-164.

indirect influence “depended on the Soviet assessments” of Cuba’s presence in Africa.²⁹¹ According to Gonzalez, Cuba exerted direct influence on the Soviet Union through mainly two channels: political interactions and military connections.²⁹² Among the Cuban elites, Fidel Castro, his brother Raúl Castro and some military generals were the strongest advocates for high level of Cuban-Soviet intervention in Africa.²⁹³ Meanwhile, they also had the greatest access to the Soviet leadership during the 1960s and 1970s.²⁹⁴ Fidel Castro’s internationalist rhetoric, which emphasized Cuba’s mission and obligations in Africa, and his role as “an effective broker between the socialist camp and Africa” created incentives for the Soviet Union to at least maintain if not strengthen the relationship with Cuba, in order to show the Soviet commitments to the Third World.²⁹⁵ When Fidel Castro visited the Soviet Union after his African tour in the spring of 1977, he was greeted by multiple Soviet leaders in the airport, including Leonid Brezhnev, the then-General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU).²⁹⁶ With the access to the Soviet leadership and the personal contact between the two leaders, Cuba could easily engage in lobbying activities during meetings to shape the Soviet perceptions of Africa.²⁹⁷ Moreover, Gonzalez argues that although political interactions were effective, the most influential method was through military connections.²⁹⁸ The contact between the Cuban and Soviet militaries started in 1960, five years before the Communist Party of Cuba (PCC) officially existed.²⁹⁹ Through arms shipment and training camps, the Soviet and Cuban militaries developed deep bonds, which became “the most important institutional linkage” between the two countries in the 1960s.³⁰⁰ Such bonding was strengthened during the 1970s, when the FAR became more professional

²⁹¹ Ibid., 157 and 160.

²⁹² Ibid., 157-160.

²⁹³ Ibid., 158.

²⁹⁴ Ibid.

²⁹⁵ Ibid.

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

²⁹⁷ Ibid., 157.

²⁹⁸ Ibid., 160.

²⁹⁹ Ibid.

³⁰⁰ Ibid.

and competent after victories in Angola and several other African countries.³⁰¹ Additionally, meetings and exchanges between the two militaries were frequent and productive, for example, Raúl Castro, the head of the Cuban military, “routinely met with his Soviet counterpart” and the Soviets had military specialists stationed in Cuba “under the command of a Soviet general.”³⁰² Given these close relationships, Cuba could effectively affect Soviet policies through the military.

Different from the direct influence through political and military channels, Cuba’s indirect influence on the Soviets took a more passive form and was contingent upon the Soviet perceptions and judgments.³⁰³ Gonzalez argues that if Moscow had a positive perception of Cuba’s actions in Africa and saw them as beneficial for the Soviet Union, it would be willing to allow more Cuban direct influence on its policies.³⁰⁴ On the other hand, if the Soviets concluded with a negative assessment, Cuba would only have a limited effect on the Soviet decision-making.³⁰⁵ If we judge based on Cuba’s performance in Angola and Ethiopia, it would be reasonable to assume that the Soviet Union was more likely to make a positive assessment about Cuba’s presence in Africa.

Two major changes in the Soviet Union after the intervention in Angola support this assumption. First, Gonzalez uses Joan Urban’s arguments to describe the debate between “conservative sectarians” and “revolutionary sectarians” in the Soviet political system.³⁰⁶ Urban argues that before the Cuban-Soviet interventions, the Soviet foreign policies were dominated by the conservative sectarians, who adopted “a highly orthodox and cautious approach to the revolutionary process abroad, particularly in Western Europe.”³⁰⁷ In other words, short-term issues, for example, *détente*, were prioritized over long-term, global

³⁰¹ Ibid.

³⁰² Ibid.

³⁰³ Ibid.

³⁰⁴ Ibid.

³⁰⁵ Ibid.

³⁰⁶ Ibid., 161.

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

revolutionary missions.³⁰⁸ The revolutionary sectarians, however, stressed the importance of revolutions, promoted more expansionist foreign policies, and even subordinated détente to revolutionary missions.³⁰⁹ Although this group initially focused on the Soviet engagements in Western Europe, what happened in Africa during the mid-1970s served as strong evidence to support their policies.³¹⁰ Gonzalez argues that the increasing momentum and support for the revolutionary sectarians during the 1970s could at least be partially, if not completely, attributed to the intervention in Angola.³¹¹ Apart from the shift in policy orientation from conservative to revolutionary, Gonzalez argue that the Soviet Union not only redeemed its self-esteem and international reputation, which were both low after the Soviet-backed Arab states were defeated by Israel in the Middle East, but also demonstrated its power and global reach through the victories in Africa.³¹²

The second major change can be seen from the Soviet Union's changed perception of the future for socialist transition in Africa.³¹³ According to Gonzalez, this change was due to both the Soviet "greater capabilities for global outreach" and the Cuban political and military presence in Africa, which stabilized the otherwise volatile and weak governments.³¹⁴ The Soviet Union attributed the setbacks in Algeria, Ghana and Mali to the region's underdevelopment, the lack of population support, and the weak leadership.³¹⁵ The successful intervention in Angola demonstrated Cuba's capabilities and convinced the Soviets of the value of the Cuban presence in removing these "existing structural impediments," stabilizing the pro-Soviet regimes in the region, and making socialist transitions in southern Africa more manageable.³¹⁶ Gonzalez points out that the Soviet Union not only recognized Cuba's value

³⁰⁸ Ibid.

³⁰⁹ Ibid.

³¹⁰ Ibid.

³¹¹ Ibid.

³¹² Ibid., 162.

³¹³ Ibid.

³¹⁴ Ibid.

³¹⁵ Ibid., 150 and 162.

³¹⁶ Ibid., 162.

but also saw its potential of consolidating the pro-Soviet countries in Africa, just as the Red Army did in Eastern Europe after the Second World War.³¹⁷ Cuba, therefore, effectively shaped the Soviet perceptions about the potential of Africa, moved Africa up on Moscow's priority list, which, as previously mentioned, could be used to advance its own interests.³¹⁸

³¹⁷ Ibid.

³¹⁸ Ibid., 162-163.

Chapter 4: United States, the Kurds, and ISIS

The ongoing Syrian civil war is currently among the most vicious and complicated warfare in the world. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the Syrian war had killed 511,000 people as of March 2018 and displaced 6.6 million internally and 5.6 million globally.³¹⁹ Apart from the high death toll and the disastrous humanitarian crisis, the chaos created by the endless fighting among the regime, the rebels, the Kurds, and the jihadists has presented external state and non-state actors with opportunities for exploitation and manipulation.³²⁰ Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah chose to back the Bashar al-Assad regime while Turkey, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries pledged their support to the opposition force.³²¹ While the conflict between the Assad regime and the rebels is already convoluted and violent enough, this is only one dimension of the war.³²² The Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) managed to exploit the chaos and establish a branch in Syria, through which the organization expanded into the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (ISIS).³²³ With ISIS taking control over more territories and gaining more momentum in the summer of 2014, the U.S. felt compelled to directly intervene through launching an aerial campaign and supporting the Iraqi and Syrian Kurds, whose survival were threatened by ISIS attack, to fight against ISIS in the region.³²⁴ With the U.S. support, the Kurds were very effective in fighting ISIS: Ilham Ahmed, the Kurdish co-chair of the Syrian Democratic Council, announced the defeat of ISIS on March 21, 2019.³²⁵ Although the power disparity between the U.S. and the

³¹⁹ "World Report 2019: Rights Trends in Syria," Human Rights Watch, January 23, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/syria>.

³²⁰ William W. Harris, *Quicksilver War: Syria, Iraq and the Spiral of Conflict* (London: Hurst & Company, 2018), pp

³²¹ Jeffrey Martini, Erin York, and William Young. "Syria as an Arena of Strategic Competition." In *Syria as an Arena of Strategic Competition*, 2. RAND Corporation, 2013. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/j.ctt2jc9hh.1>.

³²² Harris,

³²³ *Ibid.*, 33.

³²⁴ *Ibid.*, 59

³²⁵ Debbie Bookchin, "Report from Rojava: What the West Owes Its Best Ally Against ISIS," *The New York Review of Books*, April 4, 2019, <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2019/04/04/report-from-rojava-what-the-west-owes-its-best-ally-against-isis/>.

Kurds should imply absolute U.S. control in this patronage relationship, this was not the case. The Kurds, though with only 190,000 Peshmerga fighters in 2014 and 20,000 People's Protection Units (YPG) fighters in 2016, the equivalent of one-tenth of the Iraqi GDP in 2013, and no arms industry, managed to gain leverage over the U.S. and successfully manipulated the U.S. support.³²⁶ To better understand the dynamic between the U.S. and the Kurds, it is useful to apply the three factors identified in the theory chapter to analyze this case.

First, local forces were essential in defeating ISIS for both practical and political reasons. Practically, the U.S. had to rely on ground forces to hold territory and to acquire human intelligence.³²⁷ Politically, it was essential to create an alternative to ISIS for the local population.³²⁸ Facing the fragmented local forces in Syria and Iraq, the U.S. had few good options. In comparison, the Kurds were more homogeneous and well-organized, which later also proved to be more effective in defeating ISIS.³²⁹ Since the U.S. had to rely on the Kurds to provide ground troops, local resources, and human intelligence, the Kurds had leverage over the U.S. despite their power disadvantage in this relationship. Second, Mack and Arreguín-Toft's argument about relative will and political vulnerability applies well to the U.S.-Kurds relationship. The Obama administration's failure to follow through with its request for Assad to step down in 2011 and its inaction on the "red-line" warning in 2012 against the use of chemical weapons clearly demonstrated the U.S. lack of interest in Syria.³³⁰ The U.S. will, with respect to intervention, was not only constrained by public opinion, which

³²⁶ "Profile: Who Are the Peshmerga?" BBC News, August 12, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-28738975>; "Anyone for Raqqa?" The Economist, November 10, 2016, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2016/11/10/anyone-for-raqqa>; "Determined to Grow: Economy." Invest in Group. October 01, 2013. <https://investingroup.org/review/236/determined-to-grow-economy-kurdistan/>; "Iraq GDP." Trading Economics. <https://tradingeconomics.com/iraq/gdp>.

³²⁷ Ash Carter, "A Lasting Defeat: The Campaign to Destroy ISIS," Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, October 2017, <https://www.belfercenter.org/LastingDefeat>.

³²⁸ Howard Gambrell Clark, "Go Local," The American Interest, June 26, 2015, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2015/06/10/go-local/>.

³²⁹ "Arming Iraq's Kurds: Fighting IS, Inviting Conflict," International Crisis Group, May 12, 2015, 18, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/arming-iraq-s-kurds-fighting-inviting-conflict>.

³³⁰ Harris, 41-42.

was mostly against more military intervention, especially the deployment of ground troops, but also complicated by the U.S. alliance with Turkey, who strongly opposed U.S. support for the Syrian Kurds.³³¹ The Kurds, however, faced an imminent threat to their survival from ISIS's attack, which gave them much stronger resolve to fight and saved them from political vulnerabilities.³³² Third, unlike the U.S., whose goals in the Middle East were constantly fluctuating, the Kurds had a very clear set of objectives and goals: to carve out territory and to achieve independence and autonomy.³³³ An independent and autonomous Kurdish state, however, would further complicate the situation in Syria, destabilize Iraq, and most importantly, threaten the interests of Turkey.³³⁴ Although these consequences were against the U.S. interests, the U.S. had no better choice but to continue supporting the Kurds to defeat ISIS, which was the only clear objective of this element of the U.S. intervention in Syria.³³⁵ Ultimately, with the ISIS currently falling apart and the U.S. pulling out of Syria, the Kurds managed to walk away with material support from the U.S. to continue pursuing objectives against U.S. interests.³³⁶

The Civil War: 2011-2014

The conflicts in Syria started in 2011 as street protests.³³⁷ Inspired by the Arab Spring movement in Tunisia and Egypt, fifteen teenagers spray-painted anti-regime graffiti in Dera'a

³³¹ "Little Support for U.S. Intervention in Syrian Conflict," Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, March 15, 2012, <https://www.people-press.org/2012/03/15/little-support-for-u-s-intervention-in-syrian-conflict/>, and Harris, 96.

³³² Harris, 111 and 119.

³³³ Henri J Barkey, "The Kurdish Awakening: Unity, Betrayal, and the Future of the Middle East." *Foreign Affairs* 98, no. 2 (March 2019): 108. <http://ccl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/docview/2186101224?accountid=10141>.

³³⁴ Michael M. Gunter, "Iraq, Syria, Isis and the Kurds: Geostrategic Concerns for the U.S. and Turkey," *Middle East Policy* 22, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 108, doi:10.1111/mepo.12116.

³³⁵ Harris, 59.

³³⁶ "US Commanders Propose Kurdish Fighters in Syria Keep Weapons," USA News | Al Jazeera, December 29, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/12/commanders-propose-kurdish-fighters-syria-weapons-181229063446665.html>.

³³⁷ Harris, 26.

in mid-March 2011.³³⁸ Unfortunately, they were captured, detained and tortured by the head of security of the province, who was also Bashar's cousin.³³⁹ This event led to street protests in Dera'a, to which the regime responded with live fire and killed dozens of protestors within a week.³⁴⁰ If the movement in Tunis and Cairo initially had little ripple effect in Syria, Dera'a was the spark needed to provoke open defiance and revolution against the Assad regime.³⁴¹ Thousands of people in provincial cities and the Damascus suburbs went into the streets, protesting against injustice and repression.³⁴² In fear of losing face and compromising his family's influence, Bashar refused to punish his cousin or compensate the victims' families.³⁴³ Instead, he deployed more lethal force to crush the protest.³⁴⁴ In order to justify the violent suppression and to protect the legitimacy of his regime, Bashar also constructed a victim narrative, through which the protestors were described as "terrorists and fanatics."³⁴⁵

According to William Harris, the street protests in Syria, though on an unprecedented scale, were merely the trigger for long-term ethnic, religious and social conflicts embedded in the society.³⁴⁶ Harris argues that two predispositions of Assad's tyrannical rule made the uprising inevitable.³⁴⁷ First, in order to maintain "security and stability," the Assad regime relied heavily upon its highly developed security machine, consisting of secret police, an extensive monitoring network, and torture chambers, to detect and prevent any signal of dissent.³⁴⁸ Harris describes the Assad regime as "a secular Arab nationalist tyranny," which has ruled Syria under repressive Ba'athism for decades.³⁴⁹ Since its foundation in 1943, the Ba'ath Party adopted an "Arab nationalist and semi-socialist" ideology, developed

³³⁸ Ibid., 27.

³³⁹ Ibid.

³⁴⁰ Ibid.

³⁴¹ Ibid.

³⁴² Ibid.

³⁴³ Ibid.

³⁴⁴ Ibid.

³⁴⁵ Ibid.

³⁴⁶ Ibid.

³⁴⁷ Ibid., 19.

³⁴⁸ Ibid., 18.

³⁴⁹ Ibid., 5.

exceptional institutional strength, and cultivated deep reach within the military.³⁵⁰ These characteristics enabled the Ba’athists to not only trump other ideologies during the Cold War but also build an efficient security machine to cultivate a culture of absolutism.³⁵¹ Specific measures adopted by the regime include banning all ideas associated with religious communities and forcing Arabization on ethnic minorities, especially the Kurds.³⁵² This long-term repression and abuse of the population created “fierce resentment, fear and loathing” toward the regime, which makes decompression unavoidable.³⁵³ Second, the Ba’athist rule naturally gave rise to strongmen politics – Saddam Hussein in Iraq in the late 1960s and Hafiz al-Assad in Syria in the 1970s – and nepotism.³⁵⁴ Although the Ba’ath Party advocated semi-socialism and nationalism, sectarian identity still played a substantial part in Syrian politics. Sunni Arabs constitute the majority of the Syrian population, yet the leadership has been dominated by the Alawite minority, or more specifically, the Assad family.³⁵⁵ Assad family members control almost all the important and lucrative positions in the government, which subordinates the party to family interests and turns the government into a family business.³⁵⁶ Over time, the obvious hypocrisy – denying political rights to ethnic groups other than the Alawites while concentrating all the power and wealth in the hands of the Alawites – significantly undermined the legitimacy of the regime.³⁵⁷ Additionally, Harris points out that the Syrian economy shifted from the crumbling Ba’athist socialism to an even more destabilizing crony capitalism during the mid-1990s, which further damaged the foundation of the regime.³⁵⁸ In general, the Syrian regime’s fearful and repressive security machine

³⁵⁰ Ibid., 17.

³⁵¹ Ibid.

³⁵² Ibid., 18-19.

³⁵³ Ibid., 19.

³⁵⁴ Ibid., 18.

³⁵⁵ Ibid., 19.

³⁵⁶ "Syria," U.S. Department of State, September 13, 2011, https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2010_5/168276.htm.

³⁵⁷ Harris, 19.

³⁵⁸ Ibid.

forced the population to constantly live in fear.³⁵⁹ When the spillover effect of the regional uprising got triggered by a local spark, the implosion of the Syrian regime became inevitable.³⁶⁰

In addition to creating deep-rooted conflicts with its population, the Assad regime also contributed to the survival and growth of ISIS. Harris argues that both Saddam and Bashar maneuvered the relationship between Sunni Islamism and secular Ba'athism to strengthen their grip of power.³⁶¹ Saddam introduced Sunni Islamic studies into his government in the 1990s to boost the regime's legitimacy among the Sunni Arabs in Iraq.³⁶² Bashar, on the other hand, directly facilitated jihadist recruitment among the Sunni Arabs in Syria and channeled jihadists into Iraq in 2003 to distract the U.S. and to prevent an invasion.³⁶³

According to Harris, these deliberate interactions were extremely poisonous because they helped ease the integration between Ba'athism and Sunni Islamism in jihadist organizations.³⁶⁴ After the military overthrew Saddam in 2003, the U.S. disbanded the Iraqi army, de-Ba'athified Sunni officials in the army, and backed Nouri al-Maliki, a Shi'a Prime Minister who started with a pragmatic approach of governance but succumbed to sectarianism after the U.S. left.³⁶⁵ Maliki's open sectarianism favored the Shi'a and suppressed the Sunni, which provoked widespread anger and dissent among the disbanded, rebellious yet well-trained de-Ba'athified Sunni military personnel.³⁶⁶ Harris argues that these former military personnel became the perfect recruits for ISI and Saddam's previous efforts in connecting Ba'athism with Sunni Islamism served as a bridge for the integration of Ba'athist military expertise with jihadism.³⁶⁷ When ISI reinvigorated and reorganized in 2010,

³⁵⁹ Ibid

³⁶⁰ Ibid

³⁶¹ Ibid.

³⁶² Ibid.

³⁶³ Ibid., 20.

³⁶⁴ Ibid.

³⁶⁵ Ibid., 43.

³⁶⁶ Ibid.

³⁶⁷ Ibid., 20.

its new military was composed of highly experienced Ba'athist officers and the organization transformed into a hybrid of jihadism and Ba'athism.³⁶⁸

In Syria, Bashar tasked his intelligence agencies to breed and channel Sunni jihadists into Iraq in 2003 to distract the U.S. so that Syria would not become the next target for U.S. invasion.³⁶⁹ This strategy not only directed the focus of domestic jihadism abroad but also allowed the regime to accumulate jihadist-related resources and intelligence, such as jihadist prisoners, information about the identity and salary of ISIS-affiliated state employees, and connections with the Iraqi Ba'athist network that cooperated with the Islamic State.³⁷⁰ These resources later became valuable leverage for the regime to trade information, manipulate narratives, and maneuver the development of jihadism during the first stage of the civil war.³⁷¹ In sum, the infusion of Ba'athism with Sunni Islamism helped preserve the network for ISI, provided recruits for the organization, and facilitated ISI's expansion into Syria in 2013.³⁷²

The street protests turned into war in July-August 2011, during which the regime deployed more well-equipped forces to crush the demonstration.³⁷³ In response, some army officers defected and created the Free Syrian Army (FSA) in late July, which was mainly composed of Sunni Arabs.³⁷⁴ Although the FSA initially rejected sectarianism or Islamism, such an effort was hard to maintain due to the difficulties of organizing scattered armed forces and countering the rise of religious militancy.³⁷⁵ With a large number of armed groups attaching themselves to the band of FSA, the FSA was unable to effectively provide any logistical support or a clear chain of command.³⁷⁶ On the battlefield, the FSA managed to

³⁶⁸ Ibid.

³⁶⁹ Ibid., 25.

³⁷⁰ Ibid., 26.

³⁷¹ Ibid.

³⁷² Ibid., 20.

³⁷³ Ibid., 30.

³⁷⁴ Ibid.

³⁷⁵ Ibid.

³⁷⁶ Ibid.

seize the Sunni suburb of Baba Amr in Homs in November 2011, but was forced to withdraw in March 2012.³⁷⁷ The battle of Baba Amr, during which the regime used heavy artillery to blockade and destroy the city in order to crush the FSA's resolve, exemplified the fighting between the regime and the rebels in most suburbs in Damascus and Aleppo.³⁷⁸ Joseph Holliday argues that the regime used disproportionate force to target both soldiers and civilians to increase the cost of fighting for the rebels.³⁷⁹ This was indeed the case in Baba Amr, where hundreds of civilians were killed by the regime bombardment.³⁸⁰

At the initial stage of the war, external intervention was quite limited.³⁸¹ Both Saudi Arabia and Turkey pledged themselves to the opposition force but did not send in any material support.³⁸² Although both the U.S. and the European countries asked the Assad regime to "step aside," neither the U.S. nor Europe took any action.³⁸³ The rebels had to rely on "captured regime stocks, defecting officers and soldiers, the black market, and smuggling" for their weaponry supply, which means their aggression could be easily neutralized by the better equipped regime force.³⁸⁴ Holliday points out that even though the rebels successfully occupied some territories in 2011, they were unable to protect and retain control due to the insufficiency in weapons and fighters.³⁸⁵

The situation changed in 2012. The opposition forces launched attacks simultaneously in different locations, which stretched the regime force thin and made their attacks more manageable.³⁸⁶ Additionally, the conflict became increasingly sectarian, which attracted more "hardline Sunni Islamists and jihadists" to join the opposition and forced the regime to rely

³⁷⁷ Ibid., 31.

³⁷⁸ Ibid.

³⁷⁹ Joseph Holliday, "Middle East Security Report 3: Syria's Armed Opposition," *Institute for the Study of War*, March 2012, 6, <http://www.understandingwar.org/report/syrias-armed-opposition>.

³⁸⁰ Harris, 31.

³⁸¹ Ibid.

³⁸² Ibid., 30.

³⁸³ Ibid., 31.

³⁸⁴ Ibid.

³⁸⁵ Holliday, 11.

³⁸⁶ Ibid.

more on the minorities, mostly the Alawites and Christians.³⁸⁷ The combination of effective strategy and weakened regime force enabled the rebels to achieve some success during the summer of 2012.³⁸⁸ Through occupying the eastern segment of Aleppo, the rebels' presence effectively threatened the airport and the military-industrial facilities in the region.³⁸⁹ Their redoubts in Homs and al-Qusayr provided access to oversee the transportation between Damascus and the coast.³⁹⁰ Moreover, the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) joined the fight and occupied part of the northern territories in July, which also helped the rebels preserve their momentum through 2012.³⁹¹

Apart from troubles created by the rebels on the battlefield, the regime faced greater problems with its leadership.³⁹² Bashar's brother-in-law was killed in an explosion in Damascus and two Sunni high-ranking officers of the regime – General Manaf Talss and Prime Minister Riyad Hijab – fled to Turkey and Jordan.³⁹³ However, the Assad regime managed to survive this crisis due to the Alawites' sustained loyalty, the regime's advantages in air force and weaponry, the manipulation of narratives, and more importantly, the Iranian direct intervention.³⁹⁴ In early 2013, the regime imposed a blockade on the rebel-controlled sectors in Aleppo and Homs to starve the population, block transportation and interrupt communication, which effectively forced a stalemate in the region.³⁹⁵ In August, Assad ignored President Barack Obama's "red line" warning and used sarin gas on the population in rebel-controlled areas of Damascus, which killed 1,400 people.³⁹⁶

³⁸⁷ Harris, 33.

³⁸⁸ Ibid., 34-35.

³⁸⁹ Ibid., 35.

³⁹⁰ Ibid.

³⁹¹ Ibid., 33.

³⁹² Ibid., 35.

³⁹³ Ibid.

³⁹⁴ Ibid., 35-36.

³⁹⁵ Ibid., 39.

³⁹⁶ Ibid., 42.

While the pendulum seemed to be swinging toward the regime in 2013, the rebels were further challenged by their increasing fragmentation.³⁹⁷ Although the rebel forces' geographically-scattered nature increased their redundancy, making them hard to annihilate, it also made coordination extremely difficult.³⁹⁸ Besides, an increasing number of fighters left to join the jihadists, which gave rise to a "turf warfare" within the opposition, and therefore, consumed fighters' morale and further weakened the group's cohesion.³⁹⁹ Although external support for the rebels from Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the West started at the end of 2012, this support was all somewhat distracted and constrained due to domestic political concerns.⁴⁰⁰

Meanwhile, ISI, under the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, re-emerged in Iraq in 2010, got ready to launch a new branch in Syria in August 2011, transformed into ISIS in April 2013, and publicly announced the formation of the "caliphate" in June 2014.⁴⁰¹ In late 2013, ISIS started seizing the opposition's territory.⁴⁰² After conquering al-Raqqah in August, ISIS advanced westward to the Idlib countryside, then northward to al-Bab, and eventually occupied A'zaz, a city close to the Turkish border.⁴⁰³ Although the rebels later threw ISIS out of the northwestern part of Syria, they paid a high price, in terms of casualties and resources.⁴⁰⁴ ISIS also managed to survive the attack and successfully retreated to the east.⁴⁰⁵ Parallel to the conflicts in Syria, ISIS and its affiliated Sunni tribes in Iraq were also fighting against the government and the Iraqi Kurds led by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).⁴⁰⁶ By December 2014, ISIS had taken control over major cities in Iraq, including Fallujah, Mosul and Tikrit, and secured border crossings that connected Iraq and Syria.⁴⁰⁷

³⁹⁷ Ibid., 37.

³⁹⁸ Ibid.

³⁹⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid., 47 and 59.

⁴⁰² Ibid., 47.

⁴⁰³ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid., 49.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid., 48.

⁴⁰⁷ Carter, "A Lasting Defeat: The Campaign to Destroy ISIS."

Despite the challenge of fighting on double front, ISIS demonstrated clear objectives and serious executing capabilities.⁴⁰⁸ According to Harris, the ISIS agenda in eastern Syria included three parts. First, the priority was to acquire a “well-buffered command center,” which pushed ISIS to take full control over al-Raqqa from Jabhat al-Nusra in January 2014.⁴⁰⁹ Second, ISIS needed access to the Turkish border to receive material supplies and foreign recruits, which motivated ISIS to attack the Kurds in the north.⁴¹⁰ Third, in order to guarantee the territorial integrity of its caliphate across Syria and Iraq, ISIS needed a channel that connected the two countries.⁴¹¹ The Deir al-Zor province, which borders Iraq and lays at the center of the joint war zone, consisting of Syria and Iraq, became the centerpiece of ISIS’s plan.⁴¹² Although ISIS only commanded 2-3,000 troops against the 10,000 rebels in Deir al-Zor, they had superior firepower, greater mobility and flexibility, better communication, and a more effective supply chain.⁴¹³ These characteristics enabled ISIS to not only win over the entire Deir al-Zor province in early June 2014, but also take control over one third of the combined territory of the two countries during the summer of 2014.⁴¹⁴ It only took ISIS less than a month to seize this big chunk of territory, which further boosted their confidence in fighting the rebels, the regime and the Kurds.⁴¹⁵ The battle in Deir al-Zor between ISIS and the rebels, according to Harris, transformed the nature of the war, adding a second focus, which centered around ISIS, to the conflict.⁴¹⁶ With ISIS taking control over too many territories and gaining excessive momentum in Syria, the U.S. felt compelled to

⁴⁰⁸ Harris,49.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid., 50.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹¹ Ibid.

⁴¹² Ibid., 51.

⁴¹³ Ibid., 50-51.

⁴¹⁴ Ibid., 51 and 55.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid., 53.

⁴¹⁶ Ibid., 51.

intervene to contain the threat and to combat terrorism.⁴¹⁷ In September 2014, the U.S. directly intervened in Syria through an aerial campaign against ISIS.⁴¹⁸

The United States and the Kurds in defeating ISIS

By the time the U.S. directly intervened in Syria in late 2014, ISIS had control over one third of the combined territory of Syria and Iraq, had access to oilfields, and enjoyed high momentum of recruiting more fighters and acquiring more territories.⁴¹⁹ Facing ISIS's expansion, the Obama administration decided to "leverage a relatively small footprint of U.S. and coalition forces," which means to intervene through launching an aerial campaign and deploying only a limited number of Special Operations Forces, instead of a large number of ground troops, to fight ISIS.⁴²⁰ The U.S.-led coalition consisted of France, Britain, Australia, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain.⁴²¹

According to Ash Carter, Secretary of Defense from 2015 to 2017, the U.S. resisted sending ground troops due to mainly two reasons.⁴²² First, a U.S. intervention with a large number of ground troops could be perceived as an invasion, which would not be supported by the international society, and therefore, make a coalition impossible.⁴²³ Second, an aerial campaign could maximize the U.S. advantages in technology, firepower, and logistics whereas ground troops might be pulled into "ISIS's turf."⁴²⁴ In addition to these two concerns, two other factors that Carter did not make explicit were Obama's reluctance to intervene and

⁴¹⁷ Ibid., 55 and 59.

⁴¹⁸ Ibid., 59.

⁴¹⁹ Carter, "A Lasting Defeat: The Campaign to Destroy ISIS."

⁴²⁰ Ibid.

⁴²¹ "Islamic State: Where Key Countries Stand," BBC News, December 03, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29074514>.

⁴²² Carter, "A Lasting Defeat: The Campaign to Destroy ISIS."

⁴²³ Ibid.

⁴²⁴ Ibid.

the public opinion against more military interventions, especially those that deploy a large number of ground troops yet have ambiguous objectives and unclear benefits.⁴²⁵

Practical Advantage

Although the U.S. aerial campaign weakened ISIS in all aspects, including manpower, firepower, and mobility, it was not enough to defeat it.⁴²⁶ The U.S. still needed ground forces for both practical and political reasons. Practically, ground forces served three main purposes in fighting ISIS. First, it was essential to have forces on the ground to hold territories reclaimed from ISIS.⁴²⁷ Carter describes this strategy as “the lasting defeat of ISIS.”⁴²⁸ This strategy was especially important because unlike Bin Laden’s Al Qaeda, which made no territorial commitment, or Jabhat al-Nusra, which advocated for “jihadism in one country,” ISIS had a vision for a cross-country caliphate, which should be, according to ISIS, “the only legitimate authority on the planet.”⁴²⁹ According to Audrey Cronin, ISIS was not a terrorist group but “a pseudo-state led by a conventional army,” in possession of territory, infrastructure, well-developed military capabilities, and independent funding sources.⁴³⁰ In order to protect its legitimacy and maintain its attractiveness to new recruits, ISIS had to keep conquering territories and fighting for resources.⁴³¹ Without ground troops, recovered territories would be left unguarded, which gave ISIS chance to take them back. Second, although the U.S. air force is unrivaled, it is no substitute for ground forces in acquiring human intelligence.⁴³² ISIS’s leaders and fighters hid in cities so that they could blend in with

⁴²⁵ Eric V. Larson, *Public Support for U.S. Military Operations*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1996. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB2502.html; Martin Pengelly, "Obama Repeats No US Troops on Ground against Isis as Egypt Offers Support," *The Guardian*, September 20, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/20/obama-reiterates-us-troops-isis>.

⁴²⁶ Harris, 66.

⁴²⁷ Carter, "A Lasting Defeat: The Campaign to Destroy ISIS."

⁴²⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴²⁹ Harris, 61, 59.

⁴³⁰ Audrey Kurth Cronin, "ISIS Is Not a Terrorist Group: Why Counterterrorism Won't Stop the Latest Jihadist Threat." *Foreign Affairs* 94, no. 2 (2015): 88. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24483485>.

⁴³¹ Harris, 61.

⁴³² Carter, "A Lasting Defeat: The Campaign to Destroy ISIS."

civilians.⁴³³ This tactic made it hard to launch precise surgical strikes without incurring high casualties.⁴³⁴ Troops on the ground, who can provide intelligence about the locations of ISIS's personnel and facilities, would be helpful in identifying targets and increasing the accuracy of the attack.⁴³⁵ Additionally, Carter argues that the U.S. intelligence on ISIS was so inadequate in 2014 that the Americans had little knowledge about the identity, location and plan of their jihadist enemies.⁴³⁶ The insufficiency in intelligence was only gradually overcome in the following combat, during which the U.S. Special Operation Forces and the local ground troops both made valuable contributions.⁴³⁷ The U.S. Special Forces launched a raid in May 2015 to capture Abu Sayyaf, one of ISIS's leaders.⁴³⁸ Abu Sayyaf was killed, but his wife and slave, along with documents and electronics were captured, through which the U.S. obtained important information about ISIS's leadership behavior.⁴³⁹ If the U.S. launched an airstrike against the target, it would not have been able to obtain that kind of crucial information about ISIS. Likewise, the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Force (SDF) was successful in seizing Manbij in August 2016.⁴⁴⁰ This operation entailed heavy casualties but enabled the SDF to capture former ISIS safe houses and facilities, which provided valuable intelligence for counter-terrorism efforts in Europe and the U.S.⁴⁴¹ These two cases both demonstrate the importance of ground troops in acquiring human intelligence. Third, the U.S. needed ground forces, preferably local forces, to better understand the local power dynamic. Air bombing could effectively hit the target but would not help the U.S. gain insights into the ongoing conflict in the war zone.⁴⁴² Philip Zelikow argues that supporting and training local

⁴³³ Cronin, 90.

⁴³⁴ Ibid.

⁴³⁵ Carter, "A Lasting Defeat: The Campaign to Destroy ISIS."

⁴³⁶ Ibid.

⁴³⁷ Ibid.

⁴³⁸ Ibid.

⁴³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴⁴² Philip Zelikow, "U.S. and Coalition Strategy Against ISIS." In *Blind Spot: America's Response to Radicalism in the Middle East*, 199. Aspen Institute, 2015. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt19gfk32.20>.

forces is helpful because learning goes both ways.⁴⁴³ Interactions with local forces would fill in gaps in the U.S. understanding, inform the U.S. strategies and tactics, and allow the U.S. to intervene with higher credibility.⁴⁴⁴

In addition to the practical advantages, ground forces also served political purposes. Cronin argues that ISIS differs from al-Qaeda in many aspects, including recruiting strategies.⁴⁴⁵ Different from Al-Qaeda's focus on religion, ISIS appeals to people's desire for "adventure, personal power, a sense of self and community" or, sometimes simply, violence and cruelty.⁴⁴⁶ ISIS's strategy takes advantage of the young population's need for agency and the older generation's desire for money and power.⁴⁴⁷ After joining ISIS, new recruits are immediately given the chance to fight and even sexual partners to entertain them.⁴⁴⁸ In order to prevent ISIS from expanding into new territories or reinvigorating in recovered territories, the U.S. had to create an alternative that could provide the local population with agency and a sense of belonging. As mentioned in the theory chapter, local forces have much higher legitimacy than external powers in the local sphere. This argument is supported by Howard Clark, who points out that it is important to have citizens fighting for their own land "with their own blood and sweat," especially in Arab countries that involve deep-rooted tribal affiliations and sectarian divisions.⁴⁴⁹ Clark further emphasizes that political legitimacy and trust for local authorities are so fragile and specific that they could not easily shift to "far-away capitals," not to mention to ground troops of external powers.⁴⁵⁰ Clark uses the battle of Mosul to demonstrate his point. He argues that unless the Sunni Arabs in the city decided to rise and fight, Mosul would always be unstable and on the verge of falling to ISIS again.⁴⁵¹

⁴⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁵ Cronin, 94.

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁹ Clark, "Go Local."

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁵¹ Ibid.

Moreover, the tactic of completely relying on an aerial campaign without troops fighting terrorism on the ground had the risk of being manipulated by ISIS.⁴⁵² The U.S. attack against jihadists can be twisted and described as an attack against all Muslims, which could easily radicalize the population and invoke an urge to seek revenge.⁴⁵³ As a result, the U.S. had to rely on local forces to provide the local population with agency, legitimacy and organization to prevent ISIS from coming back.

To sum up, ground forces were essential in the war against ISIS. From a practical perspective, the U.S. needed ground forces to hold territories, to obtain human intelligence and to better understand the local power dynamic. Even though the Special Forces were also effective in collecting intelligence, they were unable to hold territories and have fewer knowledge about the local society than the local forces do. Given the fact that the Obama administration was unwilling to deploy a large number of ground troops in Syria, supporting local forces was the most ideal option. More importantly, the U.S. had to rely on local forces for political reasons. To eliminate ISIS and prevent it from coming back, the U.S. needed local forces to serve as an alternative to ISIS for the local population. This is especially important in Syria and Iraq, where tribal, sectarian and religious identities and relationships are so complicated and intertwined, making local authorities essential. As a result of their practical advantages in local presence, intelligence, and legitimacy, local forces became necessary and desirable in the war against ISIS. The U.S.'s reliance on them, in turn, gave these local forces leverage over the U.S., despite an overall power disadvantage.

Local forces were necessary, but the many actors in Syria and Iraq meant that the U.S. had to choose from different local partners. Despite the presence of rebels, the regime, Iran, Russia, the Iraqi army, and the Kurds, however, the U.S. had few good options. First, the

⁴⁵² Ibid.

⁴⁵³ Ibid.

rebels were extremely fragmented and disorganized.⁴⁵⁴ In general, the attention of the rebels was mostly on the Assad regime.⁴⁵⁵ Thus, even though they managed to form a loose alignment among three groups to fight ISIS in November 2013 – the Islamic Front, the Syrian Revolutionaries’ Front (SRF), and a smaller group consisting of ex-FSA fighters – that jointly commanded 80,000 fighters across Syria, no central authority or coordination mechanism existed to bring all the fighters to the battlefield to fight alongside each other.⁴⁵⁶ According to Carter, the U.S. plan for Syria in 2014 was to recruit and train individual rebel fighters, who would then assemble into a new force.⁴⁵⁷ This plan apparently failed because it was too costly and time-consuming.⁴⁵⁸ Sadly, after pouring millions of dollars into recruiting and training fighters in Syria, the U.S. only had around “60 dependable anti-ISIS fighters” deployed in Syria in July 2015.⁴⁵⁹ Some rebel trainees even gave U.S. weapons to Jabhat al-Nusra in order to get safe passage through the terrorist-controlled areas in September 2015.⁴⁶⁰ Besides, the rebels also had a terrible human rights record: they killed 190 Alawites in a massacre in September 2013, among which 57 were women and 18 were children.⁴⁶¹ To sum up, the rebels’ fragmentation, focus on fighting Assad, connection with terrorist groups, and atrocious human rights record discouraged the U.S. from providing support for them to fight ISIS.

Second, supporting the Assad regime was not feasible. The regime forces and ISIS stayed out of each other’s way before the summer of 2014.⁴⁶² More importantly, it would be

⁴⁵⁴ Harris, 37 and 48.

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid., 119.

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid., 48.

⁴⁵⁷ Carter, "A Lasting Defeat: The Campaign to Destroy ISIS."

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁰ "U.S.-trained Syrian Rebels Gave Equipment to Nusra: U.S. Military," Reuters, September 26, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-usa-equipment/u-s-trained-syrian-rebels-gave-equipment-to-nusra-u-s-military-idUSKCN0RP2HO20150926>.

⁴⁶¹ Harris, 47.

⁴⁶² Ibid.

impossible for the U.S. to support a regime that had used poison gas on its citizens.⁴⁶³ Third, Iran and Russia mostly used ISIS as a cover to justify their intervention in Syria.⁴⁶⁴ Iran sent Quds Force advisers and weapons to support the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in Iraq to fight ISIS.⁴⁶⁵ Iran's priority, however, was to strengthen the power of Shi'a Arabs and promote Shi'a dominance in Iraq.⁴⁶⁶ During battles against ISIS in Iraq when both the Iran-backed Shi'a militias and the U.S. were involved, the Shi'a forces wanted independent victories, rejected U.S. involvement, and even threatened to fight the Americans.⁴⁶⁷ The idea of coordinating with Iran would not be supported by the U.S. Congress or the American public, either. In terms of Russia, although the Russians frequently expressed their intention to fight ISIS, such gesture was merely a cover for their true intention, which was to help Assad win the war so that Syria would be their "remaining foothold in the Middle East."⁴⁶⁸ Russia deployed "500 Russian marines and 'dozen' of combat airplanes and attack helicopters" to Syria in September 2015 for the purpose of counter-terrorism.⁴⁶⁹ In reality, however, all these personnel and weapons were used to attack the rebels and "not a single bomb fell on the ISIS caliphate."⁴⁷⁰ Fourth, the U.S. tried to rebuild and re-equip the Iraqi army as an indigenous force to fight ISIS.⁴⁷¹ While planning to retake Mosul in February 2015, the United States Central Command (CENTCOM) Commander Lloyd Austin intended to rely on the Iraqi army, which, according to Carter, barely existed on paper.⁴⁷² The fact that it would take too long for the Iraqi army to be ready to fight made them not ideal for cooperation.

⁴⁶³ Ibid., 42.

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid., 57.

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid., 64.

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid., 65 and 82.

⁴⁶⁸ Martini, et al., 2.

⁴⁶⁹ Harris, 77.

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁷¹ Ibid., 63.

⁴⁷² Carter, "A Lasting Defeat: The Campaign to Destroy ISIS."

Compared to the four local presence discussed above, the Iraqi and Syrian Kurds had three main characteristics that made them a useful ally on the ground for the U.S.-led coalition in the war against ISIS. First, the Kurds were relatively homogeneous, well-organized and militarily capable.⁴⁷³ Although the Kurds had and still have internal divisions, the existential threat posed by ISIS brought the Iraqi Kurds and the Syrian Kurds together.⁴⁷⁴ The Iraqi Kurds have been governed by the KRG and guarded by the Peshmerga, while the Syrian Kurds have been ruled by the PYD and protected by the YPG.⁴⁷⁵ The YPG, upon the U.S. request, adopted a new name – the Syrian Democratic Force (SDF) – in July 2017.⁴⁷⁶ Both the Peshmerga and the YPG had been established militaries before ISIS attacked the Kurds, which saved the U.S. from having to build an army from scratch and allowed the U.S. military support to be “plugged into the already-existing groups.”⁴⁷⁷ The Crisis Group Middle East Report in May 2015 quoted a European diplomat, who said that the coalition chose to support the Iraqi Kurds mainly because of the Peshmerga, which was perceived as “a well-organized counterpart” to the U.S.-led coalition’s military.⁴⁷⁸ Second, the narrative that the U.S. was supporting and protecting a minority group under existential threat in the Middle East sold well in the government and among the public.⁴⁷⁹ Masoud Barzani, the president of KRG, also sent compelling message to persuade the West to support the Kurds in fighting against ISIS. Barzani told the *Washington Post* that ISIS not only posed a threat to the Middle East but also to the entire world.⁴⁸⁰ More importantly, he emphasized that the Kurds cannot fight ISIS alone and invited the U.S. to support the Kurds, a group of force that was “the United States’ staunch allies in the region ... the only force in the area with the means and

⁴⁷³ "Arming Iraq's Kurds: Fighting IS, Inviting Conflict," 18.

⁴⁷⁴ Barkey, 112.

⁴⁷⁵ Harris, 111 and 118.

⁴⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁴⁷⁷ Carter, "A Lasting Defeat: The Campaign to Destroy ISIS."

⁴⁷⁸ "Arming Iraq's Kurds: Fighting IS, Inviting Conflict," 18.

⁴⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁴⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

will to protect thousands of lives from the horrors that these terrorists bring.”⁴⁸¹ Third, the U.S. had a long-term and well-established relationship with KRG and Peshmerga before the war started.⁴⁸² Peshmerga had facilitated U.S. intelligence gathering in the region and benefited from the U.S. military support since the U.S. invasion of Iraq.⁴⁸³ This relatively long-standing alliance could at least reassure the U.S. that the KRG would “use weapons for the right purpose,” which made them a trustworthy partner.⁴⁸⁴ Different from the relationship between the U.S and the KRG, the U.S. support for the PYD was more recent.⁴⁸⁵ According to Harris, the U.S. saw the PYD as “an effective but insufficient ground force against ISIS” in 2014.⁴⁸⁶ Despite its insufficiency at the beginning, YPG proved its capacity and acquired recognition during the Kobani battle in October 2015.⁴⁸⁷

Given the importance of ground troops in fighting ISIS and the characteristics of other local forces in Syria and Iraq, the U.S. decided to support the Iraqi and the Syrian Kurds. The U.S. provided the Kurds with weapons, training and logistical support, while at the same time, relying on them to provide “logistical and operational collaboration” on the ground.⁴⁸⁸ The U.S. support empowered the Kurds, which created opportunities for them to acquire leverage, enhance status, and even manipulate the relationship with the U.S. As briefly mentioned above, the YPG made significant contributions to the success in the battle of Kobani. The victory changed the U.S. government’s perception of Kobani, reflected through John Kerry’s rhetoric, from not on the “level of strategic objective” to “a big deal.”⁴⁸⁹ This battle demonstrated the military capability of YPG, which was immediately promoted to “the head

⁴⁸¹ Ibid.

⁴⁸² Harris, 108.

⁴⁸³ "Kurdish Peshmerga," The Kurdish Project, <https://thekurdishproject.org/history-and-culture/kurdish-nationalism/kurdish-peshmerga/>.

⁴⁸⁴ "Arming Iraq’s Kurds: Fighting IS, Inviting Conflict," 18.

⁴⁸⁵ Harris, 107.

⁴⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid., 119.

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid., 113.

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid., 119.

of a new front of Arab and other non-Kurdish factions” in the following month.⁴⁹⁰ Another example that shows the Kurds manipulating U.S. support was during the Mosul battle in 2016.⁴⁹¹ While the U.S. was planning to retake Mosul, ISIS’s center in Iraq, the KRG and the Iraqi government were involved in an oil dispute.⁴⁹² Oil was a crucial element for the KRG to gain sovereignty, but Baghdad was unwilling to compromise.⁴⁹³ The U.S. initially had no part in this dispute but needed logistical and operational support from the Peshmerga, which was in control of land surrounding Mosul, to defeat ISIS in Mosul.⁴⁹⁴ The KRG then effectively used its local presence as a leverage and made it explicit that it would not cooperate unless the oil dispute was settled in their favor.⁴⁹⁵ Eventually, the U.S. envoy Brett McGurk acted as a mediator for five months and achieved an agreement in the interests of the KRG in exchange for Peshmerga’s “full, enthusiastic collaboration in the Mosul battle.”⁴⁹⁶

Relative Will

In addition to the practical advantage as a result of their local presence, knowledge, and network, the Kurds also had stronger will to fight than the U.S. did in Syria. According to Mack and Arreguín-Toft, local forces tend to have stronger will to fight because they have higher stakes involved in the conflict and are constrained by fewer political vulnerabilities. For the external powers, whose survival and security are not under threat, they are more likely to face pressure from their political institutions and society, demanding a quick victory to justify the resources deployed for the intervention. If it is widely known that the external power’s will of intervention is constrained by domestic politics or public opinion, local forces would not expect a long-term relationship, and then have incentives to manipulate and exploit

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁹¹ Ibid., 113-114.

⁴⁹² Ibid., 113.

⁴⁹³ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid., 114.

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid.

external support to pursue their own objectives. This argument is well-supported by the relationship between the Kurds and the U.S. in fighting ISIS.

ISIS targeted the Kurds for mainly two reasons. First, the Kurds prioritized ethnic identity over religious identity.⁴⁹⁷ The PYD's campaign for "secularism, socialism, and gender equality" was perceived by ISIS as being godless.⁴⁹⁸ Second, the Syrian Kurds occupied territories in northern Syria, which blocked ISIS communication with its cells in Turkey and Europe and obstructed transportation of foreign recruits from Turkey into Syria.⁴⁹⁹ The Kurd-controlled Kobani was especially important because it was in the middle of Aleppo – ISIS was in charge of "the Syrian side of the Turkish border northeast of Aleppo" in 2014 – and al-Raqqa, ISIS's headquarter.⁵⁰⁰ According to Harris, ISIS wanted to acquire as much control over the Syrian-Turkish border as possible so that it could penetrate Turkey, which had mostly been focusing on the PYD's presence on the border.⁵⁰¹ Unlike the Syrian Kurds, the Iraqi Kurds were not "an immediate target" for ISIS in 2014 because they did not hold territories that stood in ISIS's way.⁵⁰² However, their territories and resources in northern Iraq still made an ISIS attack inevitable.⁵⁰³

Both the Iraqi and the Syrian Kurds faced existential threat from ISIS's attack in 2014.⁵⁰⁴ ISIS surrounded villages around Sinjar, a Yazidi town west of Mosul, on August 3, 2014.⁵⁰⁵ The Peshmerga militia stationed in the region was no match for ISIS, which was equipped with American weapons captured from the Iraqi army.⁵⁰⁶ Besides, ISIS was so well informed that it had precise information about the identity and location of the Sunnis, Christians and

⁴⁹⁷ Ibid., 60.

⁴⁹⁸ Ibid., 118.

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid., 60.

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid., 118.

⁵⁰¹ Ibid., 119.

⁵⁰² Ibid., 118.

⁵⁰³ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid., 111 and 119.

⁵⁰⁵ Christoph Reuter, "The Drama of Sinjar: Escaping the Islamic State in Iraq" Spiegel Online, August 18, 2014, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/pkk-assistance-for-yazidis-escaping-the-jihadists-of-the-islamic-state-a-986648.html>.

⁵⁰⁶ Ibid.

Yazidis in the village, which allowed it to plan accordingly.⁵⁰⁷ While facing this strong enemy and its efficient attack, the Peshmerga lost confidence, disassembled, and left the 50,000 people in the Sinjar Mountain on their own.⁵⁰⁸ Four days after capturing Sinjar, ISIS seized the Mosul dam – the largest dam in Iraq – and started advancing toward Erbil.⁵⁰⁹ In order to save the KRG from this crisis, the U.S. intervened through aerial campaign, which enabled the Peshmerga to hold Erbil, recover the Mosul dam, and evacuate the population in the mountains.⁵¹⁰ In Syria, although the YPG managed to resist ISIS in July 2014, it was still not strong enough to fend off the ISIS’s major attack against the Kobani canton in mid-September.⁵¹¹ The YPG held only “a pocket in Kobani town” by early October, which forced the majority of the population to flee across the border into Turkey.⁵¹² Despite Turkey’s opposition to the U.S. supporting the YPG, the U.S.-led coalition still intervened through air bombing to protect the Syrian Kurds.⁵¹³ This support allowed the YPG to win the battle in January 2015 and regain all the lost territory in the canton by mid-March.⁵¹⁴

Unlike the Kurds, the U.S. faced no existential threat in the civil war of Syria. Although ISIS was a formidable enemy that threatened the U.S. national interests, it posed no threat to U.S. survival. Given the power disparity between the U.S. and ISIS, it would be unreasonable and politically impossible for the U.S. to deploy all of its resources, as the Kurds would, to fight ISIS. Besides, the U.S. was much more domestically-politically vulnerable than the Kurds, which significantly constrained its will. According to the survey conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2012, 64% of the U.S. population did not support intervention in

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁹ Jeremy Bender, "ISIS Has Seized Iraq's Largest Dam, And What Happens Next Is Critical," Business Insider, August 07, 2014, <https://www.businessinsider.com/isis-has-seized-the-mosul-dam-2014-8>.

⁵¹⁰ Bender "ISIS Has Seized Iraq's Largest Dam, And What Happens Next Is Critical," Harris, 112.

⁵¹¹ Harris, 118-119.

⁵¹² Ibid., 119.

⁵¹³ Ibid.

⁵¹⁴ Ibid.

Syria, 62% opposed airstrikes and 63% were against the idea of supporting the rebels.⁵¹⁵

Another survey conducted in September 2013 showed that 74% believed that airstrikes would “create a backlash against the U.S. and its allies in the region” and 61% expected long-term U.S. military commitment in Syria.⁵¹⁶ In terms of public support for U.S. campaign against ISIS, the majority supported the campaign but only 30% believed that the U.S. had “a clear goal in taking military action.”⁵¹⁷ In general, the U.S. public was not in favor of another military intervention in the Middle East, which could be an important factor that constrained the Obama administration’s will of intervention, especially during the initial stages of the civil war.

The U.S. limited interests in Syria were well demonstrated and widely known after two empty threats from the Obama administration. First, the U.S. government asked Assad to “step aside” in 2011 but did not follow through with any actions.⁵¹⁸ This behavior sent a clear message that the U.S. was no friend of Assad, but also signaled the U.S. limited interests in a direct intervention in Syria, which emboldened the regime and the jihadists.⁵¹⁹ Second, Obama explicitly declared that the use of chemical weapons was the “red line” that would trigger direct military intervention from the U.S.⁵²⁰ However, the U.S. government had no reaction when the Assad regime released a small amount of poison gas in mid-2013, which showed the U.S. unwillingness to intervene and encouraged Assad to release a large quantity of sarin gas in rebel-controlled areas of Damascus in August 2013.⁵²¹ Once again, the Obama

⁵¹⁵ "Little Support for U.S. Intervention in Syrian Conflict."

⁵¹⁶ "Public Opinion Runs Against Syrian Airstrikes." Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. September 24, 2018. <https://www.people-press.org/2013/09/03/public-opinion-runs-against-syrian-airstrikes/>.

⁵¹⁷ "Support for U.S. Campaign against ISIS." Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. September 24, 2018. <https://www.people-press.org/2014/10/22/support-for-u-s-campaign-against-isis-doubts-about-its-effectiveness-objectives/>.

⁵¹⁸ Harris, 31.

⁵¹⁹ Ibid.

⁵²⁰ Ibid., 41.

⁵²¹ Ibid., 42.

administration did not actualize its threat of intervention, and Assad was let off the hook after chemical disarmament.⁵²²

Although the U.S. threat of intervention did not directly affect the Kurds, they could not help but notice the U.S.'s small appetite for more intervention in the Middle East. This perception led the Kurds to doubt the U.S. long-term commitment to their cause after the war against ISIS ended, which likely motivated them to seize the moment and exploit U.S. support when they had the chance.⁵²³ For the Syrian Kurds, their alliance with the U.S. was already shaky while they were still fighting ISIS.⁵²⁴ Unlike the long-term and well-established relationship between the U.S. and KRG, the U.S. alliance with PYD was more recent.⁵²⁵ As discussed above, the Syrian Kurds were the only meaningful ally on the ground that the U.S. had in Syria.⁵²⁶ With the U.S. support, the YPG fighters were very efficient in fighting ISIS.⁵²⁷ They effectively forced ISIS to withdraw from the north and fall back to al-Raqqa and the Euphrates Banks in early 2017, defeated ISIS in al-Raqqa in October, reduced the number of ISIS fighters in Iraq and Syria to 1,000 by December 2017, attacked ISIS's last foothold in eastern Syria in November 2018, and captured Baghouz, the last piece of territory held by ISIS, in March 2019.⁵²⁸ After recognizing the YPG's capability and contribution, the U.S. stepped up its arms supply in May 2017.⁵²⁹ This support, however, was strongly opposed by Turkey, which saw the PYD as an offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a terrorist-separatist group that has been trying to gain independence and divide

⁵²² Ibid.

⁵²³ Ibid., 107.

⁵²⁴ Ibid., 108.

⁵²⁵ Ibid., 107.

⁵²⁶ Gunter, 106.

⁵²⁷ "Timeline: The Rise, Spread and Fall of the Islamic State." Wilson Center. April 02, 2019. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/timeline-the-rise-spread-and-fall-the-islamic-state>.

⁵²⁸ "Timeline: The Rise, Spread and Fall of the Islamic State;" Harris, 120.

⁵²⁹ Ibid., 96.

Turkey since the 1980s.⁵³⁰ After the victory in al-Raqqa in October, the U.S. conceded to Turkey's strong opposition and cut off the arms supply in November.⁵³¹

There were three Kurdish uprisings in Turkey during the 1920s and 30s.⁵³² Though the Turkish government managed to crush all three, the Kurds' ambition of independence always kept Ankara on edge, and inevitably, gave rise to a range of repressive policies, including banning all Kurdish organizations, closing down all Kurdish schools, and closely monitoring Kurdish activities across the border in Syria and Iraq.⁵³³ The fact that one of the three uprisings was planned by Khoybun, "the first transnational Kurdish political party," and launched through their Syrian base explained Turkey's concern about the PYD gaining more power in Syria.⁵³⁴ Besides, the PYD does have a close relationship with the terrorist group PKK.⁵³⁵ It was founded by the PKK in 2003 and the YPG militia was constructed in 2011-2012 with support from PKK.⁵³⁶ After the establishment of the YPG, the PYD managed to consolidate power and marginalize the Kurdish National Council (KNC), which had been willing to trade the Syrian Kurds' collaboration in fighting the regime for Turkey's recognition of "Kurdish identity and grievances" before the PYD became more dominant.⁵³⁷

Turkey had two major concerns after the Kurds joined the fight in Syria.⁵³⁸ First, Turkey was worried about the Syrian Kurds cooperating with the Assad regime.⁵³⁹ Hostilities between Syria and Turkey started to develop after Assad rejected Turkey's suggestion of political reform and personally confronted the Turkish Prime Minister Recep Erdogan in

⁵³⁰ Ibid.

⁵³¹ Suzan Fraser and Josh Lederman. "Trump Tells Turkey's Leader: US to Stop Arming Syrian Kurds." U.S. News & World Report. November 24, 2017. <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2017-11-24/turkey-us-to-stop-arming-syrian-kurdish-fighters>.

⁵³² Gunter, 106.

⁵³³ Ibid.

⁵³⁴ Ibid.

⁵³⁵ Harris, 139.

⁵³⁶ Ibid.

⁵³⁷ Ibid.

⁵³⁸ Ibid., 140.

⁵³⁹ Ibid.

2011.⁵⁴⁰ With the street protests evolving into a civil war in 2011, Turkey started providing support for the rebels and the jihadists to fight for a regime change in Syria.⁵⁴¹ This intervention marked the end of Turkey's "zero-problems with neighbors" foreign policy in the region.⁵⁴² In terms of the PYD and the regime, Turkey accused the PYD of acting as "a surrogate for the Assad regime and the PKK," since the PYD not only shared al-Qamishli, a major border city, with the regime, but also was a member of the National Coordination Committee (NCC), an agency that was commonly known as the "regime tool."⁵⁴³ Second, Turkey perceived the PYD's contribution to the war against ISIS as a design by the PKK to demonstrate capability and power, which would strengthen the Kurdish population's resolve to fight for independence.⁵⁴⁴ Even though the PYD leader Salih Muslim said during an interview in July 2015 that the Syrian Kurds had no intention to be independent, Turkey was still worried about the Kurds acquiring territorial continuity along the Syrian-Turkish border, which could not only lead to the Syrian Kurds' independence but also unsettle the Kurdish population in Turkey.⁵⁴⁵

The bitter history between the Turks and the Kurds along with Turkey's suspicion toward the rising PYD led to Turkey's judgment about the PYD: it was as much of a threat as ISIS, if not more.⁵⁴⁶ The most ideal scenario then would be to have these two enemies wear each other out in Syria.⁵⁴⁷ As a result, Turkey refused to provide help when the Syrian Kurds faced an existential threat in 2014 and strongly opposed the U.S. support for the YPG as well.⁵⁴⁸ When the U.S.-backed YPG fought for survival in Kobani, a city on the Syrian-

⁵⁴⁰ Ibid., 134.

⁵⁴¹ Ibid.

⁵⁴² Ibid., 134, 137.

⁵⁴³ Ibid., 139.

⁵⁴⁴ Gunter, 105.

⁵⁴⁵ Harris, 139.

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid., 144.

⁵⁴⁷ Gunter, 106.

⁵⁴⁸ Harris, 144.

Turkish border, in October 2014, Turkey was motionless.⁵⁴⁹ This indifferent attitude not only irritated the PYD leader Muslim, who accused Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP) of colluding with ISIS to eliminate the Kurds, but also undermined the AKP's credibility among its own Kurdish population.⁵⁵⁰ Moreover, prior to the battle to retake al-Raqqa from ISIS in 2016, Turkey wanted to replace the YPG-dominated SDF to fight alongside the U.S. and achieve "a high-profile victory" in Raqqa.⁵⁵¹ Erdogan said to Obama in October 2016 that an alliance between Turkey and the U.S. had sufficient power to defeat ISIS and they did not need "terror organizations like the PYD and the YPG in Raqqa."⁵⁵² Although it would indeed be helpful to partner with a NATO ally, the U.S. ignored Erdogan's suggestion.⁵⁵³ The SDF's solid track record of combating ISIS and the familiarity established during previous cooperation made SDF a preferable choice.⁵⁵⁴ Besides, the U.S. needed the SDF to move deeper and to fight ISIS in Deir al-Zor, one of ISIS's last few holdings.⁵⁵⁵ The U.S. dismissal of Turkey's lobbying gave rise to discontent in the AKP, which blamed the U.S. for prioritizing its relationship with the PYD over the territorial integrity of Turkey.⁵⁵⁶ Meanwhile, the AKP and the PKK continued to engage in skirmishes.⁵⁵⁷ The PKK attacked Turkish state institutions in 2016; Turkey launched airstrike against the YPG in northeastern Syria in April 2017, which forced the U.S. to conduct border patrol to prevent more clashes; and the SDF had to suspend their offensive on ISIS in November 2018 due to attacks from Turkey on Syrian Kurds in northern Syria.⁵⁵⁸

⁵⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁰ Ibid., 120 and 144.

⁵⁵¹ Ibid., 152.

⁵⁵² "Turkey to US: Drop PYD, Let's Free Raqqa Together - World News." *Hürriyet Daily News*. October 28, 2016. <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-to-us-drop-pyd-lets-free-raqqa-together-105423>.

⁵⁵³ Harris, 152.

⁵⁵⁴ Ibid., 152 and 158.

⁵⁵⁵ Ibid., 159.

⁵⁵⁶ Ibid., 158.

⁵⁵⁷ Ibid., 147 and 159.

⁵⁵⁸ "PKK Targeting Turkish Institutions across Europe, Europol Says." *DailySabah*. June 16, 2017. <https://www.dailysabah.com/war-on-terror/2017/06/16/pkk-targeting-turkish-institutions-across-europe-europol-says>; Harris, 159.

Caught up in the conflict among Turkey, the PKK, and the Syrian Kurds, the U.S. found it hard to balance its interests and allegiances. On one hand, the U.S. needed the PYD, which had proven to be very militarily effective and capable, to eliminate ISIS. On the other hand, the U.S. could not ignore the protest from its NATO ally.⁵⁵⁹ In the short-term, the U.S. could use the Turkish Incirlik air base to launch its aerial campaign, while in the long-term, Turkey is of great strategic importance to the U.S.⁵⁶⁰ From the Kurds' perspective, the U.S. rhetoric of describing its relationship with the YPG as "temporary, transactional, and tactical" in May 2017, its decision to stop arms supply for the PYD after the victory in al-Raqqa, and the U.S. acquiescence to Turkey's frequent bombing of the SDF were clear signals of the U.S.'s limited will to commit to a long-term relationship with the PYD after the defeat of ISIS.⁵⁶¹

Toward the end of 2018, Turkey constantly threatened to invade the Kurd-controlled parts of northern Syria.⁵⁶² President Donald Trump's order to withdraw the 2,000 American troops from Syria on December 19 further unnerved the Kurds.⁵⁶³ Without the deterrence provided by the U.S. military presence, the Syrian Kurds were, once again, surrounded by the Russia- and Iran-backed Assad regime and the increasingly hostile Turkey.⁵⁶⁴ In response, the Kurds reached out to the Assad regime on December 28 for protection against Turkey.⁵⁶⁵ The Assad regime had long wanted to regain control over northern Syria but had been deterred by the U.S. presence.⁵⁶⁶ Reconciliation with the Assad regime would significantly strengthen Russia and Iran's power, which could undermine the U.S. influence in the region.⁵⁶⁷ The

⁵⁵⁹ Harris, 120.

⁵⁶⁰ Ibid., 146.

⁵⁶¹ Bilal Wahab and Jackson Doering, "Managing the Shift in U.S. Relations with Syria's Kurds," The Washington Institute, December 8, 2017, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/managing-the-shift-in-u.s.-relations-with-syrias-kurds>;

⁵⁶² Harris, 122.

⁵⁶³ Ben Hubbard, "Syria's Kurds, Feeling Betrayed by the U.S., Ask Assad Government for Protection," The New York Times, December 28, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/28/world/middleeast/syria-kurds-turkey-manbij.html?login=facebook>.

⁵⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁷ Ibid.

Syrian Kurds' decision to reach out to Assad without informing the U.S. could be seen as a strategy to threaten the U.S. and send the message that if the U.S. abandoned the Kurds, they could easily turn to the enemies.⁵⁶⁸ Such a strategy led to Trump's threat to impose economic sanctions on Turkey as a response to the Turkish military buildup on the border in January 2019, his decision to leave 200 American troops in Syria in February, and discussions in the Pentagon to allow the Kurds to keep the American-supplied weapons.⁵⁶⁹ To sum up, when the U.S. limited will for long-term commitment became obvious, the Kurds leveraged other players, including the Assad regime, Russia and Iran, to influence the U.S. decision of withdrawal from Syria.

Diverging Objectives

The third factor in the theoretical framework is about diverging objectives. According to Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham, agency slack, which means local forces have incentives to escape from the external powers' control so that they could have more autonomy to pursue their own objectives, exists in the relationship between external powers and local forces. The problem would be more significant if the objectives of the two actors severely misalign, which was indeed the case in the relationship between the U.S. and the Kurds.

Around 30 million Kurds are currently residing in four countries: Syria, Iraq, Turkey and Iran.⁵⁷⁰ After the Ottoman Empire disintegrated during the First World War, the Kurds were given the chance to hold an independent referendum, as specified in the 1920 Treaty of Sevres.⁵⁷¹ However, Treaty of Sevres was re-negotiated between the new Turkish government, which came to power after Turkey's war of independence in 1923, and the

⁵⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁹ Annie Karni and Thomas Gibbons-neff, "200 U.S. Troops to Stay in Syria, White House Says," *The New York Times*, February 22, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/21/world/middleeast/us-troops-syria-.html>; "US Commanders Propose Kurdish Fighters in Syria Keep Weapons."

⁵⁷⁰ Barkey, 108.

⁵⁷¹ Ibid.

Allies.⁵⁷² The re-negotiation granted Turkey sovereignty over the otherwise potentially independent Kurdistan, and subsequently, gave rise to Kurdish nationalism and the persistent demand for independence in the region.⁵⁷³

During the 20th century, the Kurdish population in the four countries all organized insurgencies and caused serious problems for their host governments in one way or another.⁵⁷⁴ The Turkish Kurds organized three rebellions in 1925, 1930, and 1938, which were all crushed by the Turkish government.⁵⁷⁵ The most recent rebellious movements have been headed by the PKK, which has haunted the AKP for almost three decades.⁵⁷⁶ Iran was troubled by the Kurds in 1946, when the Soviet-backed Iranian Kurds “established the first genuine Kurdish government.”⁵⁷⁷ Though the government only existed for a year, it was still a serious attempt to break away from the Iranian rule.⁵⁷⁸ As for Iraq, their Kurdish population were used by Iran – their protracted enemy – to fight against the Iraqi government during the 1960s and 1970s.⁵⁷⁹ Iran abandoned the Kurds in 1975 after making a deal with Saddam Hussein over “the sharing of the Shatt al-Arab, the waterway in which the Tigris and Euphrates converge as they approach the Gulf.”⁵⁸⁰ The Shah of Iran exchanged Iran’s support of the Kurds for the control over “the deepest point” of the river.⁵⁸¹ In terms of the Syrian Kurds, their major movement toward independence started during the Syrian civil war.⁵⁸²

In response to the Kurdish rebellions, which posed a significant security threat to national interests and territorial integrity, all four host countries adopted measures to repress

⁵⁷² Ibid.

⁵⁷³ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁵ Gunter, 106.

⁵⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁷ Barkey, 108.

⁵⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁰ Joost Hiltermann, "They Were Expendable: Iraq and the Kurds," London Review of Books, November 17, 2016, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v38/n22/joost-hiltermann/they-were-expendable>.

⁵⁸¹ Ibid.

⁵⁸² Harris, 104-105.

the Kurdish population.⁵⁸³ Turkey, Iran, and Syria all banned Kurdish language, schools, and organizations.⁵⁸⁴ Turkey burned down villages; Iraq slaughtered Kurds during its 1988 Anfal counterinsurgency campaign; and Syria “revoked the citizenship of tens of thousands of Syrian Kurds” in the 1960s.⁵⁸⁵ Despite all these atrocities, the Kurds have never perceived themselves as a minority and have continued to hold onto their ambition of independence and autonomy.⁵⁸⁶ The Iranian and Turkish Kurds are both under close surveillance and strict control by their governments, which gives them few chances to acquire power and gain autonomy.⁵⁸⁷ The Iraqi and Syrian Kurds, on the other hand, have effectively exploited the chaos during the civil war and manipulated the U.S. support while fighting ISIS, thus making significant progress since 2011.⁵⁸⁸ In terms of territory held, U.S. support enabled the Iraqi and the Syrian Kurds to not only keep their previous territories but also acquire new ones after throwing out ISIS.⁵⁸⁹ The KRG captured new territories that were of great symbolic and cultural value to the Kurds and also took control over the valuable Mosul dam after defeating ISIS in Sinjar in November 2015.⁵⁹⁰ By mid-2017, the land captured during the process of fighting ISIS amounted to more than half of KRG’s own territory before the war. From the KRG’s perspective, the newly acquired territory was a part of the “disputed territory subject to Kurdish claim,” which means they intended to keep all of them.⁵⁹¹

The territorial gain was even more significant for the Syrian Kurds. Before the war, the three Kurdish cantons – Jazira, Kobani, and Afrin – were widely separated, adjacent to unfriendly Sunni Arab factions, and had no access to the Syrian-Turkish border.⁵⁹² Jazira and

⁵⁸³ Barkey, 108.

⁵⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁷ Harris, 104.

⁵⁸⁸ Ibid., 104-105.

⁵⁸⁹ Ibid., 112, 122, and 126.

⁵⁹⁰ Ibid., 112.

⁵⁹¹ Ibid., 126.

⁵⁹² Ibid., 117.

Kobani had no geographical depth, which made them easy to penetrate and conquer.⁵⁹³ The Kurds also had to tolerate the presence of the regime's intelligence service in Jazira.⁵⁹⁴ After the U.S. started supporting the PYD to fight ISIS, the PYD took advantage of the U.S. air power and the "U.S. veto against Turkish interference" to substitute ISIS on the land that would connect the three cantons.⁵⁹⁵ The SDF, with support from the U.S. airstrikes and the Special Forces advisers, defeated ISIS and captured the land in the Manbij district in August 2016, which filled in the gap between Afrin and Kobani cantons.⁵⁹⁶ Turkey was furious about the PYD's expansion in territory and retaliated through shelling the SDF and channeling more ISIS fighters into Syria.⁵⁹⁷ These behaviors provoked warnings from both the U.S. and Russia.⁵⁹⁸ By December 2018, the SDF controlled about a quarter of Syria with oil fields, agriculture, and three major cities, which represented an unprecedented expansion of territory and power.⁵⁹⁹

In addition to the territorial gain, the Syrian Kurds also achieved much greater cohesion among their previously divided factions and benefited from more international recognition, legitimacy and support.⁶⁰⁰ Henri Barkey argues that the existential threat as a result of ISIS's attacks brought the Kurdish factions together.⁶⁰¹ The experience of jointly fighting a common enemy could facilitate military and political integration among the Kurds, which could contribute to the formation of "pan-Kurdish military units" and identities.⁶⁰² Moreover, he also points out that fighting alongside the U.S. has made the PYD famous and the Kurdish plea well-known in the West, especially in Europe.⁶⁰³ The KRG received diplomatic

⁵⁹³ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁵ Ibid., 122.

⁵⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁹ Hubbard, "Syria's Kurds, Feeling Betrayed by the U.S., Ask Assad Government for Protection."

⁶⁰⁰ Barkey, 110.

⁶⁰¹ Ibid., 112.

⁶⁰² Ibid.

⁶⁰³ Ibid., 110.

recognition from the U.S., France, and Britain, which represented an unprecedentedly high level of international recognition and legitimacy.⁶⁰⁴ In terms of the revival of Kurdish language and culture, both the KRG and the PYD introduced Kurdish language education in areas under their control.⁶⁰⁵ In sum, the Iraqi and the Syrian Kurds emerged from the Syrian civil war much more powerful in all aspects, including territorial holdings, international legitimacy, and soft power. Their expansion of power was mostly a result of U.S. support while fighting ISIS. While Kurds have become more powerful, they have more potential to achieve independence and autonomy in the Middle East, which, in fact, would go against the U.S. interests in the region.

An independent Kurdistan or the Kurds acquiring more power in the region would drastically change the balance of power in the Middle East and lead to instability in Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Iran, which are not in the U.S. interests.⁶⁰⁶ In Iraq, the KRG leader Massoud Barzani's decision to hold a referendum on Kurdish independence created a chaos not only between Baghdad and Erbil but also among the external powers in late 2017.⁶⁰⁷ Though the result of the referendum, which showed that the majority voted for independence, would not be legally binding, the U.S., UK and Russia all urged the KRG to postpone while Iraq, Iran, and Turkey imposed "economic, security and diplomatic sanctions" to pressure the KRG to cancel the referendum.⁶⁰⁸ The fact that this referendum was initiated by the Kurdish government and the KRG had gained so much power and territories through fighting ISIS made the Kurdish independence threat real.⁶⁰⁹ When the threat was no longer simply an issue on paper, the integrity of Iraq was prioritized over the independence of Iraqi Kurdistan.⁶¹⁰

⁶⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁶ Gunter, 108.

⁶⁰⁷ Galip Dalay, "After the Kurdish Independence Referendum," Foreign Affairs. October 02, 2017.

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2017-10-02/after-kurdish-independence-referendum>.

⁶⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁶¹⁰ Ibid.

Although the KRG's autonomy was specified in the constitution and Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi did "acknowledge independence as the natural right of Kurds" in April 2017, he still demanded the referendum be cancelled and even threatened to deploy Iraqi troops.⁶¹¹ And it was not an empty threat. One month after the referendum, the Iraqi government, with support from Iran and Turkey, sent in troops to invade Iraqi Kurdistan, which cost the KRG one-fifth of its territory, including Kirkuk and the oil fields in the region.⁶¹² Facing the rising tension between the Iraqi government and the Kurds, Turkey chose to back the Iraqi government, despite its improved relationship and economic cooperation with the KRG in the past few years.⁶¹³ The Turkish Foreign Ministry called the referendum "a grave mistake" in June, and Erdogan even sent Turkish Foreign Minister to persuade Barzani "not to make this mistake."⁶¹⁴ Turkey's mediation, however, was rejected by Barzani, which angered Erdogan, since the KRG's rejection undermined his image as an influential leader in the region.⁶¹⁵ Moreover, Turkey found the KRG's inclusion of Kirkuk in the referendum unacceptable.⁶¹⁶ The KRG saw Kirkuk as the Kurdish "Jerusalem" while Erdogan perceived it as "a Turkmen city" and described the KRG's control over the city as "an act of occupation" that deliberately provoked Turkish sensitivities.⁶¹⁷ On the day of the referendum, Erdogan dismissed the result of the referendum as "null, void and illegitimate," launched a military exercise along the border, and then closed airspace to the KRG.⁶¹⁸ As for Iran, it banned all air traffic from Iran to Iraqi Kurdistan the day before the referendum, upon

⁶¹¹ Ibid.

⁶¹² Sergio Peçanha, "How the Kurdish Quest for Independence in Iraq Backfired," The New York Times, November 05, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/11/05/world/middleeast/kurd-independence-iraq-turkey-iran-syria-maps-backfired.html>; "Iraqi Forces Invade Kurdish City Of Kirkuk After Independence Vote." NPR. October 16, 2017. <https://www.npr.org/2017/10/16/557985852/iraqi-forces-begin-to-seize-kurdish-city-of-kirkuk>.

⁶¹³ Mehmet Uyanik, "Turkey and the KRG After the Referendum: Blocking the Path to Independence," Center for Strategic and International Studies, November 22, 2017, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/turkey-and-krg-after-referendum-blocking-path-independence>.

⁶¹⁴ Ibid.

⁶¹⁵ Ibid.

⁶¹⁶ Ibid.

⁶¹⁷ Ibid.

⁶¹⁸ Ibid.

the request of the Iraqi government, which is currently in Shi'a Arabs' control.⁶¹⁹ In sum, both Turkey and Iran were concerned about a change of status quo in Iraq, which could produce crises along their borders.⁶²⁰ Their tough attitude and strong response could also be intended to deter the PYD in Syria and their own Kurdish population.⁶²¹

Apparently, the Iraqi Kurds tried to use this referendum to leverage their newly acquired international reputation to attract more attention and support.⁶²² This attempt already created conflict and built up tension in the region.⁶²³ If the KRG continues to use its increased power to pursue independence, sectarian tensions will continue to grow in the Middle East, which could lead to fighting and instability in Iraq.⁶²⁴ Additionally, the U.S. will have to deal with Turkey's growing grievances.⁶²⁵ Even though Trump dispatched a Special Presidential Envoy to offer Barzani a way out and reiterated the U.S. rejection of the referendum during his meeting with Erdogan in September 2017, Turkey was not satisfied.⁶²⁶ The referendum re-kindled Ankara's long-standing suspicion since the First Gulf War in 1991 that the U.S. intends to build an independent Kurdish state along Turkey's border, which would eventually stretch to include the Turkish southeastern provinces.⁶²⁷ Ironically, the KRG, the destabilizing factor in this intense dynamic among Iraq, Turkey, and the U.S., was a product of the first Gulf War.⁶²⁸ It came to power through cooperating with the U.S. during the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and became more powerful due to U.S. support to fight ISIS.⁶²⁹ As shown by the U.S. reaction to the KRG referendum, the U.S. does not support the

⁶¹⁹ Dalay, "After the Kurdish Independence Referendum;" "Iran Closes Its Airspace to Kurdistan Region at Iraq's Request." Rudaw. September 24, 2017. <http://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iran/24092017>.

⁶²⁰ Dalay, "After the Kurdish Independence Referendum."

⁶²¹ Barkey 116.

⁶²² Dalay, "After the Kurdish Independence Referendum."

⁶²³ Ibid.

⁶²⁴ Uyanik, "Turkey and the KRG After the Referendum: Blocking the Path to Independence."

⁶²⁵ Ibid.

⁶²⁶ Ibid.

⁶²⁷ Ibid.

⁶²⁸ Ibid.

⁶²⁹ Ibid.

independence of the Kurds in Iraq.⁶³⁰ In other words, the U.S. own creation, strengthened by U.S. support, is now pursuing objectives against the U.S. interests.

Similar to the case in Iraq, the PYD-headed Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (DFNS)'s ambition to acquire autonomy in Syria and the PYD's attempts to trade territories with the Russian- and Iran-backed Assad regime would both jeopardize U.S. interests.⁶³¹ The DFNS was established in March 2016, and was previously known as the Cantons of Rojava.⁶³² The DFNS is currently in charge of the Kurd-controlled cantons in Syria and hopes to achieve not only autonomy for the Kurds but also pluralist democratic rule in Syria, where "the rights of all the ethnic and religious minorities" will be recognized.⁶³³ This vision already faced pushback in Tell Abyad, Manbij, and al-Raqqa.⁶³⁴ The population in these areas refused to recognize the Kurdish government, saw it as serving the interests of the Kurds, and set up civilian councils to take over administration and governance.⁶³⁵ In addition to domestic obstacles, Turkey also had no stomach for another autonomous Kurdistan on its border.⁶³⁶ According to Barkey, Turkey was worried about the U.S. granting the Syrian Kurds rights for self-governance, which would give rise to "a second KRG."⁶³⁷ Having two self-governed Kurdistans on its border is not acceptable for Turkey, not to mention that one of them is affiliated with the PKK.⁶³⁸ In order to prevent the DFNS from establishing "a terror state," Turkey has been willing and ready to deploy the military.⁶³⁹ Turkey already attacked the Syrian Kurds on several occasions during the war.⁶⁴⁰ For instance, Turkey air bombed the

⁶³⁰ Dalay, "After the Kurdish Independence Referendum."

⁶³¹ Cengiz Gunes, *The Kurds in a New Middle East: The Changing Geopolitics of a Regional Conflict* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 69; Hubbard, "Syria's Kurds, Feeling Betrayed by the U.S., Ask Assad Government for Protection."

⁶³² Gunes, 69.

⁶³³ Ibid.

⁶³⁴ Ibid., 74.

⁶³⁵ Ibid.

⁶³⁶ Barkey, 109.

⁶³⁷ Ibid.

⁶³⁸ Ibid.

⁶³⁹ Uyanik, "Turkey and the KRG After the Referendum: Blocking the Path to Independence."

⁶⁴⁰ Harris, 147 and 159.

YPG in April 2016 and, in November, supported the FSA to prevent the SDF from taking al-Bab, a city that would connect the Afrin canton with the Kobani canton.⁶⁴¹ These attacks showed Turkey's resolve to invade, which could give rise to fighting among the PYD, Turkey, and possibly intervention from Iran and Russia.⁶⁴² Such a conflict, involving "an armed revolutionary nationalist movement" attached to the terrorist group PKK, a U.S. ally ready and capable of "wiping out a credible threat to its territorial integrity," and two foreign powers aiming at greater influence in the Middle East, is not in the U.S. interests.⁶⁴³ Besides, chaos or another power vacuum could easily lead to the re-emergence of ISIS, which was just rooted out in the region.

Prior to the U.S. withdrawal, the Syrian Kurds relied on the U.S. presence to deter a Turkish invasion.⁶⁴⁴ Trump's abrupt decision to withdraw in December 2018 made the Kurds feel betrayed and abandoned.⁶⁴⁵ In response, the PYD immediately turned to Russia and Assad for protection.⁶⁴⁶ Though a negotiation between the Kurds and Assad is expected, a deal constructed while the Kurds have unprecedented control of territories and resources, yet no international or regional support, would not align well with U.S. strategic interests.⁶⁴⁷ If the Syrian Kurds continue to allow the regime troops to enter Kurd-controlled territory, as they did in December 2018 when they invited Syrian armies to enter Manbij, it would not only make Assad's goal to recover all lost land in Syria much easier to achieve, but also significantly benefit both Russia and Iran.⁶⁴⁸ Russia saw the oil fields in northern Syria as valuable assets that would help Assad's reconstruction, while Iran wanted to create a path

⁶⁴¹ Ibid., 155 and 159.

⁶⁴² Adam Erel, "The Kurdish Explosion Is Unleashing Demons," *Foreign Policy*, November 16, 2017, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/11/16/the-kurdish-explosion-is-unleashing-demons/>.

⁶⁴³ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁴ Hubbard, "Syria's Kurds, Feeling Betrayed by the U.S., Ask Assad Government for Protection."

⁶⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁸ Ibid.

that would “connect forces it supports in Syria and Lebanon with those in Iraq.”⁶⁴⁹ During a meeting with the Kurds in February 2019, the Assad regime refused to grant the Syrian Kurds autonomy.⁶⁵⁰ Despite Assad’s refusal, northern Syria is currently under PYD self-rule and the large amount of territory gives the Kurds leverage to negotiate. The result of such a negotiation, however, may not necessarily be in the U.S. interests.

As demonstrated above, the Iraqi Kurds’ ambition for independence and the Syrian Kurds’ goal of autonomy both contradict the U.S. objectives. In other words, the U.S. was pursuing a somewhat self-contradictory policy: the U.S. wanted the Kurds to be strong so that they could defeat ISIS, but the U.S. did not want them to be so strong that they could fight for independence. The KRG’s referendum and the PYD’s negotiations with Assad both show that the Kurds are wielding their growing power to pursue their own objectives at the expense of U.S. interests. What is more interesting is the proposal made by U.S. commanders, who suggested that the Kurds should be allowed to keep U.S.-supplied weapons.⁶⁵¹ Such a proposal was motivated by two factors. First, since Trump’s decision to withdraw was criticized as stabbing the Kurds in the back, letting the YPG fighters keep the weapons could serve as a reassurance that they were not abandoned.⁶⁵² Second, it would be nearly impossible for the U.S. to locate and recover all the weapons anyway.⁶⁵³ There were few strings attached when the arms were delivered to the Kurds.⁶⁵⁴ After sending the weapons to the Peshmerga, the U.S.-led coalition did not track the end-use or follow up on the distribution of the weapons, in fear of interfering with the KRG’s sovereignty.⁶⁵⁵ Whether the Kurds will be allowed to keep the weapons remains an undecided issue. If Trump adopts the Pentagon’s

⁶⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁵⁰ Andrew Osborn, "Assad Adviser Rejects Idea of Granting Syrian Kurds Autonomy." Reuters. February 19, 2019. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-adviser/assad-adviser-rejects-idea-of-granting-syrian-kurds-autonomy-idUSKCN1Q81QA>.

⁶⁵¹ "US Commanders Propose Kurdish Fighters in Syria Keep Weapons."

⁶⁵² Ibid.

⁶⁵³ Ibid.

⁶⁵⁴ "Arming Iraq’s Kurds: Fighting IS, Inviting Conflict," 20.

⁶⁵⁵ Ibid.

proposal, the YPG will have a variety of advanced U.S. weapons, including “anti-tank missiles, armored vehicles and mortars,” that can be used to forward an agenda at odds with U.S. interests.⁶⁵⁶

⁶⁵⁶ "US Commanders Propose Kurdish Fighters in Syria Keep Weapons."

Chapter 5: Conclusion

To sum up, despite significant power disadvantages, local forces can not only break free from external powers' control but also effectively manipulate external support to pursue their own objectives because they have practical advantages, a stronger will to fight, and diverging objectives from the external power. In terms of practical advantage, local forces have a more extensive local presence and networks, better knowledge about the local power dynamic, and greater legitimacy in the local sphere. These characteristics make local forces desirable partners during intervention, which consequently, gives them leverage over external powers. Second, local forces have a much stronger will to fight than external powers because they have higher stakes involved in the conflict. The fact that local forces have troops on the ground, more than likely fighting for survival, justifies the deployment of all their resources and personnel. The external powers, however, are insulated from the fighting, since their security and survival are not under threat. Given the absence of an imminent threat and the overwhelming power advantage, the constituents or elites of the external power, depending on the regime type, will demand a quick victory to justify the necessity and benefits of the intervention. Such a demand, a political vulnerability, can constrain the external power's will, which could serve as a signal for the local forces that the patronage relationship will not be long-term. If local forces perceive the relationship and support as short-term, they will not worry much about the repercussions of sabotaging the relationship and will be more likely to manipulate the support to pursue their own objectives, if given the chance. Third, the relationship between external powers and local forces suffers from the problem of agency slack, which tends to be more serious when the objectives of the two actors severely misalign. The misalignment of objectives would then create incentives for the local forces to manipulate external support to pursue their own objectives, which could be against the interests of their patrons.

The three factors identified above are then applied and examined in two cases. First, Cuba effectively manipulated support from the Soviet Union during the intervention in the Angolan civil war in 1975. Cuba, as “a self-motivated international paladin,” acted within the parameters of the Soviet strategic interests, while at the same time pursuing its own objectives, which did not necessarily align with the Soviet objectives in Africa. Its long-term military presence in Africa before the civil war and its identity as a Third World state enabled Cuba to build special ties with African countries. Compared to the Soviet Union, a superpower during the Cold War, Cuba’s presence in Angola was more welcoming and enjoyed higher legitimacy. Moreover, after the outbreak of the civil war, Cuba deployed military advisers and troops to fight alongside the MPLA, through which Cuba exerted great influence on the MPLA’s military strategies and policies. In sum, Cuba’s long-standing military presence in the region, legitimacy among African countries, and deployment of military personnel to support the MPLA all contributed to its practical advantages over the Soviet Union. In terms of relative will, Cuba, though not a local force facing an existential threat, still had stronger will to fight due to its military presence on the ground. For the Soviet Union, southern Africa was not a high priority; the Soviet strategic interests in Africa focused on northern Africa and the Horn of Africa. Additionally, Soviet will was constrained by the fact that the Soviets were concerned about the intervention disrupting détente and again leading to high tensions in the relationship with the U.S. The Soviets’ limited interests in Angola and southern Africa, however, could lead to an unfavorable situation for Cuba. Cuba’s leverage and value would diminish; the Soviet support would decrease; and Cuba’s revolutionary mission in Africa would be hard to sustain. Consequently, Cuba had a strong incentive to escape Soviet control and to effectively use the Soviet support to win battles in Angola, through which the Soviet Union could appreciate Cuba’s value and be more willing to invest in interventions in the region. More interventions in Africa would then lead to a

closer alliance between the Soviet Union and Cuba, which meant that Cuba could continue to benefit from Soviet support to pursue its own objectives in the region. Evidence shows that Cuba not only broke free from the Soviet dominance – Cuba forced fait accompli upon the Soviets in several occasions during the intervention – but also manipulated Soviet support to forward its own interests. Cuba obtained more military and economic support from the Soviet Union, enjoyed greater autonomy in its alliance with the Soviets, achieved higher status in the Third World, and actively influenced the Soviet Union’s Africa policies.

Interestingly, in another external power-local force patronage relationship in the Angolan civil war – the relationship between the U.S. and South Africa – South Africa, which was the local force in this case because it deployed troops to support the FNLA in Angola, failed to manipulate the U.S. support to forward its own interests. The U.S. encouraged and supported South Africa’s decision to invade Angola to support the FNLA in fighting the Soviet and Cuba-backed MPLA.⁶⁵⁷ After the U.S. involvement in this widely condemned invasion was made public, the U.S. immediately ended “any de facto alliance with South Africa” and stopped providing aid to Angola.⁶⁵⁸ In fear of Angola turning into a second Vietnam, then-US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger claimed that the U.S. did not collude with South Africa.⁶⁵⁹ This claim, however, was refuted by the South Africans, who argued that the U.S. assured African countries that their efforts to fight against Soviet-backed forces in Angola would receive continuous U.S. support.⁶⁶⁰ With the U.S. clearly distancing itself, South Africa was forced to bear the military and political costs of defeats against Cuba in Angola.⁶⁶¹ Facing both domestic opposition and international condemnation, South Africa

⁶⁵⁷ Robbins, 218.

⁶⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁵⁹ Ibid., 219.

⁶⁶⁰ Michael T. Kaufman, “Africans Try to Discount Effects of Angolan Rift: With Collapse of 3-Day Meeting, Leaders Look to July Parley for Solution to War Polarizing the Continent,” *The New York Times*, January 14, 1976, <https://search-proquest-com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/docview/122890409/abstract/314670490FA54B50PQ/1?accountid=10141>.

⁶⁶¹ Robbins, 219.

could do nothing more than blame the U.S. for abandoning it as an instrument.⁶⁶² In this case, the weaker partner, South Africa, had no opportunity to manipulate the U.S. and, in fact, it could be argued that it was itself manipulated.

The second case is about the U.S. supporting the Syrian and Iraqi Kurds to fight ISIS in Syria and Iraq during the Syrian civil war. The U.S. directly intervened in Syria in September 2014 through an aerial campaign to fight ISIS. However, in order to defeat ISIS, an aerial campaign was not enough. The U.S. needed ground troops, preferably local forces, for both practical and political reasons. Practically, ground troops were essential to hold territories recovered from ISIS, to gather human intelligence, to better understand the local power dynamic, and more importantly, to serve as an alternative to ISIS to provide authority for the local population. Among multiple local forces engaged in the civil war, the U.S. chose to back the Syrian and Iraqi Kurds because they are more homogenous, well-organized, and militarily capable. Moreover, the Kurds' identity as a minority group facing an existential threat, as a result of ISIS's attack, made the narrative of supporting the Kurds acceptable and popular among the western governments and public. The U.S. long-standing relationship with the KRG also made the Kurds relatively trustworthy. As a result, the U.S. started supporting the Kurds, who turned out to be very effective in fighting ISIS. With the U.S. support, Kurds defeated ISIS and kept the reclaimed territories, through which the Kurds' territorial holdings significantly increased. In comparison, the Kurds had a stronger will to fight than the U.S. did in Syria. Both the Syrian and the Iraqi Kurds faced an existential threat before the U.S. intervention, which made it easy to justify the deployment of all of their resources and personnel. The U.S., however, was not challenged by any imminent threat. Its will was further constrained by public opinion – mostly against another intervention in the Middle East – and the U.S. alliance with Turkey. Turkey strongly opposed U.S. support for the

⁶⁶² Ibid.

Syrian Kurds, whom the Turks saw as affiliated with the PKK, the terrorist group that has been trying to gain independence and divide Turkey since the 1980s. Protest and pressure from Turkey forced the U.S. to maintain a delicate balance between supporting the Syrian Kurds – the only meaningful ally on the ground in fighting ISIS – and Turkey, an important NATO ally. The U.S. conceded to Turkey’s pressure and stopped arms supplies for the Syrian Kurds after the Kurds defeated ISIS in al-Raqqa, ISIS’s capital in Syria. This served as a signal for the Syrian Kurds that the U.S. was not willing to make a long-term commitment, which therefore motivated the Kurds to sabotage the relationship and manipulate the short-term support to achieve their own objectives. Unlike the U.S.’s constantly fluctuating objectives in the Middle East, Kurds have a clear set of objectives: to acquire independence or autonomy. Through the alliance with the U.S. while fighting ISIS, Kurds acquired an unprecedented amount of power and territory, which could significantly strengthen their potential to gain independence. Neither an independent Kurdistan, or the Kurds wielding their newly acquired power in the Middle East, however, are in the U.S. interests, however, because they can create instability in the region, especially in Iraq and Syria. Despite strong opposition from the U.S. and Turkey, the KRG held a referendum in September 2017, which could be seen as an attempt to leverage its newly acquired power and international legitimacy to gain more external support before the U.S. withdrawal from Syria. However, when the threat of an independent Kurdistan became real, the U.S. and the regional powers, especially Turkey and Iran, prioritized the territorial integrity of Iraq over the independence of the Kurds. In response to the referendum, Iraq invaded the Iraqi Kurds, Turkey started border patrol, and Iran closed airspace to the KRG. Apparently, tension had already been building up in Iraq as Kurds acquired more power. The Syrian Kurds, on the other hand, wanted to achieve autonomy in a federal Syria, which is not acceptable for the Assad regime or Turkey. Assad has always wanted to reclaim all the territories in Syria and

already refused the Kurds' request for autonomy. As for Turkey, with the autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan already on its border, Turkey could not tolerate another one in Syria, not to mention the PYD's affiliation to the PKK. Turkey attacked the Syrian Kurds several times while the U.S. was still supporting the Kurds in fighting ISIS. After the U.S. withdrawal, Turkey's threat to invade the Syrian Kurds becomes more imminent. If Turkey decides to invade, it would be another bloody war that would once again give rise to chaos and a power vacuum in Syria, which could easily lead to ISIS's resurgence in the region. The Syrian Kurds already started negotiating with the Assad regime to exchange territory for protection against Turkey. Given Russia and Iran's support for the Assad regime, it would be hard to imagine that they would settle on an agreement that is not in their best interests. An expansion of Russian and/or Iranian influence in the Middle East, however, is not in U.S. interests. Apparently, the Kurds are using the power, acquired while fighting ISIS, to pursue their own objectives in the Middle East, which has already led to instability in the region. What's more interesting is the proposals made by the Pentagon to let the Kurds keep U.S.-supplied weapons, which means the Kurds could walk away with U.S. support to continue engaging in activities that would jeopardize U.S. interests.

Among the three factors that enable local forces to manipulate external powers' support, diverging objectives is the most important. While practical advantage gives local forces leverage and makes them useful partners for external powers, and stronger will gives local forces another advantage to close the significant power gap, it is diverging objectives that provides local forces with motivations and incentives to exploit and manipulate the support. If the objectives of these two actors perfectly align, such an exploitation and manipulation will not happen.

In general, the three factors – practical advantage, relative will, and diverging objectives – apply well in explaining the dynamic between the Soviet Union and Cuba in Angola, and

the relationship between the U.S. and the Kurds while fighting ISIS. However, two cases are not sufficient to generalize about the power dynamic in all proxy relationships. As briefly mentioned above, South Africa was merely an instrument of the U.S. while intervening in Angola. Consequently, further research and discussion are necessary to explore under what conditions manipulation would be more likely to happen and be successful.

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