European Journal of International Security (2025), page 1 of 18
doi:10.1017/eis.2025.10007

EJIS

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Making stars align: Partnerships between state sponsors and armed groups

Niklas Karlén

Department of War Studies, Swedish Defence University, Stockholm, Sweden
Email: niklas.karlen@fhs.se

(Received 5 November 2024; revised 25 February 2025; accepted 22 April 2025)

Abstract

How are partnerships between foreign states and armed groups formed? Previous research has suggested that the provision of external support is mainly based on group capacity and affinity ties. However, this neglects the fact that support provision is a dynamic matching process in which strategic adjustments often are made that enable the distribution of support. I argue that states place demands on rebel groups who may strategically rebrand, reform, and reorganise to facilitate the distribution of support. For state sponsors, this process serves the dual purpose of justification and control. For rebels, the process distinguishes them from competitors and increases their chances of receiving vital aid. Drawing on frame analysis, I illustrate how the Syrian Democratic Forces crafted narratives in tandem with the United States which created the necessary conditions that helped initiate and sustain the partnership. The findings highlight the importance of the strategic alignment process and show how it can supplement existing explanations related to battlefield performances and transnational affinities.

Keywords: civil war; conflict delegation; external support; framing; rebel diplomacy; strategic alignment

Introduction

The armed opposition in a civil war is rarely a cohesive unitary actor. The Syrian Civil War has seen approximately 6,000 individual armed factions over the course of the conflict that together have formed an ever-shifting network of over 1,000 unique groups.[1] Past and current civil wars in such diverse locations as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Chad, Sudan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Myanmar, Libya, and Israel also point to a plethora of non-state armed actors being involved in the fighting. The global trend is that the proportion of multi-party armed conflicts in the international system is increasing.[2] Even in conflicts often portrayed as having only a single rebel group, such as the Nicaraguan Civil War during the 1980s or the Kosovo War in the 1990s, the dominant opposition movements consisted of various factions.[3]

A concurrent trend is that the amount of internationalised civil wars around the globe is on the rise.[4] While states today rarely fight wars against each other directly, there is a considerable

[1]Carter Center, 'Syria: Countrywide conflict report #4' (11 September 2014).

[2]David E. Cunningham, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, and Idean Salehyan, 'Non-state actors in civil war', in David A. Backer, Ravi Bhavnani, and Paul Huth (eds), *Peace and Conflict 2016* (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 50–6.

[3]Robert A. Kagan, *Twilight Struggle: American Power and Nicaragua, 1977–1990* (New York: The Free Press, 1996); Henry H. Perritt Jr., *Kosovo Liberation Army: The Inside Story of an Insurgency* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2010).

[4]Shawn Davies, Therése Pettersson, and Magnus Öberg, 'Organized violence 1989–2021 and drone warfare', *Journal of Peace Research*, 59:4 (2022), pp. 593–610 (p. 597).

amount of indirect conflict that is being channelled through non-state proxies.[5] States strategically delegate the business of war to rebel organisations by providing support to various elements of the armed opposition.[6] In fact, state support to armed groups has become a key feature of international relations.[7] Given the proliferation of armed actors, states make decisions about whom to support in increasingly complex environments. Similarly, armed groups carefully consider whether, at what cost, and with what consequences to accept foreign support. How are these partnerships between states and armed groups formed?

Although there has been significant progress in research on the informal alliances between external states and rebel movements in recent years, we still lack detailed knowledge about the political decision-making processes related to support provision. Most existing theories provide reasons as to why states provide support but are less clear about how the recipients of assistance are selected.[8] The few studies that do speak to this question have been limited by large-N research designs which are not ideally suited to examine dynamic processes.[9] Such methodological constraints are mirrored by restrictive assumptions of established theoretical paradigms, mainly principal–agent theory, which diminish the agency of the recipient of support in their causal accounts.[10] This ignores the empirical record which has established the latitude of armed groups and obstructs theoretical developments that can shed light on delegation dynamics. In this article, I outline a theory of strategic alignment that takes into account the agency of both actors. I argue that support provision is based on a dynamic matching process in which state sponsors place specific demands on groups which in turn frame their armed struggle and make organisational changes. For states, this constitutes an important mechanism for justification and control. For rebels, it sets them apart from domestic competitors and increases their prospect of receiving vital aid.

Understanding how states and armed groups enter into partnerships is important since relationships once established are often durable. Moreover, they have significant long-term consequences for conflict resolution,[11] democratic transitions,[12] and post-conflict stability.[13] Several scholars have found that intervening on the side of the rebels increases the likelihood that the insurgents will

[5]Vanessa Meier, Niklas Karlén, Therése Pettersson, and Mihai Croicu, 'External support in armed conflicts: Introducing the UCDP external support dataset (ESD), 1975–2017', *Journal of Peace Research*, 60:3 (2023), pp. 545–54; Assaf Moghadam, Vladimir Rauta, and Michel Wyss (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Proxy Wars* (Abingdon: Taylor & Francis, 2023).

[6]Idean Salehyan, 'The delegation of war to rebel organizations', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 54:3 (2010), pp. 493–51.

[7]Belgin San-Akca, *States in Disguise: Causes of State Support for Rebel Groups* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 1–2; Ryan Grauer and Dominic Tierney, 'The arsenal of insurrection: Explaining rising support for rebels', *Security Studies*, 27:2 (2018), pp. 263–95 (p. 263).

[8]Daniel Byman, *Deadly Connections: States That Sponsor Terrorism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Idean Salehyan, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, and David E. Cunningham, 'Explaining external support for insurgent groups', *International Organization*, 65:4 (2011), pp. 709–44; Navin A. Bapat, 'Understanding state sponsorship of militant groups', *British Journal of Political Science*, 42:1 (2012), pp. 1–29; Henning Tamm, 'The origins of transnational alliances: Rulers, rebels, and political survival in the Congo Wars', *International Security*, 41:1 (2016), pp. 147–81; Seth G. Jones, *Waging Insurgent Warfare: Lessons from the Vietcong to the Islamic State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Brandon Ives, 'Religious institutionalism: A domestic explanation for external support of rebel groups', *International Interactions*, 45:4 (2019), pp. 693–719.

[9]San-Akca, *States in Disguise*; Victor Asal, R. William Ayres, and Yuichi Kubota, 'Friends in high places: State support for violent and non-violent ethnopolitical organizations', *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict*, 12:3 (2019), pp. 208–22; Mark Berlin and Iris Malone 'Go arm me: How militant fragmentation affects external support', *International Interactions*, 49:4 (2023), pp. 557–86.

[10]Niklas Karlén, Vladimir Rauta, Idean Salehyan, Andrew Mumford, et al., 'Conflict delegation in civil wars', *International Studies Review*, 23:4 (2021), pp. 2048–78 (p. 2072).

[11]David E. Cunningham, *Barriers to Peace in Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

[12]Michael Colaresi, 'With friends like these, who needs democracy? The effect of transnational support from rivals on post-conflict democratization', *Journal of Peace Research*, 51:1 (2014), pp. 65–79.

[13]Niklas Karlén, 'The legacy of foreign patrons: External state support and conflict recurrence', *Journal of Peace Research*, 54:4 (2017), pp. 499–512.

emerge as victorious.[14] If the rebels are increasingly likely to become the new executive once the conflict is over, *whom* states choose to support becomes central. This initial bet may essentially dictate which government and what political structure is likely to emerge in the aftermath of conflict.

This article provides a process-oriented account of state support to rebel movements. I define *state support* as deliberate assistance from a foreign government to a specific rebel group engaged in a civil war. The type of assistance provided includes political, military, and economic support. Political support encompasses public endorsement in international forums and diplomatic acts that legitimise the group. Military support entails access to resources such as weapons, logistics, and military training as well as access to intelligence, safe havens, and air support. Economic support includes various forms of money transfers aimed at strengthening a group's armed campaign.

The article makes three contributions. First, it presents a theoretical argument focused on the process of strategic alignment. While much existing research has shown why states provide support, this article elaborates on how states and armed groups form partnerships together. It does so by presenting a dynamic framework that emphasises the importance of calculated choices made by both state sponsors and rebel groups that are often required to initiate a strategic partnership. Second, it challenges some widely held assumptions in the field. In particular, it problematises identity as a causal driver of support provision. It expands on the notion of ideational contiguity by offering a detailed account of how symbols, goals, preferences, and organisational structure are purposively adjusted. In addition, it questions the prevalent view that states have little control over non-state armed groups. In fact, it shows that at least some states place specific demands on rebel groups before engaging in more extensive aid distribution. Third, it brings together related but hitherto-separate strands in previous research. This offers a fruitful way of integrating research on external support in civil wars with the growing literature on rebel diplomacy. In addition, it supplements and refines some of the findings from large-N studies on the topic. In line with existing work, it shows that the reasons for state support to rebels are multifaceted and underscores that rebel capacity and identity ties are essential. However, it adds a more nuanced understanding of the actual process of support provision and is thus amply suited to offer an illustration of the mechanism at work.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section elaborates on previous explanations as to why external states provide support to armed groups in civil wars, highlighting the capacity of the group (strength) as well as transnational affinity between the state sponsor and the armed group (similarities) in the selection process. The second section outlines the theoretical framework and explains why state sponsors and rebels strive to strategically align their divergent interests. This is followed by a brief description and motivation of the selected research design. I then turn to an empirical analysis of the partnership between the United States and the Syrian Democratic Forces from 2014 to 2019. The article ends with some concluding remarks and a discussion of how its findings might inform future research.

Existing research: Strength and similarities

Research on external support to non-state armed groups has identified a wide range of motives as to why states initiate support. These motivations include incentives such as to weaken an adversary, balance support to the government side, limit conflict diffusion, promote regime change, secure economic interests, address humanitarian concerns, divert attention away from domestic politics,

[14]Dylan Balch-Lindsay, Andrew J. Enterline, and Kyle A. Joyce. 'Third-party intervention and the civil war process', *Journal of Peace Research*, 45:3 (2008), pp. 345–63; Stephen E. Gent, 'Going in when it counts: Military intervention and the outcome of civil conflicts', *International Studies Quarterly*, 52:4 (2008), pp. 713–35; Jason Lyall and Isaiah Wilson, 'Rage against the machines: Explaining outcomes in counterinsurgency wars', *International Organization*, 63:1 (2009), pp. 67–106; Seden Akcinaroglu, 'Rebel interdependencies and civil war outcomes', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 56:5 (2012), pp. 879–903; Jones, *Waging Insurgent Warfare*.

and ensure political survival.[15] While these studies offer several important insights into why states provide support, they are unable to explain exactly how partnerships are formed. There are basically two accounts in the existing literature for how states choose *which* groups to aid: strength and similarities.

Strength

States are more likely to select rebels that can pose a viable threat to the target regime.[16] To this end, states will try to determine the capabilities of potential recipients. Various criteria can be used to assess the capacity of a particular group. Indicators include group size, cohesion, organisational structure, access to extractable resources, and support base as well as a demonstrated track record of battlefield performances or a proven ability to hold and control territory. States are unlikely to see the weakest rebel groups as worth investing in. Although the rebels need to be sufficiently strong, Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham found that support is most often channelled to moderately strong groups.[17] They explain this by rebel groups' willingness to accept support. Insurgents that are already highly capable have fewer reasons to accept offers from external state sponsors as this restricts their autonomy and potentially decreases their legitimacy in the eyes of their local constituency. In addition, the most capable groups are often able to rely on extensive domestic resources, which significantly reduces the need for external support.

As potential recipients, rebel groups need to demonstrate that they are worthy of support. Asal, Ayers, and Kubota compare various ethno-political organisations and find that support is more forthcoming to organisations that engage in political violence to achieve their goals.[18] Moreover, they find that the popularity of the organisation and organisational capability matters, but that the significance of these factors varies over time. They conclude that: 'after the Cold War, states are more likely to support successful organizations in a way they did not during the Cold War period'.[19] 'Success' is here measured in terms of battle deaths, control over territory, and domestic as well as diaspora popularity. Most civil wars are dual contests: rebel groups regularly fight against both the incumbent regime as well as competing factions. Stein and Cantin convincingly argue that inter-rebel fighting increases as groups target each other to signal to external state sponsors that they are the most capable organisation worthy of support.[20]

Similarities

States do not care only about which rebel groups are the most viable challengers. San-Akca argues that while the presence of a strategic interest (i.e. the target is an adversary) determines the decision to start supporting a rebel group, ideational affinity – similarities in ideology, ethnicity, or religious beliefs – can guide states to support particular rebel groups.[21] Ideational affinity can be an important reason for support even when a state sponsor lacks direct strategic interests. Ethnic kinship ties have proven particularly salient. Several scholars have shown that members

[15]Byman, *Deadly Connections*; Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham, 'Explaining external support for insurgent groups'; Jacob D. Kathman, 'Civil war diffusion and regional motivations for intervention', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 55:6 (2011), pp. 847–76; Bapat, 'Understanding state sponsorship of militant groups'; Daniel Byman, 'Outside support for insurgent movements', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 36:12 (2013), pp. 981–1004; San-Akca, *States in Disguise*; Tamm, 'The origins of transnational alliances'; Ives, 'Religious institutionalism'.

[16]Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham, 'Explaining external support for insurgent groups', p. 715.

[17]Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham, 'Explaining external support for insurgent groups'.

[18]Asal, Ayers, and Kubota, 'Friends in high places'.

[19]Asal, Ayers, and Kubota, 'Friends in high places', p. 218.

[20]Arthur Stein and Marc-Olivier Cantin, 'Crowding out the field: External support to insurgents and the intensity of inter-rebel fighting in civil wars', *International Interactions*, 47:4 (2021), pp. 662–91 (p. 669).

[21]San-Akca, *States in Disguise*, 35.

of ethnic groups care about other group members and that this loyalty transcends borders.[22] Saideman argues that 'ethnic identity, by its nature, creates feelings of loyalty, interest, and fears of extinction'.[23] This implies that people will care strongly about those with whom they share ethnic ties. Because ethnicity is such a strong identity marker, it is likely that some state sponsors sympathise with certain rebel movements based on kinship ties. Examples include India's backing of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka, Albanian support for the Kosovo Liberation Army in Serbia, and Rwanda's assistance to M23 in the Democratic Republic of Congo.[24]

Rebels are motivated by similar considerations in selecting their sponsors as states are when choosing which rebels to support.[25] Gaining support from an external state with which the group shares some form of identity link can help maintain legitimacy in the eyes of the local population and foster a sense of trust. This diminishes the risk that rebels would be seen as pawns of a foreign state.[26] Despite the acknowledgement by existing research of various forms of ideational congruence, similarities between states and rebels are frequently seen as static and underpinned by affection; it is often assumed that identities do not change over time. This is problematic as it black-boxes significant parts of the process of strategic alignment, since ideational changes are rendered invisible. Furthermore, there may be more than affection at play. Salehyan et al. have argued that 'external states will be more likely to delegate to rebels when they are reasonably confident that the rebel force shares similar preferences; when they can select good, competent agents; and when they can effectively monitor agent activities and sanction bad behavior'.[27] But *how* does this work?

Strategic alignment

To understand this process, I suggest that we could conceptualise the formation of a partnership between a state and an armed group as a two-stage matching process. Conflict delegation is a highly asymmetrical hierarchical relationship in which the state sponsor has the preponderance of power and resources. Since the interests of states and armed groups are seldom perfectly aligned, there is an inevitable conflict of interests. Because the pool of available recipients is not infinitely large and diverse, the state sponsor is unlikely to find a recipient that perfectly mirrors its preferences. This suggests that states will try to *shape* and *transform* armed groups. I assert that this is done by issuing a set of demands to the group's leadership. This constitutes the first stage of the matching process.

The second stage is that the armed group purposively *adjusts* following these demands. This means that rebel groups actively frame their struggle and make organisational changes in order to make external support flow. I refer to this two-stage matching process as 'strategic alignment'. The explanation put forward builds on scholarship that has emphasised the need to understand

[22] Alexis Heraclides, 'Secessionist minorities and external involvement', *International Organization*, 44:3 (1990), pp. 341–78; David R. Davis and Will H. Moore, 'Ethnicity matters: Transnational ethnic alliances and foreign policy behavior', *International Studies Quarterly*, 41:1 (1997), pp. 171–84; Erin K. Jenne, *Ethnic Bargaining: The Paradox of Minority Empowerment* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007); Harris Mylonas, *The Politics of Nation-Building: Making Co-nationals, Refugees, and Minorities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

[23] Stephen M. Saideman, 'Discrimination in international relations: Analyzing external support for ethnic groups', *Journal of Peace Research*, 39:1 (2002), pp. 27–50 (p. 32).

[24] Berlin and Malone recently found in a large-N study that as the number of armed groups in a conflict increases, it is less likely that external support is provided based on shared ties. They explain this counter-intuitive finding on the grounds that states could then increasingly leverage the opportunity to shift support from one group to another. Nevertheless, they note that 'this is not to say that state sponsors never support groups with shared ethnic or ideological ties in multi-militant environments' (Berlin and Malone, 'Go arm me', p. 13).

[25] San-Akca, *States in Disguise*, p. 125.

[26] Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham, 'Explaining external support for insurgent groups', p. 717.

[27] Salehyan, Gleditsch and, Cunningham, 'Explaining external support for insurgent groups', pp. 714–15.

the provision of support as a two-way simultaneous selection process.[28] On the one hand, I adhere to rationalist core assumptions and start from the premise of traditional principal–agent theory: interest divergence and how to overcome it. On the other hand, I emphasise the agency of both actors and rely on a constructivist view of agency theory in which goal incongruity is in no way fixed – rather it is socially constructed.[29] I will now outline how the strategic alignment process works in practice and the underlying incentives for states and rebels to engage in it.

State incentives

With the act of support provision, states often gain influence over the group and a stake in the post-war order. In the context of armed conflict, it might be difficult to find groups that already from the outset match the preferred goals and preferences of the state supporter. This means that states seek to connect their support to specific criteria that need to be fulfilled before the relationship is established and support provided. There are essentially two rationales for why states select groups based on a dynamic process of strategic alignment: (1) to increase control, and (2) to be able to justify the act of support to relevant audiences.

First, the process of strategic alignment serves as an indirect mechanism of control. The ability of state sponsors to monitor the behaviour of the group is inherently limited and costly.[30] A careful screening process thus serves to reduce the risks involved.[31] States need to make sure that the armed group shares its view of what is appropriate in the conflict situation and, more importantly, what vision it holds for the future. Fostering strategic alignment is essentially a way to mitigate risks. State sponsors attempt to shape the incentives of armed groups so that it is in the interests of those agents to carry out their sponsors' vision.[32] The shadow of the future is important, and states often invest in groups to reap future benefits. To this end, state sponsors want to make sure that the group has a stated vision that is at least to some degree in line with their preferred policies. This means that rebel groups' efforts in framing their goals and preferences become crucial in attracting support. State sponsors and their non-state proxies generally share a common enemy. This is the most basic form of goal alignment, as the pursuit of a military goal against a mutual enemy is often the primary reason for the formation of a partnership.[33] However, state sponsors often have other goals that they need to consider as well. As such, there is often a need to make trade-offs. Goals such as promoting regime change, containing regional spillover effects, or securing strategic resources might be goals that at times may be contradictory. States may also hold clear preferences as to how goals should be achieved – for instance, with minimal civilian victimisation or through the establishment of certain religious institutions. Delegation requires some degree of agenda control, and as such states try to shape the aims, strategies, and tactics of the groups they support.[34] Partnerships are essentially

[28]Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham, 'Explaining external support for insurgent groups'; San-Akca, *States in Disguise*; Vladimir Rauta, 'A structural-relational analysis of party dynamics in proxy wars', *International Relations*, 32:4 (2018), pp. 449–67.

[29]Cf. Eric Rittinger, 'Arming the other: American small wars, local proxies, and the social construction of the principal-agent problem', *International Studies Quarterly*, 61:2 (2017), pp. 396–409.

[30]Jeremy M. Berkowitz, 'Delegating terror: Principal–agent based decision making in state sponsorship of terrorism', *International Interactions*, 44:4 (2018), pp. 709–48 (p. 718); Armin Krishnan, 'Controlling partners and proxies in pro-insurgency paramilitary operations: The case of Syria', *Intelligence and National Security*, 34:4 (2019), pp. 544–60 (p. 545); Kaitlyn N. Robinson, 'Organizing for violence: The politics of militant group formation and fragmentation in armed conflict', PhD diss., Stanford University (2022), p. 41.

[31]David A. Patten, 'Taking advantage of insurgencies: Effective policies of state-sponsorship', *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 24:5 (2013), pp. 879–906 (p. 881); Erica L. Gaston, *Illusions of Control: Dilemmas in Managing US Proxy Forces in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2024), pp. 6–11; 42–9.

[32]Jeremy M. Berkowitz, 'Success or shirking in terror: Control mechanisms in state sponsored terrorism', *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2024), available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2024.2401908.

[33]Sara Plana, 'The proxy paradox: Explaining (lack of) control over state-sponsored proxy armed groups', PhD diss., Massachusetts Institute of Technology (2021), p. 60.

[34]Salehyan, 'The delegation of war to rebel organizations', p. 501.

bargaining processes in which sponsors both seek to coerce and cooperate with armed groups.[35] Ultimately, if states sponsors are successful at influencing the armed group at an early stage, this could reduce interest divergence at a later stage.[36] Importantly, even though states go through the process of strategic alignment with the intent to increase control, this does in no way guarantee it.

Second, it is important for state sponsors to find armed groups with goals and preferences as closely aligned to the sponsor as possible, since decision-makers need to justify their provision of support to internal and external audiences. The identity of the most salient audiences varies on a case-by-case basis, but 'power-granting actors' are always present.[37] These are the actors that political leaders need to engage with to empower the narrative that legitimises their action. The primary internal audiences are often other political elites and the domestic constituency, while external audiences are frequently allies or the international community at large. Political leaders, regardless of regime type, are rarely completely free to make decisions regarding foreign policy. The provision of external support to a rebel group needs to be justified both domestically and internationally even if most instances of support to rebel groups abroad are covert actions.[38] This is likely to be especially important in democracies where decision-makers are more accountable, oversight committees exist, and the public is more influential if information leaks to the press. For instance, the US Congress played a significant role in overseeing support to the Contras in Nicaragua in the 1980s.[39] However, even in authoritarian regimes there are often political elites that hold leaders accountable and constrain the flow of resources.[40] Similarly to democracies, leaders in more authoritarian states also rely on certain audiences as a source of power.[41] Groh[42] has touched on the need to actively frame proxy war policy, since support to armed groups is often 'implausible to deny'[43] and frequently 'open secrets'.[44] The provision of external support becomes easier to justify for relevant audiences – both internal and external to the state – if there is some degree of strategic alignment. The matching process thus facilitates policy acceptance.

Rebel incentives

Rebels are often in dire need of external resources to credibly challenge incumbent regimes, especially if they are unable to tap into domestic resources. To attract supporters, groups need to convince states that their goals and preferences are generally aligned.[45] An integral part of the strategic matching process for the rebels is thus to adjust to the demands of state sponsors and to frame their armed struggle accordingly. This activity is part of what Reyko Huang has termed 'rebel diplomacy' – that is, the rebel group's conduct of foreign affairs during civil war for the purpose of advancing its military and political objectives.[46] Already in *The Marketing of Rebellion*, Clifford

[35] Plana, 'The proxy paradox', pp. 50–83.

[36] Sara Plana, 'Controlling proxies', in Assaf Moghadam, Vladimir Rauta, and Michel Wyss (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Proxy Wars* (Abingdon: Taylor & Francis, 2023), pp. 218–228 (p. 221).

[37] Jack Duffield, 'Why do states choose covert action?', *Intelligence and National Security* (2025), p. 6, available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2025.2461901.

[38] Tyrone L. Groh, *Proxy War: The Least Bad Option* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), pp. 44–5; Arthur Stein, 'Committed sponsors: External support overtness and civilian targeting in civil wars', *European Journal of International Relations*, 28:2 (2022), pp. 386–416 (p. 391).

[39] James M. Scott, 'Interbranch rivalry and the Reagan Doctrine in Nicaragua', *Political Science Quarterly*, 112:2 (1997), pp. 237–60.

[40] Jessica L. Weeks, 'Autocratic audience costs: Regime type and signaling resolve', *International Organization*, 62:1 (2008), pp. 35–64; Niklas Karlén, 'Changing commitments: Shifts in external state support to rebels', *Civil Wars*, 24:1 (2022), pp. 73–96 (p. 79).

[41] Duffield, 'Why do states choose covert action?', p. 6.

[42] Groh, *Proxy War: The Least Bad Option*, pp. 84–103.

[43] Rory Cormac and Richard J. Aldrich, 'Grey is the new black: Covert action and implausible deniability', *International Affairs*, 94:3 (2018), pp. 477–94.

[44] Austin Carson, *Secret Wars: Covert Conflict in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).

[45] Efe Tokdemir, Evgeny Sedashov, Sema Hande Ogutcu-Fu, et al., 'Rebel rivalry and the strategic nature of rebel group ideology and demands', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 65:4 (2021), pp. 729–58.

[46] Reyko Huang, 'Rebel diplomacy in civil war', *International Security*, 40:4 (2016), pp. 89–126 (p. 90).

Bob highlighted how rebel groups marketed themselves to attract support from NGOs. Bob argued that insurgent groups magnify their appeal 'by framing parochial demands, provincial conflicts and particularistic identities to match the interests and agendas of distant audiences'.[47]

During the Cold War, many rebel groups framed themselves as either communist or anti-communist to attract support from the Soviet Union and the United States respectively. More recently, emphasising liberal Western values and norms[48] or various tenets of Islamism[49] have become other ways to attract external supporters. Rebels generally need international legitimacy for their armed struggle and vital material support that contributes towards a successful outcome. Rebels soliciting support must successfully convince potential sponsors to devote resources to the group's cause. They therefore strive to package and promote their organisation in ways that demonstrate the legitimacy of the group's goals, garner sympathy for the movement and its members, and delegitimise their opposition.[50] Strategic frames are key tools for rebel groups in this endeavour just as for social movements more broadly.[51] It is not necessarily the case that a group must change its entire ideological orientation or organisational structure to adhere to state sponsors' demands – often, it is more a matter of adjustments.[52] There is also a limit as to how much a rebel group can engage in strategic alignment. Rebel leaders need to balance the need for external support with the equally pressing need of local acceptance of the armed struggle. Rebels might be reluctant to accept foreign support if this would mean that they risk undermining local legitimacy.[53] Rebel group framing is thus driven both by international as well as local concerns such as recruitment and civilian support.[54]

I am not alone in arguing that some form of matching process takes place. Tokdemir et al. have compellingly argued that rebel groups make strategic use of ideology and demands to set themselves apart from other groups in a multi-party setting.[55] They show empirically that groups are more likely to shift their ideology and modify their demands as the number of rival groups increases. Their study acknowledged that rebel groups' goals and preferences are not set and that they can be strategically adopted in multi-party contexts. They have suggested that 'rebel groups have a rational incentive to substitute for or complement inter-group violence with ideological product differentiation, demonstrating that they are distinct from their competitors in features such as goals, demands, and tactics'.[56] Similarly, Schwab emphasises that rebels make use of ideological differentiation to carve out a niche in a competitive environment.[57] Baylouny and Mullins have shown that ideological differentiation helped Syrian rebel groups in attracting and maintaining external support.[58] Relatedly, Phillips and Valbjørn have shown that 'identity content' matters for

[47] Clifford Bob, *The Marketing of Rebellion: Insurgents, Media, and International Activism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

[48] Jori Breslawski, 'In the spotlight: How international attention affects militant behavior', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 33:1 (2021), pp. 3–25.

[49] Christopher Phillips and Morten Valbjørn, '"What is in a name?" The role of (different) identities in the multiple proxy wars in Syria', *Small Wars & Insurgencies,* 29:3 (2018), pp. 414–33.

[50] Devorah Manekin and Reed M. Wood, 'Framing the narrative: Female fighters, external audience attitudes, and transnational support for armed rebellions', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 64:9 (2020), pp. 1638–65 (p. 1642).

[51] Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow, 'Framing processes and social movements: An overview and assessment', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 26:1 (2000), pp. 611–39.

[52] Regine Schwab, 'Same same but different? Ideological differentiation and intra-jihadist competition in the Syrian Civil War', *Journal of Global Security Studies*, 8:1 (2023), pp. 1–20 (p. 5).

[53] Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham, 'Explaining external support for insurgent groups', p. 717.

[54] In this article, I focus specifically on international framing to attract external state sponsors. For an elaborate discussion of rebel group framing domestically, see Kai M. Thaler, 'Rebel mobilization through pandering: Insincere leaders, framing, and exploitation of popular grievances', *Security Studies*, 31:3, pp. 351–80.

[55] Tokdemir et al., 'Rebel rivalry and the strategic nature of rebel group ideology and demands'.

[56] Tokdemir et al., 'Rebel rivalry and the strategic nature of rebel group ideology and demands', p. 734.

[57] Schwab, 'Same same but different?', p. 4.

[58] Anne Marie Baylouny and Creighton A. Mullins, 'Cash is king: Financial sponsorship and changing priorities in the Syrian Civil War', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 41:12 (2018), pp. 990–1010.

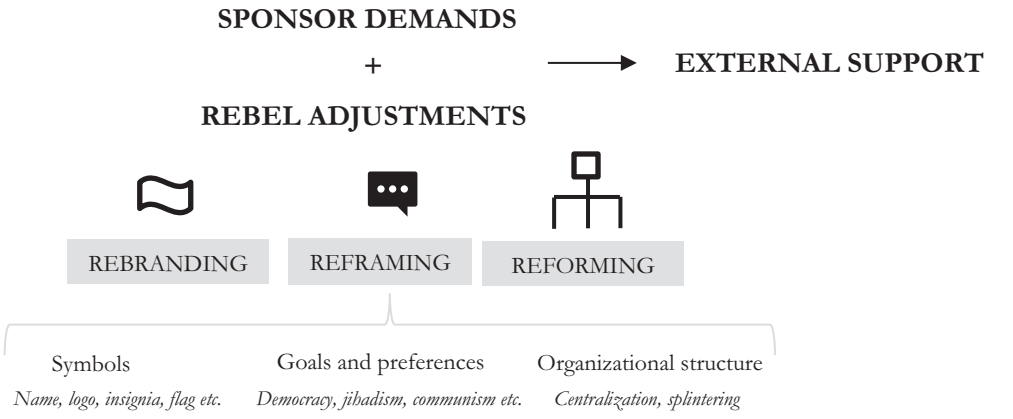

Figure 1. The process of strategic alignment.

support provision in that global powers are more reluctant than regional states to back groups that emphasise subnational identities.[59] Similarly, Skoll argues that rebel groups actively engage in 'branding' efforts to attract external support.[60] What I am essentially doing in this article is demonstrating how this process works in practice by offering a general theoretical framework that can help us understand it. As such, it builds on and integrates insights from these other studies.

Rebranding, reframing, and reforming rebellion

I propose that it is heuristically useful to characterise the type of changes that facilitate alignment based on the ways in which a group rebrand, reframe, and reform the organisation. In essence, this is the result of rebel groups responding to either explicit or implicit demands made by state sponsors. *Rebranding* concerns changes in symbols used by the armed group, such as for instance the group's name, its logo, flag, or insignias. *Reframing* refers to changes in the groups' stated objectives and ways to achieve those, for instance, highlighting certain goals as more important than others or stressing certain values or identity markers. I define a goal as an explicitly stated policy objective, to which the act of providing support is intended to contribute. Preferences are conceived of as preferred paths to achieve a particular goal. Goals are thus *what* state sponsors and rebel groups wish to achieve while preferences concern ideas about *how* these should be achieved. *Reforming* concerns organisational changes such as the degree of centralisation or integration with other groups. These three adjustments can occur step by step or in tandem. To some degree, they are increasingly infringing on the armed group's autonomy. While many symbolic actions may be plain window dressing, adjusting goals and preferences or implementing organisational changes can impact groups at a deeper level. However, I am not interested in assessing whether the adjustments made are 'sincere' or not. The ambition is rather to explore how groups engage in these practices in order to facilitate support distribution and establish a partnership. Not all supporter–recipient relationships go through all three stages. The degree to which changes take place is likely to vary based on sponsor preferences, relevant audiences, and how vital the support is perceived to be for a specific group. While the establishment of most relationships between external state sponsors and rebels is likely to see some degree of strategic alignment, certain conditions such as great power sponsorship, the post–Cold War context, and a more fragmented conflict environment may be factors that further accentuate the process. Figure 1 depicts the process.

[59] Phillips and Valbjørn, "'What is in a name?'"
[60] Amy Skoll, 'Rebel group branding and external intervention', *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 36:3 (2025), pp. 502–28.

As an example, the United States issued a number of demands to the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) before providing support. The CIA delivered these demands directly to the group in 1998: (1) there must be no Muslim influence, you must not repeat the Bosnian experience; (2) there must be no strong drug money supporting your activities; (3) there must be no terrorist attacks outside the geographical boundaries of Kosovo; and (4) you must target uniformed personnel rather than civilians as much as possible.[61] The leadership of KLA responded to these demands by stressing 'Western values' while at the same time downplaying religion, secessionism, spillover effects, and terrorism. The group steered clear of militant Islamic influences, raised money in other countries openly, kept the armed struggle inside Kosovo, and largely avoided terrorist attacks on civilian targets. KLA even disavowed the objective of creating a 'Greater Albania' which was somewhat paradoxical in light of the ethnic nationalism that helped establish the movement. However, talk of a Greater Albania worried potential supporters, who feared that such a path could lead to the dissolution of Serbia and Macedonia, as well as an expansion of Albania, which was far from a model of either democracy or market economy at the time. As such, each KLA communiqué contained language emphasising that the group's activities were aimed at expelling occupiers and did not constitute a conflict of a terrorist, inter-ethnic, or religious character.[62]

States can also help establish new armed groups from scratch rather than seeking to shape a pre-existing group. Robinson labels this 'foundational support' and finds that as many as one out of six rebel groups in the 1990–2019 period was created with a foreign state's direct assistance.[63] In these cases, it is more about the initial branding, framing, and forming of the group, as states interact with the aggrieved sentiments of a population and individuals rather than with an already-existing organisation. Examples include Iran's foundational support to Hezbollah, Libya's organisational assistance to the Revolutionary United Front in Sierra Leone, and Rwanda's support of M23.[64]

Analytical approach

This article uses frame analysis to empirically study strategic alignment.[65] This approach is ideal since what I seek to evaluate is essentially the actors' discursive efforts to engage in a framing process. In comparison to discourse analysis, frame analysis highlights the strategic and deliberative use of frames by key actors. As such, it is a particular causal-oriented and focused version of discourse analysis.[66] Importantly, for the purpose of this research article, I am more interested in highlighting the actual framing process rather than specific frames. I adhere to a deductive type of frame analysis in which I construct a set of predefined frames based on my theoretical framework and then systematically go through the case to see if these processes took place. What is set is the broader analytical frames, but I will go through the case to fill them with content. To capture reforming, I turn from the actors' framing strategies to actual organisational changes made. At this stage, I focus particularly on key changes in the organisational structure of the group such as centralisation or decentralisation in terms of command structure and splintering or merging with other groups. I also look at the criteria for membership inclusion in the organisation.

For the empirical analysis, I focus on the relationship between the United States (the sponsor) and the Syrian Democratic Forces (the recipient). The case constitutes a plausibility probe, and it is nomothetic in orientation as I seek to probe the details of a particular case in order to shed light

[61] Perritt Jr., *Kosovo Liberation Army*, pp. 141–2.

[62] Perritt Jr., *Kosovo Liberation Army*, pp. 144–6.

[63] Robinson, 'Organizing for violence', p. 53.

[64] Robinson, 'Organizing for violence', pp. 37; 43–4.

[65] Cf. Benford and Snow, 'Framing processes and social movements'; Lars Wikman, 'Entrepreneurial frame alignment: Framing foreign policy change under a veil of continuity', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 20:4 (2024), pp. 1–21.

[66] Lasse Lindekilde, 'Discourse and frame analysis: In-depth analysis of qualitative data in social movement research', in Donatella Della Porta (ed.), *Methodological Practices in Social Movement Research* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 195–227 (p. 223).

on a broader theoretical argument.[67] To this end, I consciously depart from a case that is typical of contemporary great power support in a multi-party setting. These are conditions under which the process of strategic alignment is likely accentuated. I am particular interested in empirical fingerprints that shed light on the process of how the partnership was formed. The material collected showcases the framing process in which the state sponsor stipulates demands and the rebel group adjusts to meet those demands. The empirical analysis rests on statements by key decision-makers as well as secondary source documentation. Studying state–rebel relationships is notoriously difficult as publicly available information is scarce. Triangulation of sources is used to validate the claims made. In terms of analysis, I focus on the key actors of strategic alignment: the state sponsor and the armed group. In the empirics, I seek to validate three parts of the process: (1) that the state sponsor places specific demands on the group; (2) that the group adjusts to these demands; (3) that this enables external support to be distributed.

Strategic alignment: Origins of the partnership

The civil war in Syria erupted in early 2011 after peaceful demonstrations were met with violent repression. The conflict escalated significantly in 2014 after the emergence of the Islamic State (ISIS), and by the summer ISIS was seen as a significant threat to the United States' policy objectives in the wider Middle East.[68] The United States had earlier provided lethal assistance to other elements of the armed opposition in Syria to promote regime change, but at this point the main strategic objective shifted towards defeating ISIS.[69] Because of this, the United States actively sought new local partners. In the northern part of Syria, the People's Protection Units (YPG – Yekineyen Parastina Gel[70]) and some affiliated Kurdish militia groups had been relatively successful in countering ISIS, but the United States was reluctant to support an ethnic militia whose primary goal was secession. This diminished the group's appeal, as it would be popular neither domestically nor in the eyes of regional allies (i.e. Turkey). As such, the United States requested that the group should rebrand their image, reframe their goals and preferences, and restructure the organisation.

Both the United States and the YPG had a mutual interest in defeating ISIS. This basic form of goal alignment formed the basis of the relationship. For the YPG, it was a matter of survival. Former rebel commander Mazloum Abdi explained that the group opted for a partnership with the Americans at a time when ISIS was getting stronger every day: 'we were at capacity just stemming the tide and protecting our area'.[71] At the same time, a sense of urgency was growing in the United States after ISIS conducted public beheadings of American citizens.[72]

Despite a common goal in defeating ISIS, there were significant areas of interest divergence. US General Joseph L. Votel said in an interview that 'in terms of balancing our interests versus their interests, one way might be in developing a partnership. First and foremost, it is about making sure we know what their true motives and intentions are – and in areas where we

[67] Jack S. Levy, 'Case studies: Types, designs, and logics of inference', *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, 25:1 (2008), pp. 1–18 (p. 6).

[68] Bo Arnold and John Nagl, 'A light footprint in Syria: Operational art in operation inherent resolve', *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 34:5 (2023), pp. 1007–39 (p. 1011).

[69] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020).

[70] The People's Protection Units (YPG) were established in 2012 as the military wing of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) – a Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

[71] Quoted in Robin Wright, 'How Trump betrayed the general who defeated ISIS', *The New Yorker* (4 April 2019).

[72] Chelsea J. Carter, 'Video shows ISIS beheading U.S. journalist James Foley', *CNN* (20 August 2014).

diverge, making it clear the areas we can or cannot support. I think that's very important.'[73] In this case it was the YPG's long-term interest of post-conflict autonomy that appeared most problematic for the United States.[74] American officials conveyed early on that the US would not support any effort to establish an independent Kurdish state and cautioned the group against taking actions that could provoke Turkey.[75] In fact, at the beginning of the relationship, the United States communicated a clear set of demands to the YPG. These were that the group should *not* (1) take steps towards autonomy (connecting the cantons in northern Syria into a contiguous land), (2) fight against Turkey, (3) associate with the PKK, (4) cooperate with the regime or its backers, or (5) commit human rights violations. When incidents later surfaced, US officials also requested that the group should not fight against other US-backed groups in north-western Syria.[76] Being aware that support would be contingent on how the group framed their armed struggle in relation to these demands, they entered a process of strategic alignment.

Rebranding: From ethno-nationalism to national armed struggle

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) was founded in October 2015 announcing that their political goal was to create a secular, democratic, and federalised Syria.[77] Although there were eight different groups that signed the founding document, the People's Protection Units (YPG) and the Women's Protection Units (YPJ) came to form the backbone of the new organisation. Prior to the formation of the Syrian Democratic Forces, the United States had provided limited air support for the YPG as they battled ISIS in Sinjar and Kobani.[78] However, it was not until the SDF was created that the United States 'opened the flood gates of support'.[79] On the same night as the SDF was established, the United States airdropped 50 tons of ammunition destined for the group.[80]

Turkey saw the YPG as an extension of the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party), which was considered a terrorist organisation. Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said that it 'would be wrong for the United States with whom we are friends and allies in NATO to talk openly and to expect us to say "yes" to such a support to a terrorist organization'.[81] American officials conveyed that American support was contingent on the YPG not associating themselves with the PKK publicly or materially.[82] When the first US military advisors arrived in north-east Syria in December 2015 and saw a large portrait of PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan overlooking the meeting, they jokingly said that 'that's the first thing that's got to go'.[83]

[73]General Votel (commander JSOC 2011–14, SOCOM 2014–16, CENTCOM 2016–19) responding in an interview to the general question 'How would you reconcile the competing national interests between the United States and its partners? When does this come into consideration when developing this relationship?'. *Joint Forces Quarterly* 89, 2nd Quarter (2018), pp. 34–39.

[74]Dylan Maguire, 'A perfect proxy? The United States–Syrian Democratic Forces partnership', PWP Conflict Studies (Blacksburg: Virginia Tech Publishing, 2020), p. 10.

[75]Wojciech Michnik and Spyridon Plakoudas, *Proxy Warfare on the Cheap: The Partnership between the USA and the Syrian Kurds* (London: Lexington Books, Rowman & Littlefield, 2023), p. 38; Michael Knights and Wladimir van Wilgenburg, *Accidental Allies: The US–Syrian Democratic Forces Partnership against the Islamic State* (London: I.B. Tauris, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022), pp. 38; 83; 101.

[76]Plana, 'The proxy paradox', p. 492.

[77]The establishment of SDF was announced on 11 October 2015 during a press conference in al-Hasakah.

[78]Arnold and Nagl, 'A light footprint in Syria', p. 7; Michnik and Plakoudas, *Proxy Warfare on the Cheap*, p. 37.

[79]Plana, 'The proxy paradox', p. 151.

[80]Knights and van Wilgenburg, *Accidental Allies*, p. 84.

[81]Quoted in 'Turkey will not cooperate in US support for Kurds in Syria, says Erdogan', *The Guardian* (19 October 2014), available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/19/turkey-will-not-cooperate-us-support-kurds-erdogan.

[82]Plana, 'The proxy paradox', p. 501.

[83]Knights and van Wilgenburg, *Accidental Allies*, p. 101.

US General Raymond Thomas[84] explained how the group adjusted in light of US demands:

> "I dealt with them directly, that was in the formative stages of the relationship with these guys. They formally called themselves the YPG who the Turks would say equated with the PKK – you are dealing with the terrorists, enemy of mine, how could you do that ally? So, we literally played back to them that you got to change your brand. What do you want to call yourselves besides the YPG? And with about a day's notice, they declared that they were the Syrian Democratic Forces. I thought that it was a stroke of brilliance to put democracy somewhere in there."[85]

This is illustrative of conscious discursive efforts at rebranding initiated after US demands. Statements made by political decision-makers in Washington, DC, as well as special forces operatives on the ground in Syria, substantiate the rebranding process. The National Security Council's director for Syria Alexander Bick said that 'the SDF was our name',[86] and US special forces officers that 'we made the word "SDF"' and that 'the SDF was something [the US military] helped them brand themselves with'.[87]

In general, the United States favoured those armed groups in Syria that appealed to the nation and that were more inclusive rather than those that mobilised around a narrower subnational identity. This was partly based on an interest in keeping the Syrian state intact, but it is likely that historical experiences also played a role. There were past instances in which support channelled to groups with a subnational identity had either actively turned against the United States or not proven to be advantageous in the long run, a primary example of this being the Reagan administration's efforts to arm the Mujahideen in Afghanistan in the 1980s.[88] That the United States favoured national movements was problematic to the YPG as their core constituency was the Kurds. However, with the creation of the wider umbrella organisation, the Syrian Democratic Forces, in October 2015, they changed to a more inclusive framing. Whereas the YPG and YPJ retained the traditional Kurdish flags and symbols of red, yellow, and green, the SDF's logo was consciously more inclusive: a map of Syria, with its name written in Arabic, Kurdish, and Syriac. Similarly, Rojava – which means 'West' in Kurdish, implying it is the western province of a greater Kurdistan straddling Syria, Iraq, Turkey, and Iran – was renamed the 'Democratic Federation of Northern Syria' in 2016, to make the organisation more inclusive.[89] The colours of the newly created flags and symbols remained the same.

Any time US military officials saw PKK symbols, especially near official SDF buildings or bases, they reminded their SDF counterparts of the original agreement not to associate with the PKK as a condition of American support. A former special operations commander noted that, although members of the SDF would remove the symbols when caught, threats of support withdrawal did not entirely prevent similar behaviour in the future. Another special operator elaborated on the same issue: 'We raised hell every time. They made a good faith effort to curb it, but it will be hard.'[90] After the SDF would take over a new town from ISIS – such as Raqqa in October 2017 – they first raised the SDF flag, but it did not take long until huge posters of PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan appeared in the city centre.[91] A former State Department official with knowledge of the SDF relationship

[84]Deputy Commander Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) 2010–12; Associate Director of Military Affairs, CIA 2013–14; Commander, Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), 2014–16; Commander of the United States Special Operations Command (SOCOM) 2016–19.

[85]Raymond Thomas, Commander of the United States Special Operations Command (SOCOM), 2016–19, 'Public interview', Aspen Institute Security Forum, 21 July 2017. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kVZCIel_2Xw.

[86]Plana, 'The proxy paradox', p. 450.

[87]Plana, 'The proxy paradox', p. 450.

[88]Niklas Karlén and Vladimir Rauta, 'Dealers and brokers in civil wars: Why states delegate rebel support to conduit countries', *International Security*, 47:4 (2023), pp. 107–46 (pp. 126–33).

[89]Phillips and Valbjørn, '"What is in a name?"', p. 426.

[90]Plana, 'The proxy paradox', p. 502.

[91]Phillips and Valbjørn, '"What is in a name?"', p. 426.

confirmed that despite repeated appeals from the US, PKK or Ocalan imagery was 'always an issue every single time they took a new town'. YPG leaders claimed it was difficult to police these expressions of support for Ocalan among YPG fighters and downplayed that they reflected any actual link to the PKK.[92]

Reframing: Towards a secular, democratic, and federalised Syria

The SDF presented the organisation and depicted their goals and preferences in a way that would facilitate a strategic partnership with the United States. More specifically, this meant emphasising certain aspects of the armed struggle while at the same time de-emphasising others. This included downplaying the central goal of secessionism, the Kurdish identity, and the group's conflictual relationship with Turkey, while at the same time highlighting a willingness to confront ISIS and to stand up for democratic values. The SDF had to accept that its region would remain part of Syria rather than striving for an independent Kurdish state, while simultaneously vowing not to attack Turkish interests. Still, American special operators and diplomats knew that YPG commanders wanted to leverage American support to further their own project of autonomous governance.[93]

After the US Department of Defense found that the Kurdish fighters in Syria were more committed to democratic values than other armed groups, they deepened the collaboration with the YPG and helped it evolve into a broader and more inclusive force, under the banner of the SDF.[94] The SDF explicitly emphasised Western values and ideals. This targeted communication to particular audiences is visible in public interviews and meant that certain goals and preferences became more salient. A representative of the Syrian Democratic Forces said in an interview that 'the current goal in practical terms is to confront Daesh, given that it is the first enemy, but the goal is also to build a democratic Syria in the future'.[95] Similarly, Nasir Haj Mansour, an official in the defence ministry of the Kurdish administration in YPG-held territory said that 'given that these forces in general are democratic and secular forces that believe to a great degree in diversity, we hope that they will receive support' from the US-led coalition.[96] The United States rotated the same special operators through north-east Syria year after year to actively foster personal relations, build up an institutional memory, and establish contact networks.[97] Interviews with US special operatives on the ground mirror the armed group's own depiction of the organisation: 'The SDF and its political arm, the Syrian Democratic Council, believe in equal rights for women, freedom of speech and religion, and local governance. The group also values education and has a judicial system that is fair and transparent.' The same special operative added: 'This was the first opportunity I have seen to actually achieve our end-state objectives because we had a partner that very closely shares our American values.'[98] Another special operative said that the members of the SDF were 'incredibly fair in their heart. … They would rather take casualties themselves than harm a civilian.'[99]

SDF consciously promoted women's empowerment and liberation to the point that it became a major component of the organisation's identity.[100] It has even been described how the movement has been on one end of the spectrum and ISIS on the other in the portrayal of gender identities in the Syrian Civil War. Szeleky suggests that the salience of gender ideology is an efficient and

[92] Plana, 'The proxy paradox', p. 501.

[93] Plana, 'The proxy paradox', p. 506.

[94] Federico Manfredi Firmian, 'Strengthening the US partnership with the Syrian Democratic Forces', *Survival*, 63:6 (2021), pp. 159–82 (p. 164).

[95] Suleiman Al-Khalidi and Tom Perry, 'New Syrian rebel alliance formed, says weapons on the way', *Reuters* (12 October 2015).

[96] Al-Khalidi and Perry, 'New Syrian rebel alliance formed'.

[97] Knights and van Wilgenburg, *Accidental Allies*, p. 14.

[98] Quoted in Lara Seligman, 'U.S. military officers who fought with Kurdish SDF fighters in Syria are devastated, ashamed', *Foreign Policy* (10 October 2019).

[99] Quoted in Seligman, 'U.S. military officers who fought with Kurdish SDF fighters in Syria are devastated, ashamed'.

[100] Ora Szekely, 'Fighting about women: Ideologies of gender in the Syrian Civil War', *Journal of Global Security Studies*, 5:3 (2020), pp. 408–26 (p. 415).

relatively low-cost means by which armed groups can signal their position relative to other parties in the conflict.[101] This includes strategically using frames related to female fighters, which has at least in part served to boost their appeal to the broader US public. This practice strengthened the legitimacy of the group in relation to key audiences, since portraying combatants as simultaneously armed fighters and feminine women sent the message that even those who are traditionally expected to be the furthest removed from fighting were taking up arms. The attention-grabbing nature of this messaging was founded on gendered assumptions that women have no place in conflict.[102] In general, we know that external state supporters such as the United States are affected by this type of gendered messaging.[103]

Reforming: Inclusion of non-Kurdish militias

The creation of the Syrian Democratic Forces allowed the United States to provide military assistance to the YPG while bolstering the public image of the group. The National Security Council Director for Syria[104] has explained that 'the SDF gave a superstructure which allowed the United States to have a partner'.[105] The United States actively devised a plan for the YPG that would bring on board more Arab forces. Training provided by US advisors, along with weapons and airstrikes, was later supplemented with monthly stipends of between $100 and $400 paid to SDF fighters, which induced more Arabs to join the movement.[106] American officials noted that they pushed their Kurdish counterparts to 'be more inclusive of Arab groups and the Kurdish opposition'.[107] Colonel John Dorrian[108] underlined in an interview that 'the Syrian Democratic Forces are a multi-ethnic and multi-sectarian organization, and that is one of the reasons why we're working with them, and they have continued to build the Arab element of their force'.[109]

Although the SDF included a range of different factions, the YPG was clearly dominant within the organisation. In the words of one of the SDF commanders, the YPG constituted 'the core column of SDF'.[110] At as many as 40,000 fighters, the YPG overshadowed any other Arab or minority factions in the SDF, the second largest of which was at most 4,000 fighters. The YPG also formed the leadership and logistics backbone of the group. American officials in charge of the relationship with the SDF would most regularly speak to commanders in the YPG or leaders affiliated with the YPG's political arm.[111] 'The entire backbone and mission command structure of the SDF was built on the expertise, experience, and commitment of the YPG. There was a deliberate attempt to put SAC elements [shorthand for Arab groups within the SDF] in the lead and make them the visible components but they were underpinned by Kurdish experience and leadership.'[112] The United States actively sought to create Arab-majority elements, grafted onto the YPG, to enhance the effectiveness of post-conflict local governance and to ameliorate Turkey's concerns.[113] Whenever YPG

[101] Szekely, 'Fighting about women', p. 422.

[102] Lindsey A. Goldberg, 'International virtue signaling: How female combatants shape state support for armed rebellion', *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, 43:2 (2025), pp.107–30 (p. 108).

[103] Manekin and Wood, 'Framing the narrative'; Goldberg, 'International virtue signaling'.

[104] Director for Syria, National Security Council 2014–16.

[105] Plana, 'The proxy paradox', p. 477.

[106] Wladimir Van Wilgenburg and Mario Fumerton, 'From the PYD-YPG to the SDF: The consolidation of power in Kurdish-controlled northeast Syria', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 47:9, pp. 1090–109 (p. 1099).

[107] Plana, 'The proxy paradox', p. 484.

[108] Spokesperson for the Combined Joint Task Force Operation Inherent Resolve 2016–17.

[109] John Dorrian, 'Department of Defense Press Briefing by Col. Dorrian via teleconference from Baghdad, Iraq', Washington, DC, 15 March 2017, available at: https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/1119873/department-of-defense-press-briefing-by-col-dorrian-via-teleconference-from-bag/.

[110] Knights and van Wilgenburg, *Accidental Allies*, p. 84.

[111] Plana, 'The proxy paradox', p. 450.

[112] Plana, 'The proxy paradox', p. 488.

[113] Aaron Stein, 'Partner operations in Syria: Lessons learned and the way forward', Atlantic Council: Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East, Washington, DC (10 July 2017), p. 3.

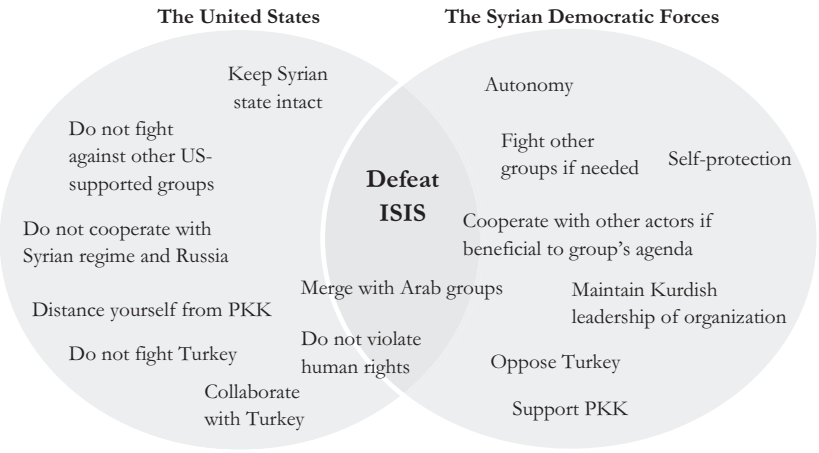

Figure 2. Convergence/divergence of interests between state sponsor and rebel group.

took territory from ISIS, they had to include other ethnic or religious groups, notably Arabs and Christians, in setting up governance and security. The inclusion of non-Kurdish factions facilitated the framing of the group as more inclusive. Not only did this help mitigate concerns that the group had ties to the PKK, but it also helped the movement appear more legitimate to a domestic audience.

Knights and van Wilgenburg assert that the United States had much more control over the SDF than most observers believe because of 'explicit instructions, implicit examples, and inferred expectations'.[114] A US official involved in vetting and interacting with the YPG/SDF explained: 'We wanted to mitigate the actual security threats originating in northeast Syria. The YPG did everything we told them to do, and did not do the things we told them not to do.'[115]

The matching process

Interest divergence is at the core of the principal–agent problem. State sponsors and non-state armed groups rarely – if ever – have identical interests. Because of this, they need to engage in a matching process. Figure 2 displays the main issues of interest convergence and divergence between the United States and the Syrian Democratic Forces summarised in a Venn diagram.

The United States issued a set of demands to the Syrian Democratic Forces at the beginning of the relationship. Promises of external support were then to some extent made conditional on these. In response, the Syrian Democratic Forces used a range of different framing techniques to secure support. Using frame amplification, they invigorated certain goals and preferences. In particular, they emphasised that their long-term political goal was to create a secular, democratic, and federalised Syria.[116] This was then picked up in Washington, where the SDF was depicted as sharing a Western understanding of human rights and women's rights.[117] The SDF also employed frame transformation. Specifically, they changed the dominant narrative that they were fighting for an independent Kurdistan to one that would contain the conflict within the borders of Syria. This meant changing certain key symbols as well as de-emphasising linkages to the PKK. Moreover, this

[114]Knights and van Wilgenburg, *Accidental Allies*, pp. 18; 242. This conclusion is based on around 100 interviews conducted in both Syria and the United States with YPG and SDF military officers as well as US officials and military officers who led the 'by, with, and through' campaign (Knights and van Wilgenburg, *Accidental Allies*, p. 6).

[115]Knights and van Wilgenburg, *Accidental Allies*, p. 242.

[116]Firmian, 'Strengthening the US partnership with the Syrian Democratic Forces', p. 164.

[117]Till F. Paasche and Michael M. Gunter, 'Revisiting Western strategies against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria', *The Middle East Journal*, 70:1 (2016), pp. 9–29.

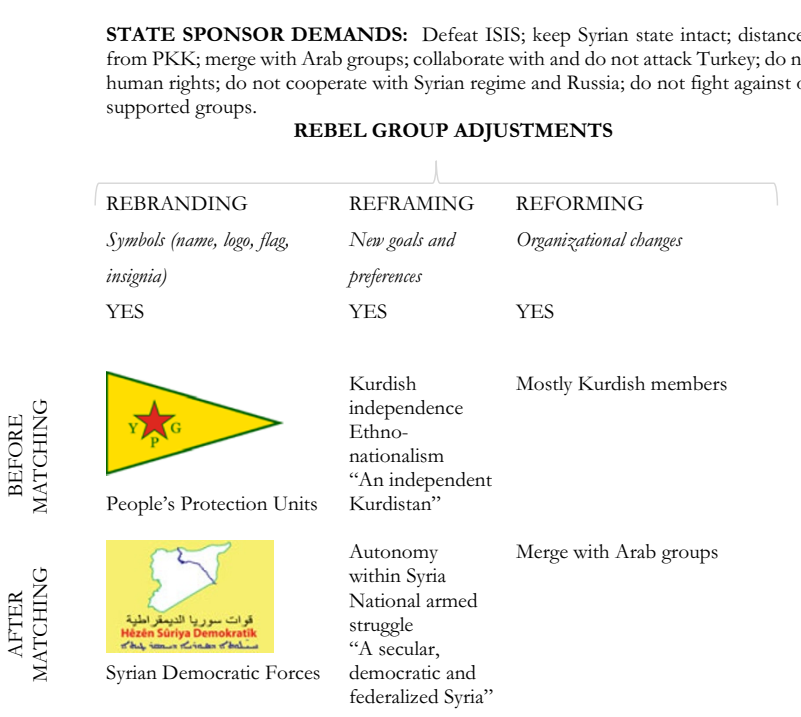

Figure 3. Strategic alignment process of the Syrian Democratic Forces.

included a deliberate frame extension in that they broadened the group's membership. Although the YPG dominated the new movement, the addition of various Arab militias was crucial to extending the frame from Kurds to Syrians more broadly. Figure 3 summarises some of the main tenets of the strategic alignment process.

In sum, the United States made a number of demands, many of which clashed with the YPG-led SDF's objectives of protecting Kurdish territories, pursuing Kurdish autonomy, and carving out a future for itself in Syria.[118] Still, the group went through a comprehensive process that included actions directly related to rebranding, reframing, and reforming. These adjustments made it possible for the United States to set up a working partnership with the group.

Conclusion

How are partnerships between foreign states and armed groups formed? I have argued that states and rebel groups engage in a strategic matching process to establish and sustain their relationship. For state sponsors, strategic alignment helps to justify the act of support to relevant audiences and to enhance control. For rebels, strategic alignment serves to distinguish them from competitors and to increase the chances of obtaining resources vital for organisational survival. This does not imply that decisions to provide and accept support are not also guided by states' calculations about group capacity and rebel concerns for recruitment. However, it does demonstrate that both actors engage in a process of strategic alignment in the formative stages of the relationship. Seeing how actors consciously and actively frame their own relationship problematises identity as a causal driver.

The study demonstrates how useful it may be to shift from an outcome-centred lens to a more process-centred approach. External support provision has often been studied through 'snapshots' in time focused on a single actor, usually the state sponsor. This misses the dynamic matching

[118]Plana, 'The proxy paradox', p. 442.

process in which both state sponsors and rebels exercise agency. In this article, I have presented a framework focused on state demands and key activities such as armed groups' rebranding, reframing, and reforming to highlight this process. Drawing on frame analysis, I have then illustrated how the Syrian Democratic Forces crafted narratives in tandem with the United States to create the necessary conditions which enabled support to be provided. This case served as a plausibility probe meant to integrate research on external support in civil wars with the growing literature on rebel diplomacy. Future research is needed to assess the value of the proposed framework and to determine how far the process of strategic alignment extends beyond the empirical illustration.

There are at least three pathways worthy of further inquiry. First, more research should engage in unpacking the discursive efforts made by both actors as the relationship unfolds. This would mean a stronger focus on language and communication rather than on the actual resources provided. Furthermore, while this article focused on external framing, other studies have looked at internal framing efforts.[119] A fruitful avenue for future research might be to integrate the two strands. Second, there is a need to acknowledge that proxy relationships develop over time. Since strategic alignment is a continuous and gradual process, the establishment of the relationship may not be as neatly sequenced as depicted. Moreover, the findings seem to suggest that, while limited external support could be provided at an early stage, the process of strategic alignment is needed to more fully 'turn on the taps'. Relatedly, it could prove fruitful to explore in greater depth whether the strategic alignment process differs for groups that are directly created by foreign states. Third, the study gives rise to a number of additional questions that could be further examined using comparative approaches: Why do states and rebels sometimes engage in extensive efforts to match while at other times they do not? Are some states and rebels more likely than others to engage in strategic alignment? Which are the main audiences of the discursive efforts and how do these change over time and across cases? In the end, acknowledging that a dynamic matching process exists is central if we want to increase our understanding of how states and non-state armed groups establish and manage their relationships.

Acknowledgements. I am grateful to Lars Wikman, Lisa Ekman, Vladimir Rauta, David Gebre-Medhin, and the members of the Civil Wars and Military Interventions Research Group at the Swedish Defence University for constructive comments on earlier drafts of this paper. Previous versions of this project were presented at the Conflict Delegation and Proxy Wars in International Security Workshop in 2021, at the PRIS biennial conference in 2022, and at the War Studies Research Seminar at the Swedish Defence University in 2022. This research has been enabled by a grant from the Swedish Armed Forces.

Niklas Karlén is Senior Lecturer in War Studies at the Swedish Defence University, Stockholm, Sweden. His main research interests are interventions, civil wars, and US foreign policy. His previous work has appeared in outlets such as *International Security, Journal of Peace Research, Security Studies, International Studies Review, Terrorism and Political Violence, Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, and *Civil Wars*.

[119]Thaler, 'Rebel mobilization through pandering'.

Cite this article: Niklas Karlén, 'Making stars align: Partnerships between state sponsors and armed groups', *European Journal of International Security* (2025), pp. 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2025.10007