

Cooperating with auxiliaries in the Middle East: historical approaches and strategic implications

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In a BBC Radio Four interview on 9 October, UK Defence Secretary Michael Fallon declared that the war against Islamic State (IS) in the Middle East ‘can only be won on the ground, but it can also only be won by a home army, not by America or Britain’. According to Fallon, this was the main lesson to be learned from recent Western interventions in Iraq and in Afghanistan, where occupation by Western forces had ostensibly triggered full-blown insurgencies. Rather than deploying ground forces, the West should restrict its role to training and supplying local forces and to supporting the latter with air strikes. In the fight against IS, the relevant local players that warrant Western support are the Iraqi army, Kurdish *peshmerga* forces and moderate Syrian rebel organizations.¹

Fallon’s assessment illustrates that the West has taken stock of its post-9/11 counter-insurgency campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. The rise of the counter-insurgency paradigm that began with General David Petraeus’s appointment as commanding general of the Multinational Forces in Iraq in 2007 was swiftly followed by a sobering assessment of

the West's Pyrrhic victory in Iraq and Afghanistan's uncertain future in the wake of the withdrawal of Western security forces.

The West's reluctance to commit ground troops also chimes with the realities of the UK's and other Western states' defence planning in the age of austerity: both the UK and the US are currently implementing far-reaching cuts in their professional armed forces. Both countries are in the process of cutting their armies by 20 per cent.² By contrast, in both countries Special Forces (SF) capabilities will remain unaffected by budget cuts. Both the US 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) and the UK 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) indicated that one way to tackle the resulting manpower shortage in the armed forces is the extension of reserve forces.³ An alternative solution, even though one that the QDR and the SDRS are much less upfront about, is an increasing reliance on local auxiliaries: local militia and rebel groups who are willing to bear the brunt of the fighting on the ground with Western support in terms of materiel, communications and, possibly, air strikes. This is the solution that the West has so far sought to implement in Libya, Syria and Iraq since 2014.

However, reliance on local auxiliaries is a phenomenon that preceded the era of austerity. In the earlier phases of the 'war on terror', Western coalitions cooperated with local allies such as the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan and the *peshmerga* in Iraq. The enlistment of local Sunni fighters in Iraq between 2006 and 2010 in the framework of the 'Sons

of Iraq' (SOI) scheme, who joined the US-led coalition in its fight against al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) was seen as a central element of the Western forces' efforts to turn the tide of the insurgency in Iraq. However, in the current situation of sustained financial pressure on the West's military resources and manpower, the importance of local auxiliaries is likely to increase.

Even though reliance on military auxiliaries currently seems to be a popular option among major international actors, there is a striking dearth of informed strategic debate on its potential pitfalls. The recent COIN debate touched upon the topic of auxiliaries, as does the emerging literature on 'hybrid warfare'.⁴ Yet, the nascent scholarly engagement with the topic does not match its relevance in the current strategic context. Existing accounts have highlighted a number of pitfalls involved in cooperating with irregular auxiliaries such as their potential lack of ethical and legal accountability and the difficulty of integrating them into state-building processes.⁵ Yet, they have not systematically taken into account the way in which specific arrangements and narratives pursued by the auxiliaries' sponsors impact upon local perceptions of political legitimacy and, by extension, local and regional power dynamics.

In order to understand the political dynamics that potentially arise from military cooperation with local auxiliary forces, it is useful to turn to the history of modern war in order to identify historical approaches

for such cooperation. The rapid decline of the counter-insurgency paradigm following the failures of the Western operations in Iraq and Afghanistan has somewhat tainted historical approaches to the study of current strategic problems. The counter-insurgency narrative centered around the notion of 'lessons' that ought to be 'learned' from the history of earlier campaigns, most notably Malaya, ostensibly implying that there was a blueprint operational and tactical approach that could be distilled from history and applied to today's wars.⁶ Such a Jominian approach to history⁷ could only fail, not least because the political and global conditions of contemporary counter-insurgency operations are vastly different from those of the post-Second World War era.

Yet, it would be shortsighted to turn away from the history of modern wars entirely. History does not repeat itself – it does not even rhyme –, hence resisting attempts of 'learning lessons', readymade and applicable to today's problems from it. However, it does provide us with a rich store of evidence from which we can distill an analytical vocabulary that can help us understand current events. Viewed from this perspective, the study of history cannot offer solutions, but it can help us ask pertinent questions. The next section outlines three political and military approaches of collaborating with auxiliaries, which roughly correspond to three different historical phases, though the boundaries between these phases are not clear-cut, and earlier models often survived into, or were revived during, later episodes. The first approach is the eighteenth century model of the native auxiliary as an ethnic

irregular fighter and tactical complement to regular armed forces. Historically, these fighters were called 'partisans'. The second model covers the marginalization of the 'partisans' as an illegitimate combatants and their concomitant, yet paradoxical reinvention in the form of 'martial races'. The latter formed the core of late nineteenth and early twentieth century colonial armies, which became increasingly regularized and integrated into the European military command structures. The third approach consists of the rise of native loyalist auxiliaries after 1945. These represented a departure from the earlier trend towards the increasing regularization of colonial troops. They were deliberately set apart from regular armed forces and often stayed outside of the regular military command structures. Their military effectiveness was limited as a result of poor training and armament. In fact, the main motive for their recruitment was political, not military, in that they were designed as a symbol of legitimacy of western political power in the peripheries of the international system after 1945.

The third part of this article discusses current Western strategy in the Middle East and its efforts to contain or even combat IS in Iraq and Syria through the lens provided by the historical analysis. It shows that even though Western collaboration with local auxiliaries unwittingly echoes earlier approaches and practices, the West's predominant focus on the issue of religious extremism in the debate about this collaboration prevents it from realizing the wider implications of its practices on power dynamics in the Middle East.

Cooperating with irregular auxiliaries: three historical approaches

The practice of relying on military auxiliaries is as old as warfare itself. However, it was only when European armed forces became increasingly 'regularized' that military auxiliaries were referred to as actors different from regular armed forces. By the eighteenth century monarchs in Europe had successfully increased their control over their armies. However, paradoxically it had become increasingly difficult for them to use those armies to wage war. The average size of European armies had more than doubled between the mid-seventeenth and the early eighteenth centuries. Mobilizing for major war slowed down economic production and inevitably put a strain on state finances. Communication capabilities had not grown in equal measure as the size of armies, hence limiting the radius of their campaigns. Tactical limitations meant that battles were often costly, but rarely decisive.⁸ In these circumstances reliance on small mobile units of light infantry and light cavalry provided European states with increased room for manoeuvre. These units could either serve alongside regular units and take on tasks that regular forces struggled with, such as reconnaissance, or they could operate independently.⁹ They were something akin to early modern Special Forces.¹⁰ The names of these units often reflected their ethnic origin: the Habsburg empire relied on 'Pandours' and 'Croats' who stemmed from the border region with the Ottoman

empire, Russia used 'Cossacks' and Bavaria and Prussia 'Hussars'. The overall notion for these light infantry and cavalry detachments was 'parties' in French or 'Partheyen' in German. Their members were called 'partisans'.¹¹ In other words, mid-eighteenth century European powers deployed irregular auxiliaries as a tactical complement alongside regular forces. This practice was reflected in a number of publications on the subject by military writers such as Turpin de Crissé, Thomas Antoine le Roy de Grandmaison, Capitaine de Jeney, Count de la Roche, Roger Stevenson, Johann von Ewald, Andreas Emmerich, Georg Wilhelm Baron von Valentini, Gerhard von Scharnhorst, Friedrich Leopold Klipstein, and Carl von Decker.¹²

The turn of the eighteenth to the nineteenth century was a 'watershed' moment for the European 'partisan' auxiliaries. The notion of the 'partisan' was subject to a fundamental transformation.¹³ With the French Revolution and the concomitant nationalization of war in Europe, the term 'partisan' came to designate counter-revolutionary rebels. The tactical meaning of *la petite guerre* gave way to the notion of people's war or guerrilla warfare – two terms that were burdened with issues of political legitimacy. The denunciation of 'partisans' and guerrilla fighters was based on a complex interplay of perceptions that included claims that their way of fighting was abhorrent, that they were fighting for the wrong motives and that they had no right to take up arms.¹⁴

However, states continued to cooperate with irregular auxiliaries.

Britain's support for Spanish guerrillas in the Peninsular War is a case in point. It was dictated by considerations of grand strategy. In wake of the Battle of Talavera on 27 and 28 July 1809, the Duke of Wellington, frustrated by both the incompetence and the lack of loyalty displayed by the remainder of the Spanish regular forces, increasingly premised his operations on collaborating with the guerrilla bands. In December 1810 he wrote to the Secretary of State for War and the Colonies, Lord Liverpool, that the Spanish state had been obliterated by Napoleon's occupation forces and that there was no hope of a regular response to French occupation. He concluded: 'The war in the Peninsula, therefore, as far as the Spaniards are concerned in it, cannot take a regular shape. It must be confined to the operations of the guerrillas, upon which the calculations are very different from those which would be made in respect to the operations of a more regular force.'¹⁵ Britain's support for the Spanish guerrillas proved successful in the framework of its overall European strategy to roll back the Napoleonic empire. However, in Spain it sowed the seeds for more than a century of intermittent civil war between 1832 and 1939. The forces that the Peninsular War had unleashed sowed the seeds for a continuous struggle between liberalism and absolutism that marked the history of Spain throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹⁶

At the same time, the nineteenth century gave rise to a new paradigm in the use of irregular auxiliaries, one that originated mainly in the

colonies. Colonial powers had at all times relied on local auxiliaries recruited from within their colonial territories or from nearby localities. In the second half of the nineteenth century all colonial powers regularized their irregular colonial auxiliaries to a certain extent.¹⁷ In the case of Britain, the experience of the 1857 mutiny and the predicament of recruiting native auxiliaries that it highlighted prompted the evolution of the concept of 'martial races'. The notion of 'martial races' was based on the idea that some social and 'ethnic' groups in India (and elsewhere) were biologically or culturally more disposed to make effective and loyal soldiers than others. In the colonial context, therefore, the eighteenth century tradition of tactical handbooks on the use of military auxiliaries was replaced with racial theories on the 'correct' way to recruit colonial armies.¹⁸

The rise of the 'martial races' discourse in the context of colonial warfare was to a certain extent the flipside of the marginalization of irregular fighters in Europe. Characteristically European imperialists approached their colonial auxiliaries with in the framework of an 'orientalist' perspective. Non-European fighters were assigned both attributes of inferiority and superiority.¹⁹ They were seen as inferior, because they were regarded as 'savage', 'uncivilized' and 'undisciplined'. At the same time, their negative attributes were perceived as an advantage: 'uncivilized' behaviour could translate into increased martial spirits and fighting prowess. At the same time, the 'martial races' discourse displayed some similarities with its eighteenth

century predecessors: after all, eighteenth century light infantry and cavalry units had traditionally been recruited from among ethnic groups on the borders of Europe.²⁰ However, the 'cult of the regular' and the marginalization of the irregular was an intellectual template that exerted its influence beyond the boundaries of Europe. The drive towards creating regular colonial armies could be observed among all imperial powers at the end of the nineteenth century.

A third approach to cooperating with irregular auxiliaries emerged after the Second World War. Colonial and 'post'-colonial insurgencies (such as the Vietnam War) after 1945 featured a complex coexistence and cooperation of different military forces. Regularized colonial troops that had their roots in the 'martial races' era fought alongside metropolitan units and allied foreign military forces. At the same time, western powers also started recruiting a new category of local irregular auxiliaries, whose main value was not seen in their military contribution, but in their political impact on the conflict dynamic: these auxiliaries, though ostensibly recruited for military purposes, were raised as a conspicuous sign of *loyalism* among the native population.

In Indochina, France recruited the *Groupement de Commandos Mixtes Aéroportés* (GCMA), renamed in 1953 in *Groupe Mixte d'Intervention* (GMI); in Algeria, the *harkis* played the role of the loyalist militia. In Malaya and later in Kenya, British forces relied on the Home Guard. During the Vietnam War, the US relied on the regular Army of the

Republic Vietnam (ARVN) to carry the brunt of military operations, but it also cooperated with Regional Forces and Popular Forces (RF/PF, also known as 'Ruff-Puffs' among US officers) and the People's Self-Defense Force, whose features differed from the ARVN. All these auxiliaries shared the same characteristics: in contrast to the earlier colonial forces recruited under the 'martial races' model, they were not regularized. As a result, they were mostly insufficiently trained and armed and had only limited military effect.²¹ However, this mattered little to their western sponsors, since their purpose was not primarily military, but political. Even if their local knowledge could be beneficial for intelligence purposes and even if their 'native' way of fighting often seemed suited to the purposes of counter-terror, western sponsors made no efforts to foster those capabilities by increasing military or intelligence training or by providing better equipment. The prime value of loyalist militias consisted in their role as a symbol of the legitimacy of the colonial power's or the supported government's counter-insurgency efforts and political positions, and their purchase among the local population.

Even though the recruitment of loyalist auxiliaries was meant as a political tool to support military operations, the historical record indicates that the success or failure of the military operations had a far greater impact on the fate of the loyalist auxiliaries than the other way around. In other words, where the counter-insurgency effort failed, loyalist militias were left highly exposed and vulnerable to revenge

attacks. In Malaya and Kenya, both of which were deemed a victory for the counter-insurgent side (albeit the outcome was decolonization, of course), former loyalist auxiliaries fared well and often rose to power positions in the post-colonial state.²² In those cases where the counter-insurgent side was defeated and the political authorities were formed from among the ranks of its former opponents, the fate of the loyalists was much less favourable.

In Indochina French forces withdrew from an increasing number of areas between 1950 and 1954, knowing that the loyalists would become the target of revenge attacks. Many loyalists begged French officers to take them along and to protect them. It was a traumatic experience for the officers involved, and one that contributed to the revolt of parts of the French army in 1961 in Algeria, as it became clear that the *harkis* would face a similar fate after French withdrawal.²³ And indeed, they did: an estimated 30,000 - 40,000 Algerian Muslim loyalists were killed in the wake of Algerian independence.²⁴ In Vietnam, the Hue massacre of 1968, in which troops of the North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong had killed an estimated 2,800 to 6,000 loyalists and civilians after battle of Hue, spread fear among loyalists over their fate in the event of a communist victory. The widespread panic that accompanied the North Vietnamese advance and the fall of Saigon in 1975 was a manifestation of these fears, as was the hectic US evacuation of Saigon in April 1975. There were allegations that US embassy staff in Saigon failed to destroy the records of about 30,000

local collaborators operating in the framework of the Phoenix programme. The records allegedly fell into the hands of the communists after they took over Saigon, and many former loyalists were allegedly killed.²⁵

In search of local allies: Western strategy in the Middle East and North Africa

On the face of it, the new era of Western offshore balancing in the Middle East and North Africa with support from local boots on ground began in 2011 in Libya. This new approach ostensibly came about as a result of the coincidence of growing doubts over the eventual success of the Western counterinsurgency effort in Iraq, the Arab Spring, cuts in Western defence budgets and a perceived military intervention fatigue among Western publics. From April to October 2011 NATO forces supported a local Libyan insurgency against the dictator Muammar Gaddafi. Even before the onset of military operations, major Western governments had recognized the National Transitional Council as Libya's new legitimate government. Western policy-makers and the media referred to the anti-Gaddafi forces as 'rebels', thereby turning a word that in the nineteenth century had been a term of abuse for illegitimate guerrilla fighters into a badge of honour and a conspicuous symbol of political legitimacy. With the support of NATO, the Libyan

'rebels' prevailed against Gaddafi, who was captured and killed on 21 October 2011.

The Libyan uprising had, in turn, a large impact on the evolving Syrian civil war, both in terms of the ambitions of local actors and in terms of the developing Western perspective on the situation in Syria. However, even though policy-makers and the media frequently drew parallels between the Libyan uprising and the Syrian civil war, in particular with respect to the extent of civilian suffering, direct Western military intervention did not take place before 2014. The West came close to attacking the Assad regime and its forces after the chemical weapons attack in Ghouta on 21 August 2013, which was attributed to the regime. However, a lack of political will in Western capitals combined with Russia's staunch support for the Assad regime prevented direct military intervention in 2013. Yet, since 2012 the US reportedly has provided both non-lethal military support and military training to Syrian rebel forces. The US is also said to have channeled weapons to Syrian rebels since 2012 with the aid of the Gulf States and Turkey.²⁶

From the US perspective, the biggest challenge in supporting the Syrian uprising consisted in finding the right allies on the ground. While there was indeed a lively debate over Obama's Syria policy, in which political heavy-weights such as Leon Panetta, Hillary Clinton, Robert Gates and John McCain called for a clearer and more supportive stance towards moderate Syrian rebels, this debate focused almost exclusively on who

these 'moderate' forces were and on how to ensure that weapons did not fall into the wrong hands, meaning those of the 'extremist' factions.²⁷

The experience of Libya had alerted policy-makers to this risk: even though NATO had claimed in 2011 that there was no significant presence of Jihadist groups among the Libyan fighters, US intelligence sources were reportedly concerned over the involvement of al-Qaeda-affiliated groups among the rebels.²⁸ The killing of US ambassador J Christopher Stevens on 21 September 2012, blamed on the Jihadist militant group Ansar al-Sharia, at the latest drove home the message that the West's enemies' enemies were not necessarily their friends.

However, vetting Syrian rebel groups for their degree of religious extremism proved practically difficult at best and outright counterproductive at worst. In December 2013 the US suspended all support to moderate rebel forces after provisions had reportedly fallen into the hands of Jihadist groups.²⁹ Covert CIA-run arms provisions and training programmes have been reported to continue.³⁰ However, the challenge of finding 'moderate' rebel groups worthy of Western support has, if anything, increased between 2012 and 2014, and this has partly been the result of previous policies towards the rebels. There are indications that intelligence vetting aimed at separating 'moderate' from 'extremist' rebels (and the involvement of the Gulf States in the supply of weapons) have led to a process of fragmentation among the

more moderate rebel groups, from which the Jihadist factions, in turn, have profited.³¹

The Free Syrian Army (FSA) is a case in point. Founded in July 2011 and recruited mostly from the ranks of defected Syrian Armed Forces officers and soldiers, it was the West's initial main ally in Syria.

However, the FSA soon encountered problems arising from corruption, poor discipline, fragmentation and a lack of equipment. In 2013 and 2014, a number of FSA members reportedly defected to Jabhat al-Nusra, a Sunni Jihadist group affiliated with al-Qaeda, and even to IS. Jabhat al-Nusra emerged as one of the militarily most effective rebel forces within Syria, which added to their attractiveness in the eyes of 'moderate' rebels.³² The 'moderate' vs 'extremist' perspective that the West has adopted is not particularly meaningful for Syrian fighters on the ground: most of those who are doing the fighting are to a certain extent 'religious' and are hence able to buy into religious agendas without necessarily perceiving these agendas as 'extremist'. Last but not least, Assad is their common enemy and the gravest threat to their own survival. Against this backdrop, the 'moderate' vs 'extremist' divide pales into insignificance from the point of view of Syrian rebels.³³

The US has openly supported the FSA with non-lethal equipment, but is also said to have covertly facilitated shipments of arms supplies.³⁴

However, the scale of this support has not so far reached the levels at which it would have given the FSA a competitive edge over either the

Assad or the more 'extremist' rebels. In addition, two factors have profoundly shaken the relationship between the FSA and the West: the first was the Western decision not to intervene directly against Assad's forces after the chemical weapons attack in 2013, and the second was IS's rise and spread to Iraq, which deflected the West's attention to a certain extent away from the Assad regime and towards the threat posed by an expanding IS. In the UK, senior figures such as the former head of the army, Lord Dannatt, and the then chairman of the intelligence and security committee, Sir Malcolm Rifkind, publicly called for an instrumental rapprochement between the West and Assad in order to defeat IS.³⁵ As a result of what the FSA saw as a marked change of focus in Western strategy from the Assad regime to IS in Iraq, the FSA announced in September 2014 that it would not cooperate with US forces against IS unless the US makes a commitment to toppling Assad after IS has been contained or routed.³⁶

The final episode in the series of recent events in the Middle East that have promoted local auxiliary forces to the West's best strategic bet in the region was, of course, the rise of IS and its rapid expansion to Iraq in the spring and summer of 2014. While it was the violent repression of the civilian population by the dictators Gaddafi and Assad in Libya and Syria respectively that served as the main argument in favour of Western involvement, IS's expansion to Iraq was perceived as a more direct threat to Western interests. While the US-trained Iraqi army quickly disintegrated under the attack of IS forces, the Kurdish

peshmerga forces, a traditional US ally in Iraq, has evolved into the most crucial fighting force on the ground. The *peshmerga* receive Western support and military training. Since 8 August 2014 the US and other Western countries have conducted a number of air strikes against IS, both in Iraq and in Syria.

The weak performance of the Iraqi army in the face of advancing IS forces has been much commented upon by Western media. However, the way in which IS's expansion in Iraq has ostensibly tapped into another pool of US-trained and supplied fighters in Iraq has received much less attention. The Anbar Awakening that had started in late 2006 and the subsequent enlistment of Sunni fighters in the framework of the SOI scheme, recruited in order to join the West in its fight against AQI, was initially hailed as a masterstroke by US COIN experts. It was seen as a central element of the US forces' efforts to turn the tide of the insurgency in Iraq.³⁷

However, after the US withdrawal from Iraq, the Iraqi government under Nouri al-Maliki proved fickle in its approach to the SOI and ostensibly reneged on its commitment to integrate SOI fighters into the Iraqi security forces or the civilian administration. A US-run disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programme focused on teaching former SOI fighters vocational skills had started before the withdrawal of the US forces, but was apparently not continued by the Iraqi government.³⁸ Sidelined by the Shiite dominated

government and repeatedly targeted by sectarian violence, many of the former SOI fighters reportedly joined IS in 2014.³⁹ This trend was exacerbated by the breakdown of the Iraqi army, which effectively left the task of defending Baghdad against advancing IS forces to reemerging Shia militias, thereby leading to a further sectarianization of the conflict.

Loyalist and quasi-nationalist auxiliaries in the Middle East:

Strategic implications

The West's approach to cooperating with irregular auxiliaries in the Middle East and North Africa over the past decade is reminiscent of two historical models: the model of the quasi-nationalist 'rebel' guerrilla force and the model of the loyalist militia. Support for the 'rebels' in Libya and for the *peshmerga* forces in Northern Iraq followed the first model, the SOI scheme in Iraq the second. The Western perspective on Syrian rebels, and the FSA in particular, changed over time, from being initially guided by the idea of the quasi-nationalist rebel force to the loyalist anti-Jihadist militia, which caused friction in the relationship between the West and the FSA. Both models are bound up with issues of political legitimacy: the paradigm of the quasi-nationalist rebel force involves the claim that those who are doing the fighting are somehow representative of the 'people' and should hence form the government, while the paradigm of the loyalist militia indicates that the

counterinsurgent force has the support of the population for its military operations and its political actions. Both approaches draw the West into local and regional political dynamics that are hard to predict, let alone manipulate.

On the one hand, the fate of the SOI after the withdrawal of US armed forces has demonstrated that loyalist militias continue to be vulnerable to local political rivals and opponents once their sponsor can no longer protect them. The FSA's refusal to support the West's fight against IS can be partly explained as a manifestation of its reluctance to shift from a quasi-nationalist rebel organization to a loyalist militia. The FSA understandably fears that if they adopt the role of the loyalist auxiliary they may be faced with unpalatable options as the war goes on: either join Jihadist factions, as many FSA members have already done, or become the target of revenge attacks for being perceived as the West's ally. An FSA rebel leader echoed this dilemma in 2014 when he explained the FSA's reluctance to send members to a US-run training programme in Saudi Arabia: 'Why do we need training—we have been fighting for three years? ... What do they want? To create a force that is loyal to them and not us?'.⁴⁰

On the other hand, guerrilla forces fighting a 'people's war' against an oppressive government are prone to disintegrate once their common enemy has been toppled, as in Libya. Alternatively, they can be liable to a process of increasing political fragmentation and radicalization, as in

Syria – a process to which the West has inadvertently contributed.

Lastly, even if quasi-nationalist ‘rebel’ forces neither disintegrate nor radicalize, as seems to be the case with the Kurdish *peshmerga* fighters at the moment, they might claim their prize in the form of the creation of their own nation state after the fighting is over. The creation of an independent Republic of Kurdistan is an option that Western strategymakers will have to consider, even though it is not part of the official Western discourse on the future of Iraq at this point.⁴¹ And it would not only affect Iraq, it could also put the territorial integrity of Syria and Turkey at risk. Western media have depicted Turkey’s president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan as a scheming yet hapless actor, an unreliable ally of the West who tacitly supports IS.⁴² Yet, viewed from Turkey’s perspective, Erdoğan’s policy is perfectly rational: IS’s actions may be unpalatable, but the breakup of the Turkish state as a result of further Kurdish empowerment in the region is even more undesirable.

What about the other historical approaches of cooperating with irregular auxiliaries discussed above – the eighteenth century concept of the ‘partisan’ and the colonial offshoot of the nineteenth century discourse, the ‘martial races’ concept? As for the model of the ‘partisan’ as a designated irregular fighter trained for small war roles, local actors such as Iran are using it much more proficiently than the West. The Quds force element of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, trained to fight in insurgencies abroad, has fought both in Syria and in Iraq on the side of the respective regimes against IS. While this has been costly for Iran

in terms of personnel and resources, the upside of Iran's arrangement consists in the close political and military control that the Iranian government has over its 'partisans'.⁴³ The Quds forces, in turn, reportedly enable the Iranian leadership to exert influence and control over the Shia militias in Iraq, who are currently the most militarily effective force fighting against IS in Iraq. In fact, after Ramadi fell into IS's hands in May 2015, the Iraqi government has called upon Iranian-backed Shia militias to lead the fight against IS in the Anbar province. The price that the Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi will have to pay for this is an increase in Iranian influence over Iraqi politics. Thus the Quds forces are working as a force multiplier for Iran.

Owing to its inherent racism, the 'martial races' approach is, of course, wholly discredited today. However, some are pining for the onus that it placed on notions of allegiance and loyalty among colonial troops. Once those terms are stripped of their initial racist underpinnings, this model can indeed serve as a reminder for Western states who are training indigenous forces that combat effectiveness is meaningless, possibly even dangerous, without loyalty.⁴⁴ There is no doubt that the experience of raising colonial armies showed that the process of creating regular armies takes much longer than the Western COIN campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq have lasted. The swift disintegration of the Iraqi army in the summer of 2014 has underscored this. Yet, it is questionable whether a non-racist conception of the 'martial races' model and a greater focus on loyalty would have solved the problem of

the Iraqi army: after all, its allegiance would have had to center upon the Iraqi government, not a neo-colonial Western master, but it was precisely the Iraqi government that had alienated many, in particular Sunni, Iraqis.

Conclusion

There is no quick fix for the pitfalls of cooperating with auxiliaries in the Middle East. If the West wants to contain or rout IS in Iraq and Syria, it will have to rely on local allies in some way. However, the current debate on the forms that such collaboration could take and the risks that it involves is overwhelmingly focused on the vetting of Syrian rebel groups with a view to establishing their degree of religious 'extremism' and on debating the danger of weapons falling into the 'wrong' hands. While these are certainly valid questions, they do not even scratch at the surface of the deeper strategic challenges involved in collaborating with local auxiliaries. Focusing exclusively on the 'moderate' vs 'extremist' divide not only risks approaching the problem from a point of view that has little meaning for those with whom the West intends to collaborate, it also distracts attention from the broader strategic picture.

A survey of the history of Western attempts at collaborating with local auxiliaries cannot offer solutions to the conundrum that the West is

currently facing in the Middle East and Northern Africa. However, it can help alerting political and military decision-makers and the broader public to the problems that are potentially involved in such practices. The challenges are numerous: they range from the time and effort required for training professional armed forces and the problems of loyalty and allegiance that are not easily resolved in countries emerging from a deeply engrained sectarian conflict, to the issue of the vulnerability of 'loyalist' forces and to claims to political agency as a nation being voiced by those who have borne the brunt of the fighting.

Intractable as these questions are, they will need to be included in the strategic debate. The onus is not only on regional experts, but also on scholars in strategic studies, many of whom have neglected the issue of military auxiliaries for decades, to develop a thorough and systematic analysis of the political and military parameters of collaborating with local forces. This is also a chance for the strategic studies community to reconsider its self-understanding: over the past decade, it has too often given in to the temptation of offering blueprint solutions to strategic problems, in particular in the framework of the COIN debate. However, there are neither blueprint solutions, nor do war and strategy lend themselves to expertocracy. Every strategy involves risks and challenges: the task of experts is to provide both policy-makers and the general public with the knowledge and the vocabulary necessary to have an informed debate.

Endnotes

¹ Today Programme, BBC Radio Four, 9 October 2014,

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b04kf7ff>.

² The US army intends to reduce the army from 570,000 to between 450,000 and 440,000 troops. The British Army 2020 plan envisages a troop reduction in the army from 102,000 to 82,000.

³ *Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: Strategic Defence and Security Review* (London: HMSO, 2010);

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⁵ Geraint Hughes and Chris Tripodi, 'Anatomy of a Surrogate: Historical Precedents and Implications for Contemporary Counter-Insurgency and Counter-Terrorism', *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 20/1 (2009), 1-35.

⁶ For a critique of the uses and misuses of history in the framework of the COIN debate see eg. Douglas Porch, *Counterinsurgency: Exposing the Myths of the New Way of War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Patrick Porter, 'Goodbye to All That: On Small Wars and Big Choices', *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 25/3 (2014), 685-695.

⁷ For Jomini's approach to history and Clausewitz's critique of it, see Hew Strachan, *Carl von Clausewitz's On War: A Biography* (New York: Atlantic Books, 2007), 8.

⁸ Hew Strachan, *European Armies and the Conduct of War* (London: Routledge, 1983), 11f.

⁹ Walter Laqueur, 'The Origins of Guerrilla Doctrine', *Journal of Contemporary History* 10/3 (1975), 341-82.

¹⁰ Beatrice Heuser, 'Small Wars in the Age of Clausewitz: The Watershed Between Partisan War and People's War', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 33/1 (2010), 142.

¹¹ Heuser, 'Small Wars in the Age of Clausewitz', 144.

¹² Heuser, 'Small Wars in the Age of Clausewitz', 142.

¹³ Heuser, 'Small Wars in the Age of Clausewitz'; Martin Rink, 'The Partisan's Metamorphosis: From Freelance Military Entrepreneur to German Freedom Fighter, 1740-1815', *War in History* 17/1 (2010), 6-36.

¹⁴ For a more extensive overview of this process of the marginalization of irregular fighters see Sibylle Scheipers, *Unlawful Combatants: A Genealogy of the Irregular Fighter* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), chapter two.

¹⁵ Duke of Wellington to the Earl of Liverpool, Secretary of State, 21 December 1810, printed in *The Despatches of Field Marshall the Duke of Wellington during His Various Campaigns in India, Denmark, Portugal, Spain, the Low Countries, and France from 1799-1818*, edited by Lt Col Gurwood (London: John Murray, 1838), 59.

¹⁶ Charles J Esdaile, *Spain in the Liberal Age: From Constitution to Civil War, 1808-1939* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 1999).

¹⁷ Examples include the *tirailleurs algériens*, established in 1842, the *tirailleur sénégalais* (1857), the *tirailleurs tonkinois* (1884), the reform of Britain's colonial forces in India into the British Indian Army (1895), the establishment of the King's African Rifles (1902) and the creation of the *Kaiserliche Schutztruppe* (1891). Portugal introduced systematic recruitment regulations for native forces in all Portuguese colonies in 1901.

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¹⁹ Patrick Porter, *Military Orientalism: Eastern War through Western Eyes* (London, Hurst, 2009), 42.

²⁰ Cf. Heather Streets, *Martial Races: The Military, Race and Masculinity in British Imperial Culture, 1857-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), who argues that the British 'martial races' discourse had its roots in the practice of recruiting Highlanders into the British armed forces.

²¹ On the GCMA/GMI in Indochina, see Philippe Pottier, 'GCMA/GMI: A French Experience in Counterinsurgency during the French Indochina War', *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 16/2 (2005), 125-46; on the Home Guard in Malaya see David French, *The British Way in Counter-Insurgency, 1945-1967* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 187 and Karl Hack, 'Everyone Lived in Fear: Malaya and the British Way of Counter-Insurgency', *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 23/4-5 (2012), 688; on loyalism in Kenya see Daniel Branch, *Defeating Mau Mau, Creating Kenya: Counterinsurgency, Civil War and Decolonization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); on the *harkis* in Algeria see Raphaëlle Branche, 'Harkis in French Algeria', paper prepared for the workshop "'Staying True to Their Salt": The Recruitment and Management of Non-Western Personnel in Intelligence Services and Armed Forces, c. 1900-2010', Oxford, February 2010; on the RF/PF in Vietnam see Andrew Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore,

MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 221. Krepinevich argues that the RF/PF were highly effective in spite of their poor circumstances. Still, they remained dependent on support by regular troops. When RF/PF units were integrated into the ARVN command structure after the withdrawal of US forces, they were swiftly destroyed during the fall of Saigon in 1975.

²² Branch, *Defeating Mau Mau*, 218.

²³ Alexander J Zervoudakis, 'From Indochina to Algeria: Counter-Insurgency Lessons', in Martin S. Alexander, Martin Evans and J V F Keiger (eds.) *The Algerian War and the French Army: Experiences, Images, Testimonies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 43-60.

²⁴ Branche, 'Harkis in French Algeria'.

²⁵ Le Thi Anh, 'The New Vietnam', *National Review*, 29 April 1977.

²⁶ George Malbrunot, 'Comment la CIA contrôle la livraison d'armes aux rebelles', *Le Figaro*, 27 June 2012.

²⁷ See, for instance, Steve Clemons, 'A Question for Obama's Syria Critics: What Are the Alternatives?', *The Atlantic*, 17 February 2014.

²⁸ Alexander Cockburn, 'Libya Rebels: Gaddafi Could Be Right about Al-Qaeda', *The Week*, 24 March 2011.

²⁹ Mark Landler, 'U.S. Considers Resuming Nonlethal Aid to Syrian Opposition', *New York Times*, 9 January 2014.

³⁰ Greg Miller and Karen DeYoung, 'U.S. Weighs Expanded CIA Training, Arming of Syrian Allies Struggling Against Assad', *Washington Post*, 14 November 2014.

³¹ Cf. Emile Hokayem, 'Iran, the Gulf States and the Syrian Civil War', *Survival* 56/6 (2014), 59-86; Charles Lister, 'Assessing Syria's Jihad', *Survival* 56/6 (2014), 87-112.

³² Nicholas Blanford, 'Jihadis May Want to Kill Assad: But Is He Lucky to Have Them?', *Christian Science Monitor*, 10 October 2013.

³³ I am grateful to my colleague Jasmine Gani for clarifying this point.

³⁴ Eric Schmitt, 'CIA Said to Aid in Steering Arms to Syrian Opposition', *New York Times*, 21 June 2012.

³⁵ Andrew Sparrow, 'UK Should Join US in Bombing Isis militants, Says Ex-Head of Army', *Guardian*, 22 August 2014.

³⁶ Mona Mahmood, 'US Airstrikes in Syria Driving Anti-Assad Groups to Support Isis', *Guardian*, 23 November 2014.

³⁷ Stephen Biddle, Jeffrey A. Friedman and Jacob N. Shapiro, 'Testing the Surge: Why Did Violence Decline in Iraq in 2007?', *International Security* 37/1 (2012), 7-40.

³⁸ Anthony H. Cordesman and Sam Khazai, *Iraq after US Withdrawal: US Policy and the Iraqi Search for Security and Stability* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2012), 61.

³⁹ E.g. Stephanie Sanok Kostro and Garrett Riba, 'Resurgence of al Qada in Iraq: Effect on Security and Political Stability', Center for Strategic and International Studies, 4 March 2014;

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⁴⁰ Jamie Dettmer, 'Why Does the Free Syrian Army Hate US?', *The Daily Beast*, 10 March 2014,
<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/10/03/why-does-the-free-syrian-army-hate-us.html>

⁴¹ Gareth Stansfield, 'The Islamic State, the Kurdistan Region and the Future of Iraq: Assessing UK Policy Options', *International Affairs* 90/6 (2014), 1347.

⁴² Patrick Cockburn, 'Whose Side Is Turkey on?', *London Review of Books* 36/21 (2014), 8-10.

⁴³ Cf. Hokayem, 'Iran, the Gulf States and the Syrian Civil War', 76.

⁴⁴ Johnson, 'Upstream Engagement', 665. The author would like to thank Jasmine Gani, who provided invaluable insights into the dynamics of the wars in Syria and Iraq and provided comments on an earlier draft of this article.

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