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**Superiority or Submission?**

**Variation in State Control of Militias**

*Abstract*: State sponsorship, or support, of militias has been a regular occurrence in both civil and interstate wars. Why is there variation in how much control states have over the behavior of militias they support? Under what conditions do militias merely follow the direct orders of the states that fund or train them? In contrast, under what conditions do militias and states interact more horizontally, like equal partners? This paper shows that the traditional focus on principal-agent models is misleading; an additional fruitful approach to consider is the alliance politics model outlined by Snyder. Ultimately, interest alignment best predicts whether states and militias will have more vertical or horizontal relationships.

*Keywords*: Militias; Pro-Government Militias; Rebel Groups; Principal-Agent Models; Alliances; Middle East; Control; Political Violence

**Introduction**

The relations between states and militias have puzzled scholars for decades. This is due to the fact that from the American Civil War to the current civil war in Syria, state sponsorship, or support, of militias has been a regular occurrence in both civil and interstate wars. Recent scholarship in the literature on militias has attempted to understand why states delegate, cooperate, or turn a blind eye to informal armed organizations, especially those committing atrocities. Researchers have also developed numerous typologies on the different types of militias in order to assess how these differences impact patterns of violence, conflict termination, and conflict resurgence. Despite important advances in the literature in these areas, one area that remains understudied is the variation in state control of militias.

In this paper, I define militias as nonstate armed groups that have at least minimal ties to a state, an intentionally broad definition in order to account for the wide variety of militias.[[1]](#footnote-1) States decide to employ militias because they can be cheaper to fund (relative to conventional forces); they can limit or complicate an adversary’s military response; and they can boost a state’s bargaining leverage during negotiations to end conflicts.[[2]](#footnote-2) While the benefits of militias are more uniform, relationships between militias and states are more varied. Some militias are subjected to relatively high levels of control (e.g. Iranian control over Hezbollah in Lebanon after its inception), while others experience relatively low levels of control (e.g. Iranian control over Hezb-e Wahdat in Afghanistan[[3]](#footnote-3)).

Within-case and within-state variation raises the following questions: under what conditions are militias merely agents of the states that fund or train them? In contrast, under what conditions do militias and states interact more horizontally? By horizontally, I mean that the state and the militia’s relationship better resembles an alliance than a relationship between a patron and client. San-Akca puts it simply in her book *States in Disguis*e: allies both “gain some good when exchanging such support,”[[4]](#footnote-4) thus allies do not always find it useful to try to dominate the other. In order to better understand state-militia dynamics, I will first review the existing political science literature related to militia control. Then, I will outline my theory, which utilizes two existing conceptual frameworks: principal-agent and alliance politics. Next, I will provide preliminary evidence for my theory with illustrative case studies of Iranian militias Hezbollah and Hamas. In my conclusion, I will discuss areas for future research.

**Literature review**

The literature does not have one comprehensive research program on militias. Instead, several disparate sub-literatures (see chart below) are relevant to the study of militia control.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Pro-state** | **Pro-insurgency** |
| **Foreign presence** | Foreign militias\* | Foreign fighters\* |
| **Little foreign presence** | Progovernment militias (can be state-sponsored) | Militants/terrorists (can be state-sponsored) |

**\***Literature on this subject is not discussed in this paper.

In this literature review, I will not discuss the literature on foreign militias and foreign fighters. I do not delve into the foreign militia literature because, to date, it is not a fully developed literature. The term “foreign militias” is not currently being used in the literature; I define foreign militias as: a cohesive armed group of foreign individuals that operate within the confines of a conflict that identify as pro-state, and lack affiliation with an official military organization. Although there are important cases of foreign militias (Liwa Fatemiyoun – made up of Shi’ite Afghans, and Liwa Zainebiyoun – made up of Shi’ite Pakistanis) discussed in policy circles[[5]](#footnote-5), it is still unexamined in the academic literature. Although the foreign fighter literature is a comprehensive literature, I do not discuss it because I conceptualize it as an individual-level phenomenon, while militias are a group-level phenomenon.[[6]](#footnote-6) For this reason, the literature’s insights are less relevant to this specific undertaking. Finally, I do not discuss Berman and Lake’s *Proxy Wars: Suppressing Violence through Local Agents* in this literature review because I examine it at length in the theory section.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The progovernment militias (PGMs) literature provides relevant insights on variation in state control of militias. Carey and Mitchell define PGMs as “armed groups that are linked to government but exist outside the regular security apparatus, and have some level of organization.”[[8]](#footnote-8) This definition only captures indigenous militias, such as the Hindu nationalist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in India, and the Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front militia. Because I focus on Iran-linked militias in the case studies below, it is important to note which Iran-linked militias fit into this definition and which do not. The Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corp (IRGC) and Iran’s Basij fit Carey and Mitchell’s definition because they are indigenous Iranian militias. Other groups tied to Iran that fit this definition are Iraq’s Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF, also known as Hashd al-Shaabi) and Syria’s National Defense Forces (NDF) and Shabiha militias. Importantly, because it excludes state sponsorship of militias in other countries, Iran’s sponsorship of Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Palestinian Territories fall outside of the definition. To date, this sub-literature has focused on typologies of PGMs (Carey and Mitchell[[9]](#footnote-9); Aliyev[[10]](#footnote-10); Staniland[[11]](#footnote-11)), the function of PGMs (Stanton[[12]](#footnote-12)), and the effects that PGMs have on conflicts dynamics (Aliyev[[13]](#footnote-13)[[14]](#footnote-14)[[15]](#footnote-15)).

Cary and Mitchell’s 2017 *Annual Review* article provides a valuable typology on PGMs. PGMs are categorized by two dimensions: link to the government (semiofficial or informal) and link to society (militia is locally recruited and active or not).[[16]](#footnote-16) In addition to their typology, the authors pose, and attempt to preliminarily answer, a key question: “Does the government control the militia or does the militia control the government?”[[17]](#footnote-17) They contend that control “depends on goal variance and the balance of information between the government and its militia.”[[18]](#footnote-18) Militias with “private agendas” and advantages in information will be harder for states to control, while militias with formal ties to the state will be easier to control.[[19]](#footnote-19) However, Carey and Mitchell also assert that: weak “control could result from a strategic choice to give discretion to the (informal) security apparatus, or from government weakness in failing states.”[[20]](#footnote-20) On the first point, they envision a scenario where lax state control of militias is actually beneficial to the state (for example, the state can benefit from violence committed by a militia only loosely tied to the state while maintaining plausible deniability). On the second point, they claim that variation in control could be due to national-level factors, such as state capacity. However, I will show in this paper that variation occurs within states, which points to the necessity of examining additional factors.

Aliyev’s 2016 article differentiating between “state-manipulated” and “state-parallel” paramilitaries is also useful. State-manipulated paramilitaries are developed, and funded, by the state for the purpose of carrying out its “dirty work,” such as exterminating rebels.[[21]](#footnote-21) State-parallel paramilitaries emerge in weak states during armed conflict to preserve the status quo of behalf of the state.[[22]](#footnote-22) This hints at variation in state control: states should theoretically have more control over state-manipulated militias than state-parallel militaries, although Aliyev does not explicitly directly address levels of state control in his article.

Furthermore, in “Militias, Ideology, and the State,” Staniland develops another beneficial typology of state-militia relations.[[23]](#footnote-23) The approaches that states can take towards militias are: suppression, incorporation, containment, and collusion. Collusion ranges from deep collusion (armed allies) to collusion (business partners) to thin collusion (strange bedfellows). Although Staniland does not explicitly address control dynamics, he states that business partner militias “can be valuable local enforcers in exchange for autonomy and resources.”[[24]](#footnote-24) This implies that states exchange low control for cooperation with militias that are a “gray zone ideological fit with a government that are also operationally useful.”[[25]](#footnote-25) His article is also pertinent because it highlights the importance of “ideological fit” in the strategies that states choose to adopt. According to Staniland, there “is a deeper ideological politics at work that influences both which regimes are open to using militias and which kinds of groups are seen as potential partners.”[[26]](#footnote-26) However, state ideology (which he states emanates from a state’s current “ideological project”) is notoriously difficult to operationalize and measure. This is especially the case because projects can shift over time. Nevertheless, I agree with Staniland that ideological fit is a key determinant of the relationship between states and militias, as will be discussed in my theory section below.

The state-sponsorship of militants/terrorists literature is relevant to militia control because much of the scholarship utilizes principal-agent theory. While principal-agent theory can be a useful framework to analyze state-militia relations, its current dominance is problematic (more on this below). Byman and Kreps apply principal-agent theory to state-sponsored terrorism to explain “why states delegate to terrorist groups, how they seek to control their agents, and the tensions in the relationship.”[[27]](#footnote-27) The authors’ discussion of control mechanisms, and of the pros and cons of high state control are important. In their words, control mechanisms attempt to “create convergence between agents’ behavior and principals’ objectives.”[[28]](#footnote-28) The first control mechanism is altering the “scope of authority” it assigns to the terrorist group.[[29]](#footnote-29) The second and third mechanisms are monitoring and reporting behavior, and screening and selection procedures.[[30]](#footnote-30) The fourth mechanism is rewarding agents that act according to the principal’s desires and sanctioning agents that do not.[[31]](#footnote-31) In addition to delineating the different ways that states could try to gain higher levels of control over terrorist groups, Byman and Kreps assert that: “whereas less oversight and control increase agent autonomy, this freedom increases the risk of agency losses. Conversely, greater principal oversight and less agent discretion might lead to fewer agency losses and fewer cleavages between principal and agent, but increased risk of exposure.”[[32]](#footnote-32) Furthermore, like Staniland, the scholars highlight ideology’s importance. They write: “a strong ideological bond often reduces divergence and thus reduces the need for other control mechanisms.”[[33]](#footnote-33) However, Byman and Kreps also highlight the limits of ideological convergence – it does not guarantee alignment.[[34]](#footnote-34) I concur with the authors that interest convergence is critical (and this often depends on factors such as ideology), but I bring in the mechanism of trust to better explain why this is the case.

Additionally, there is a separate literature on internationalized civil wars – which helps explain outside states’ support of rebel groups during civil war. An important contribution comes from San-Akca’s book *States in Disguise*.[[35]](#footnote-35) San-Akca underscores a vital point: “The state-centric view of proxy war, which dominated international relations studies until recently, treats nonstate armed groups as subordinate entities, with no autonomous decision-making capacity.”[[36]](#footnote-36) To correct for this misleading view, she proposes “distinguish[ing] between state selection and rebel selection processes.”[[37]](#footnote-37) By incorporating the preferences and needs of rebel groups, San-Akca tries to move the literature towards viewing external states and rebel groups as allies, instead of as superiors and subordinates.[[38]](#footnote-38) By comparing state-rebel group relationships to “alliances and alignments between states,” she explains that “both sides gain some good when exchanging such support.”[[39]](#footnote-39) This more horizontal conception is important because it impacts understandings of state control. San-Akca claims that states are “more likely to grant higher levels of autonomy to rebels in operations against the common enemy.”[[40]](#footnote-40) Furthermore, she says that states grant higher levels of autonomy for additional reasons, including “domestic incentives for supporting rebels and ideational ties with rebel groups.”[[41]](#footnote-41) From the rebel group’s perspective, rebel groups prefer state supporters who will grant them high levels of autonomy.[[42]](#footnote-42) San-Akca hypothesizes that weak states can be good options for rebel groups that want a safe haven and highly prioritize autonomy.[[43]](#footnote-43) I incorporate San-Akca’s theoretical conceptualization on state-rebel alliances in my theory section.

Lastly, the external state sponsorship in civil wars literature has also addressed the role of preference or interest convergence in relationships between states and rebel groups. Salehyan et al. contend that states “will be more likely to delegate to rebels when they are reasonably confident that the rebel force shares similar preferences.”[[44]](#footnote-44) There is some debate in the literature about what contributes to similar preferences. Some scholars point to broad similarities between states and rebels. Salehyan et al. point to shared ethnicity or religion,[[45]](#footnote-45) while San-Akca says ideational ties can be based on ethnic/national, religious, or political identity.[[46]](#footnote-46) Gleditsch also writes that “external interventions in conflicts often seem motivated by efforts to support ethnic kin in other states.”[[47]](#footnote-47) Furthermore, Findley and Teo contend that “former colonial powers may maintain interests in their former colonies, thereby increasing the probability they will return to aid their favored groups.”[[48]](#footnote-48) There can also be more strategic incentives. San-Akca asserts that common enemies can also lead to similar preferences.[[49]](#footnote-49) These ideas are incorporated below.

**Theory**

In this section, I will first re-examine principal-agent theory given the existence of the control paradox. Then, to correct for the current dominance of the principal-agent framework in the literature, I will introduce another control framework: alliance politics. The most commonly used framework to understand the dynamics of control is the principal-agent theory, which examines the relationship between a state, or other actor, (the principal) and another actor that the principal wants to control (the agent). Principal-agent theory assumes that once power has been delegated, principals cannot fully observe the agent’s behavior. This leads principals to rely on a mixture of rewards and punishments to *compel* the agent to carry out the principal’s desired actions. The idea that “compellence” is usually required by principals seems to be at odds with the control paradox, popularized in the business literature. The control paradox claims that “stricter attempts to control subordinates result in less effort by subordinates.”[[50]](#footnote-50) Before examining the implications of the control paradox, I will dive deeper into principal-agent theory.

The principal-agent theory begins from the premise that if “both parties to the relationship are utility maximizers, there is good reason to believe that the agent will not always act in the best interests of the principal.”[[51]](#footnote-51) Therefore, principals must provide “appropriate incentives” and regularly monitor agents in order to ensure that agents are correctly carrying out their duties.[[52]](#footnote-52) Berman, Lake, Padró i Miquel, and Yared clarify that the “correct” set of incentives supplied by the principal, depend on the agent’s “effort cost.”[[53]](#footnote-53) For these scholars, “effort cost” is a function of i) the agent’s direct cost of implementing the principal’s preferred actions, and ii) the extent to which the principal and agent have divergent preferences over these actions.[[54]](#footnote-54) If the “effort cost” is appropriately calculated, the principal should theoretically be able to supply the appropriate set of rewards and punishments. However, the existence of private information – in the forms of unobserved effort or unobserved costs – typically frustrates the principal’s capacity to compel agents.[[55]](#footnote-55) Private information, and continual changes in both actors’ strategic environments, force principals to constantly change their tactics in order to ensure that their agents are behaving in accordance with their interests.[[56]](#footnote-56) Much (but not all) of the work on principal-agent theory assumes that maximizing control is the best means towards achieving the ultimate goal of agent actions conforming to principal interests.[[57]](#footnote-57) The theory’s emphasis on control maximization seems to contradict the control paradox.

Gary Miller’s “Monitoring, Rules, and the Control Paradox: Can the Good Soldier Švejk Be Trusted?” outlines the idea of the control paradox. Miller prefaces the control paradox by highlighting a phenomenon called “working to rule,” which occurs when individuals closely follow the rules but deliver “no voluntary effort” beyond what the rules explicitly require.[[58]](#footnote-58) “Working to rule” is typically triggered by strict enforcement of workplace rules; for example, by severely micromanaging individuals or stringently enforcing quotas. Miller explains that in one case “strict enforcement of rules heightened the awareness of the workforce on the *minimum* effort they could offer without being fired.”[[59]](#footnote-59) These findings led to the theory of the control paradox: “more monitoring and supervision could result in less control.”[[60]](#footnote-60) Thus, the paradox advises lax control over certain individuals or groups. This recommendation seems to run counter to certain readings of principal-agent theory.

The assumptions underlying prominent readings of principal-agent theory and the control paradox are different, which explains their seemingly contradictory prescriptions. Some versions of principal-agent theory assume that maximizing control over agents is the best way to achieve agent compliance, and that agent compliance is a higher goal than the maximization of individual or group effort. In contrast, the control paradox assumes that maximizing individual or group effort is the fundamental goal. The difference is that under certain versions of the principal-agent theory, there seems to be a strong possibility that effort *by itself* does not translate into the principal’s desired actions. Under the control paradox, effort seems more directly translatable to the preferred actions of the organization’s leadership. As we know, in this context, effort is not merely following the rules, but being a productive member of the organization. It becomes apparent, then, that the key difference between these theories is: levels of trust, which depend crucially on interest, or preference, alignment (or misalignment). If, under principal-agent theory, the principal could trust the agent, then the goal could be changed from maximizing control to maximizing effort. Alternatively, if, under the control paradox, the management did not trust the individuals, the goal would need to be changed from maximizing effort to maximizing control. This is because the leadership would not trust that effort would translate into desired actions.

Levels of trust differentiate the principal-agent theory and the control paradox. In terms of how to conceptualize trust, Levi helpfully characterizes that “A trusts B because he presumes it is in B’s interest to act in a way consistent with A’s interest.”[[61]](#footnote-61) In other words, trust is strongly related to actors’ interests or preferences. This is made clearer through Russell Hardin’s definition of trust, which is paraphrased by Farrell and Knight in their article “Trust and Institutional Compliance”: “trust consists of a reasoned expectation on the part of actor *a* that actor *b* will take her interests into account with regard to a particular matter or situation, *c*.”[[62]](#footnote-62) Therefore, interest alignment should best guarantee the existence of trust. This notion is further strengthened by answering the question: what happens if there is interest misalignment?

In addition to assuming the goal is maximizing individual or group effort, the control paradox assumes that even if there is interest misalignment – the individual worker has an interest in providing “effort up to the point at which the marginal cost of effort equals K times the marginal impact of effort on the probability of being caught” while the leadership has an interest in inducing maximal effort – interests are sufficiently related and there is a higher chance of trust forming. In contrast, for principal-agent theory, Berman, Lake, Padró i Miquel, and Yared highlight that if “interests strongly diverge…it will be extremely costly for the principal to apply sufficient rewards and punishments to make the agent comply.”[[63]](#footnote-63) When this happens, there is a low chance of trust forming. Both theories take into account the level of interest or preference alignment, which directly impacts the level of trust. Because states and militias have a plethora of interests, the highest priority interests will be key in determining alignment. This can either be one critical interest or a couple vital interests. Because these actors will always have some differing interests, it is not useful to assess interest alignment in terms of amalgamation of *all* interests. The overarching implication, then, is that if there is a relatively high level of trust, the principal should allow for a more horizontal relationship (laxer control) and incorporate a leadership strategy based on maintaining that trust. If there is a relatively low level of trust, the principal should opt for a more vertical relationship (stricter control) and install a leadership strategy based on creating mechanical incentives to induce the agent into compliance.

Before proceeding, it is important to address endogeneity concerns. Do high levels of trust lead to horizontal relationships or do horizontal relationships lead to high levels of trust? Although it is not outside the realm of possibility, it seems unlikely that states would grant significant autonomy to groups that they did not trust in the first place. There are a few exceptions to this: when states utilize militias to carry out their “dirty work,” when states are very weak, and states have a minor stake in the conflict. On the first exception, some states grant autonomy because they believe they will benefit from violence. As Carey and Mitchell state, violence “might be ordered or implicitly condoned by the principal and carried out by the agent, notably under conditions where the principal has a strategic motivation to harm or kill civilians.”[[64]](#footnote-64) In these cases, autonomy does not threaten state interests. On the second exception, very weak states might grant autonomy because they don’t believe alternatives exist. On the third exception, if only peripheral interests are at stake for the state, it might be more willing to gamble on militias. Although these exceptions are important, I do not believe they are present for the majority of the cases of state sponsorship, or support, of militias.

Because I am theorizing that states and militias that share a high level of trust are more likely to have horizontal relationships; it is useful to introduce a second framework of control: alliance politics. The alliance politics framework envisions a less hierarchical relationship between the two actors than the principal-agent framework predicts. This is an important alternative framework given the insights drawn above from the control paradox. In his 1997 book *Alliance Politics*, Snyder discusses the formation and management phases of alliances. Although the book’s scope conditions include only alliances between great powers in a multipolar system,[[65]](#footnote-65) his approach is useful for studying all types of alliances. Importantly, Snyder describes that alliances between strong and weak states “tend to be dominated by the stronger member, which uses the alliance as a vehicle for asserting influence or control.”[[66]](#footnote-66) In spite of this, Snyder believes that regardless of power disparities, both allies have bargaining power during all phases of the alliance (alliance formation and alliance management).

During bargaining over alliance *formation*, two factors are key: the inherent valuation of the prospective alliance, and the availability and attractiveness of other alliance alternatives.[[67]](#footnote-67) The first factor is determined by the adversary threat, ally capacity and willingness, and value of autonomy that will be sacrificed. During bargaining over alliance *management*, each ally’s power depends on “perceptions of their comparative dependence, commitments, and intensity of interest in whatever they are bargaining about.”[[68]](#footnote-68) Level of dependence is measured by the need for assistance, the extent to which the ally satisfies this need, and alternatives to the ally.[[69]](#footnote-69) Level of commitment is influenced by “the verbal promise in the alliance contract and subsequent elaborations of it” and “interests in aiding the ally that would exist apart from the promise.”[[70]](#footnote-70) The last factor is fairly straightforward. Snyder establishes a three-point scale (high-moderate-low) to give each of these three factors a numerical score in order to establish which ally has a stronger position on a certain issue being bargained over. These scores are meant to help determine whether one ally will prevail or compromise will occur. This more horizontal understanding of the relationship between states and other actors, such as militias, differs significantly from the principal-agent framework.

I will show in the remainder of the paper that state-militia relationships are best captured by either the principal-agent framework or the alliance politics framework. Importantly, state-militia relationships can be better understood by different frameworks at various points in time (depending on whether trust levels are increasing or decreasing). It is likely that the principal-agent framework will better capture the start of a relationship between a state and a militia because the state initially needs time to evaluate the level of interest convergence. If high levels of trust are established over time, then it is more likely that the alliance politics framework will better capture the relationship between a state and a militia. If there is a continuing lack of trust between the actors, the relationship will likely be better analyzed through the lens of the principal-agent framework. I will show that incorporating the alliance politics framework into the study of state control of militias better captures variation across time. Relying exclusively on the principal-agent framework has thus far prevented a fuller picture from emerging.

**Observable implications of the theory**

If the above theory is correct, I would expect the following:

*If the state and militia operate according to the principal-agent framework:*

1. Little continuous bargaining should take place between the actors
2. The state should implement stricter monitoring mechanisms
3. If the militia carries out actions that the state disagrees with, the state is more likely to punish the militia; if the state wants the militia to carry out an action it desires, the state should be more likely to offer incentives
4. If the actors’ interests/preferences diverge, the state should significantly decrease funding for the militia, or the state and militia should cut ties
5. If the militia carries out activities condemned internationally, the state should be more likely to publically denounce the specific activities

*If the state and militia operate according to the alliance politics framework:*

1. Significant bargaining should continuously take place between the actors
2. The state should implement looser monitoring mechanisms
3. If the militia carries out actions that the state disagrees with, the state should be less likely to punish the militia; if the state wants the militia to carry out an action it desires, the state should be less likely to offer incentives
4. If the actors’ interests/preferences diverge, the state should continue funding the militia and the state and militia should not cut ties
5. If the militia carries out activities condemned internationally, the state should be more likely to continue publically supporting the militia

**Research design**

In order to illustrate the value of incorporating the alliance politics framework, I will be evaluating the relationship between Iran and two of its militias, Hezbollah and Hamas, over time. I will first show that the relationship between Iran and Hezbollah was first captured by the principal-agent framework; but, over time, was better captured by the alliance politics framework. This will be an example of within-case variation. I will then show that the relationship between Iran and Hamas has consistently fit the principal-agent model. This will be an example of between-case variation (variation between Hezbollah and Hamas).

Hezbollah and Hamas are good cases because they follow the Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD), popularized by Mill.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Hamas** | **Hezbollah** |
| **Similarities** | | |
| Region | Middle East (Palestinian Territories) | Middle East (Lebanon) |
| Initiation of relationship | 1992 | 1982 |
| Size of organization | ~ 15,000 combatants (2013) | ~ 25,000 combatants (2017) |
| Ideology | Revolutionary Islam | Revolutionary Islam |
| Geographic proximity (capital-capital) | 1,150 miles | 1,015 miles |
| **Differences** | | |
| Religious affiliations | Sunni | Shi’ite |
| External patron(s) | Multiple (including Iran) | Single (Iran) |
| External funding from Iran | ~ $70 million (2018) | ~ $700 million (2019) |
| Current geographic access | Indirect access | Direct access |

As can be seen in the chart above, there are several similarities between the two groups. They operate in the same region, have the same external patron (Iran), have had relationships with Iran for decades, have a large fighting force, and espouse revolutionary ideology. The key difference between the groups is their religious affiliation – Hamas is a Sunni group, while Hezbollah is a Shi’ite group. By controlling for several variables, I am able to better isolate the variables driving variation in state control.

Regarding religious affiliation, Ostovar highlights the importance of religious similarities in his article “Iran, its clients, and the future of the Middle East: the limits of religion.”[[71]](#footnote-71) He argues that it “is beyond argument that Iran’s closest and most loyal allies—Lebanon’s Hezbollah and Iraq’s Badr Organization (hereafter Badr)—are among a small collection of clients that have adopted the Iranian Islamic system as their own official religio-political ideology.”[[72]](#footnote-72) While he concedes that a few Shi’ite groups (such as Iraq’s Supreme Council and Afghanistan’s Hezb-e Wahdat) have detached themselves from Iran out of self-interest, Ostovar asserts that “Iran’s track record with Sunni clients is even more mixed.”[[73]](#footnote-73) He explains that Iran’s relationships with non-Shi’ite groups, such as the Sunni group Hamas, have been largely transactional and not produced “broad-based strategic alignment.”[[74]](#footnote-74) This is likely due to the fact that Iran trusts Shi’ite groups more, given there is a higher chance of interest alignment. Given this information we should observe Iran exerting less control over Hezbollah, and other similar groups, once Iran has proof that the militia’s religious values are aligned with their own.

**Case studies**

Variation in control within one case (Hezbollah)

In this case study, I will demonstrate that Iran and Hezbollah’s relationship changed over time. At Hezbollah’s inception, Iran and Hezbollah interacted vertically, with Iran exhibiting strong control over the militia. Over time, as trust developed between the actors, Iran and Hezbollah interacted more horizontally, with Iran loosening control over the militia. In other words, the state-militia relationship could first be explained using the principal-agent framework, but was then better explained using the alliance politics framework. This within-case variation illustrates the importance of bringing in an alternative framework to principal-agent.

Hezbollah was founded in Lebanon, with Iranian support, in the early 1980s after Israel invaded the state. At the time of Hezbollah’s establishment, which also marked the start of their relationship, Iran and Hezbollah shared many common interests: the founding of an Islamic republic in Lebanon (presumably imitating Iran’s model), the eradication of Israel and liberation of Palestine, the expulsion of Western states from Lebanon, and more.[[75]](#footnote-75) More generally, Iran, Hezbollah, Syria, and other “Resistance Axis” members “shared common perceptions of the Middle East regional order and goals, including the weakening of Western influence and liberating Israeli occupied territories.”[[76]](#footnote-76) Azani notes that “Hezbollah took a clear pro-Iranian stance, compatible with the positions of its benefactor.”[[77]](#footnote-77) As a further sign of interest convergence, in the 1985 declaration of their platform, Hezbollah stated: “We abide by the orders of one single wise and just leadership, presented by ‘Waliyat el Faqih’ and personified by Khomeini.”[[78]](#footnote-78) This early statement endorsing Iran’s central role in decision making seems to imply the value of utilizing the principal-agent framework in this case; Iran was serving as the principal that communicated “orders” to their agent, Hezbollah.

Given the theory outlined above, though, it is important to note that converging interests at Hezbollah’s founding were not enough to convince Iran of Hezbollah’s trustworthiness. As preliminary, albeit incomplete, evidence, Hezbollah scholar Ahmad Nizar Hamzeh writes that high-ranking IRGC officers embedded in Hezbollah’s military headquarters after they first formed. However, “the guards withdrew in the early 1990s”[[79]](#footnote-79); this signals that after several years, Iran decreased its direct monitoring of Hezbollah. It is possible that this occurred because Iranian leaders trusted Hezbollah’s leadership, and it no longer needed to rely on extensive monitoring to ensure Hezbollah was acting according to its broad interests. However, more evidence is needed to substantiate this argument. At the very least, the IRGC’s direct role diminished over time; scholar Massaab Al-Aloosy remarks: “Hezbollah became the initiator and did not include the Revolutionary Guards in decision-making of” their attacks.[[80]](#footnote-80) With this caveat, I will now provide evidence that Iran controlled Hezbollah early on in their relationship.

Some early Hezbollah behavior seems to have been directed by Iran, confirming that the state exercised strong control over Hezbollah in the years immediately following its formation.[[81]](#footnote-81) One illustrative example is Hezbollah’s role in kidnappings. In the 1980s, Hezbollah carried out a campaign of suicide attacks, plane hijackings, and hostage kidnappings against foreigners. Kidnappings were especially pervasive. Although kidnappings were “not always perceived as beneficial for the interests of the Shiite community in general and Hezbollah in particular,” Hezbollah only stopped carrying them out once Iran’s policy towards kidnapping changed.[[82]](#footnote-82) Hezbollah’s cost effort to undertake these activities was low: the direct cost was minimal and the preference divergence was minimal. This preference divergence piece is key. Because at this time Hezbollah was focused on “advanc[ing] pan-Islamic objectives,” the harm that kidnappings had on Hezbollah’s image domestically and internationally was of secondary importance.[[83]](#footnote-83) As additional evidence of Iran’s dominant role, Hamzeh writes that “[a]lthough the Iranian government maintained its distance from the operational elements involved, its influence on the hostage takers was deemed sufficient to prompt the 1990 U.S.-Israeli opening to Iran.”[[84]](#footnote-84) Thus, analyzing Hezbollah’s actions during this time through a principal-agent lens seems useful.

The notion that Hezbollah first interacted vertically with Iran is captured by Lebanese scholar Joseph Alagha. He claims that Hezbollah has gone through three distinct stages, the first being from formation until 1985. During these early years, “Hezbollah was, ideologically, completely dependent on Khymayni [Khomeini].”[[85]](#footnote-85) This dependence decreased slightly from 1985 to 1991 (the second stage). This time period witnessed a shift in Hezbollah’s behavior, as they “had some room to maneuver.”[[86]](#footnote-86) The third phase, after 1991, saw a further increase in autonomy.[[87]](#footnote-87) This was especially the case after Ayatollah Ali Khamenei appointed current Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah and another Hezbollah leader as “his religious deputies in Lebanon” in May 1995; this decision “granted Hizbullah special prerogatives and delegated responsibilities (*taklif shar’i*) that reflect a great independence in practical performance.”[[88]](#footnote-88) Scholar Adham Saouli states that the religious deputy roles facilitated “an important channel to receive religio-political *taklif* and to send back input and feedback associated with Lebanese and regional politics and Hezbollah’s role therein. In that sense Hezbollah as a whole plays an important role in advising the *faqih*.”[[89]](#footnote-89) El Husseini makes a similar claim to Alagha; Hezbollah’s “local autonomy seems to have increased alongside Hezbollah’s periods of ‘Lebanonisation.’”[[90]](#footnote-90) This period usually refers to the 1990s.[[91]](#footnote-91)

Many decisions Hezbollah made in the 1990s and beyond cannot be characterized as being dictated by Iran. For Hezbollah’s later stages, a more clarifying conceptual framework is alliance politics. This is in line with how Hezbollah leaders have characterized their own relations with Iran. In the words of Hezbollah Deputy Secretary General Naʻim Qāsim: “it is a genuine collaboration on common convictions and on the requirements of the relationship.”[[92]](#footnote-92) Other scholars have also referred to Iran and Hezbollah as allies, instead of as a principal and an agent. Saouli explains that “the relationship between Iran and Hezbollah has with time developed into one of interdependence.”[[93]](#footnote-93) He claims that each actor offers the other something it needs: Iran offers Hezbollah “[f]inancial and military assistance, sanctuary and political backing,” while “Hezbollah offers Iran a strategic presence in the Levant.”[[94]](#footnote-94) As mentioned earlier, Snyder theorizes that bargaining over alliance formation depends on the inherent valuation of the prospective alliance, and the availability and attractiveness of other alliance alternatives.[[95]](#footnote-95) In the case of Hezbollah and Iran, both highly valued the prospective alliance and both did not have other available and attractive alternatives.[[96]](#footnote-96) In regards to alternative allies for Iran, before facilitating Hezbollah’s creation, the state tried to infiltrate “existing Shi’ite organisations such as Amal. When these efforts bore little fruition, Iran seized the opportunity” to prop up Hezbollah.[[97]](#footnote-97) These circumstances allowed the development of their alliance over time.

One early instance of autonomy in decision making was Hezbollah’s choice to run in its first election (the August 1992 parliamentary election). This choice was highly consequential for both Hezbollah and Iran since running in the elections “was the revocation, or at least downplaying, of the pan-Islamic and revolutionary policies” of the 1980s.[[98]](#footnote-98) Yet, while Iran played some role in the decision making process, Hezbollah leaders ultimately made the choice. The organization chose twelve prominent Hezbollah leaders to debate and decide on electoral participation. Norton explains that three key questions dominated the conversation: was participation legitimate? Would participation lead to the abandonment of Islamic principles? And, should pragmatism trump ideology?[[99]](#footnote-99) After Hezbollah asked Iran for guidance on the first question (regarding legitimacy), Khamenei issued a May 1992 fatwa that stated that Hezbollah could participate in the elections.[[100]](#footnote-100) Although Khamenei’s fatwa strengthened Hezbollah’s pro-election faction, the internal debates actually focused more on the Shiite population’s public opinion.[[101]](#footnote-101) However, it is important to note that once the decision was made, the committee sent it to Khamenei for approval. Thus, while Iran indirectly influenced the decision making process, it did not direct Hezbollah to make a specific choice. In another example from the 2000s, Hezbollah secured legitimacy for its “watershed decision to participate in the Lebanese cabinet” in 2005 from “Shaykh ‘Afif al-Nabulsi, the head of the Shi’ite religious scholars of south Lebanon, and not Imam Khamina‘i [Khamenei],” which “indicates more independence in decision-making.”[[102]](#footnote-102)

These examples align with the view of Hezbollah scholar Aurélie Daher that “allegiance to *wilāyat al-faqīh* translates into (i) a stamp of approval delivered *a posteriori* by a Guide who, by all indicators, to date has never countermanded a decision taken by the party leadership; and (ii) refereeing in a way that always seems to second the majority view in the Council.”[[103]](#footnote-103)Daher’s understanding is that Iran endorses or approves Hezbollah decisions, but does not set its priorities and strategies.[[104]](#footnote-104) Hezbollah leader Qāsim remarked that there “is no link between the manner in which the Iranian Islamic state conducts its affairs and how Hezbollah manages its own.”[[105]](#footnote-105) In his own book detailing the inner workings of Hezbollah, Qāsim underscores this point: “Harmony at the general guideline or theoretical level was thus present, although the detailed application of these guidelines was subordinate to the particular characteristics of each country in question.”[[106]](#footnote-106) This makes it clear that Hezbollah maintains a significant amount of autonomy in its operations.

Iran’s hands off approach is presumably due to high levels of trust. Daher states that Khamenei, “obviously has confidence in Hezbollah’s leadership being able to make the right choices for sustaining the party.”[[107]](#footnote-107) This trust is underpinned by continuing interest alignment. Qāsim also emphasized this point when he wrote that the “Iranian government and Hezbollah move in different directions, although they can sometimes encounter each other on the road of their commitment to the recommendations and guidelines of the *waliy al-faqīh*.”[[108]](#footnote-108) A commitment to *waliy al-faqīh*, “government by legal expert,” and other high priority interests (such as eradicating Israel), drives both Iranian and Hezbollah interests.[[109]](#footnote-109) This illustration of how interest alignment and trust enable less control shows that the principal-agent framework can miss important variation across time. In addition, by assuming that Iran is directing Hezbollah behavior and activities, its decision making is reduced to being regionally-focused, instead of state- and local-focused. For example, if Hezbollah’s decision to run for office in 1992 is viewed as driven by Iranian interests, the critical role of the Shiite community’s public opinion disappears from interest. Furthermore, the principal-agent framework overestimates the ability, or desire, of the principal to direct, reign in, or change the agent’s behavior in some way.

The value of the alliance politics framework is apparent when considering the ongoing tensions between Hezbollah and Israel, and Iran’s role in these tensions. As several analysts note: Iran did not provide Nasrallah with permission to conduct the operation against Israel on July 12 that led to the 2006 war in Lebanon.[[110]](#footnote-110) While Iran benefitted from the war in certain ways (increased popular support and the view that Iran was actively resisting Israel), Middle East scholar Paul Salem assesses that Tehran “perceived the summer war to have very mixed results.”[[111]](#footnote-111) This is due to the fact that the war decimated the Lebanese Shiite community, brought Hezbollah into conflict with other Lebanese political players, “wasted much of Hizbollah’s deterrent power for Iran before Iran could make use of it,” and increased sectarian tensions in the region.[[112]](#footnote-112) On the deterrent point, Israeli analyst Nahum Barnea underscores that Iran had “planned to use the threat of Hezbollah’s arsenal to deter Israel from launching attacks on Iran’s nuclear installation”[[113]](#footnote-113) It is important to note that Iran was found to be in noncompliance with its Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty safeguards agreement in September 2005.[[114]](#footnote-114) Thus, deterrence against Israel would have been important at this sensitive time. This more nuanced understanding of the war undercuts the traditional principal-agent narrative that a Western diplomat channeled on July 27: “Without any cost to Iran, Lebanon is getting devastated, Israel is taking hits, and the Iranians are getting distraction from the nuclear issue.”[[115]](#footnote-115) In my reading of his or her interpretation, Iran encouraged Hezbollah to attack Israel as a way to distract from its domestic activities. This does not seem to be the case.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Scoring for elements of alliance bargaining power (adapted from Snyder’s *Alliance Politics*)** | | | |
|  | *Interests* | *Dependence* | *Commitment* |
| *High* | c (stronger) | a (stronger) | a (stronger) |
| *Moderate* | b | b | b |
| *Low* | a | c | c |

My assessment is that in terms of alliance bargaining power in the lead-up to the 2006 war, for Iran, interests were low (a), dependence was moderate (b), and commitment was moderate (b). Iranian interests were low because previous Hezbollah kidnapping operations had resulted in only minor Israeli retaliation.[[116]](#footnote-116) In addition, Iran did not particularly benefit from Israel being targeted at this time. For Hezbollah, interests were moderate (b), dependence was moderate (b), and commitment was moderate (b). Hezbollah interests were moderate because they desired another prisoner exchange (similar to the one that occurred in 2004). As Daher notes, “Nasrallah formally committed to doing his utmost to liberate the last Lebanese still languishing in the southern neighbor’s prisons.”[[117]](#footnote-117) Thus, Hezbollah’s wishes would have prevailed over Iran’s even if Iran did want to influence Hezbollah. There is no evidence that they tried to influence the militia, however. This highlights Hezbollah’s (at least) partial autonomy in its dealings with Israel.

This is further evidenced by disagreements between Hezbollah and Iran over action related to Israel. To start, in at least two instances, Alagha argues, Hezbollah refused to abide by Iran’s “orders” since they did not “serve its overall interest.”[[118]](#footnote-118) He says that during Ariel Sharon’s 2002 West Bank counterterrorism offensive and Ehud Barak’s 2008-2009 Gaza offensive (Operation Cast Lead), “Iran strongly urged Hizbullah to open the northern front across the Lebanese-Israeli border in order to release pressure on the Palestinians, but Hizbullah adamantly refused because such a move was considered detrimental to its national interest.”[[119]](#footnote-119) In addition, Iran scholar Ali Alfoneh claims that Iranian media reports from May 2012 suggested that IRGC Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani warned Nasrallah against preemptively striking Israel.[[120]](#footnote-120) Alfoneh believes Iran’s warning was a response to a televised speech by Nasrallah in which he openly threatened Israel. At this point in time, Iran had a high interest in preventing a conflict between Hezbollah and Israel; Israel was reportedly preparing to attack Iran in April, May, or June of 2012 because of its expanding nuclear program.[[121]](#footnote-121) In addition, Alfoneh wrote that “Tehran may fear that Hezbollah, fearing improvement of relations between Iran and the West, is planning to spoil the Baghdad nuclear negotiations.”[[122]](#footnote-122) While this is speculative, it is interesting to consider the potential power a militia has over its state sponsor if it can threaten to be a spoiler. This incident can only be viewed as a counter-factual; i.e. would Hezbollah have struck Israel if it had not been warned by Iran? It is especially difficult to assess because it is unclear whether Hezbollah wanted to act against Israel at this time. But, even if they did, Iran would likely be able to reign in the militia because its interests in this matter were high. These examples are especially interesting given that Israel is one of Iran’s highest priorities.

A final example involves Hezbollah’s participation in the Syrian civil war. When Syrian President Bashar al-Assad (who is an Alawite, a “sect” of Shi’ism) was faced with a growing domestic opposition movement in 2011, Hezbollah’s leaders were conflicted. Syria analyst Christopher Phillips explains that Assad’s toppling would be an “existential threat” to Hezbollah; however, “the costs of supporting Assad in his repression were [also] potentially great.”[[123]](#footnote-123) This was due to the fact that any intervention on behalf of Assad would inevitably been seen as intervention against Sunnis, which could hurt Hezbollah’s reputation domestically and internationally. Daher also notes this reputational concern: Nasrallah’s statement in early 2011 that he supported a negotiated solution to the conflict led his “image as a pan-Arab hero… [to] suffer considerably.”[[124]](#footnote-124) These potential negative repercussions led Nasrallah to delay Hezbollah’s overt involvement until Assad’s military position was severely threatened.

Some scholars have portrayed Hezbollah’s entrance into the Syrian civil war as being directed by Iran. Terrorism expert Daniel Byman testified in 2016 that: “Even more important, Hizballah’s closest ally, Iran was calling in all its favors and saw the potential fall of its ally in Damascus as a calamity.”[[125]](#footnote-125) However, many experts actually see Hezbollah’s involvement as being driven by its own interests, not Iran’s. In the words of Al-Aloosy: “if Hezbollah is mostly concerned with the Iranian project in the region, then why is it more invested in Syria rather than Yemen and Iraq?”[[126]](#footnote-126) Several experts offer substantial evidence of Hezbollah’s need for the Assad regime to survive. Phillips notes that in early 2013, when Hezbollah’s overt military support began, Assad’s military position was untenable and jihadists and Salafists were becoming a worrying presence along Lebanon’s border.[[127]](#footnote-127) Daher similarly recognizes that Hezbollah felt it had to intervene once escalating attacks began in Shiite areas in Lebanon and Syria.[[128]](#footnote-128) Daher further argues that Hezbollah’s participation was less about “an attempt to save the Syrian regime than an anticipation of possible negative repercussions” if Assad was toppled.[[129]](#footnote-129) Although Iran would also suffer greatly if Assad fell, there is no evidence that this was the cause of Hezbollah’s involvement.[[130]](#footnote-130) Discounting or minimizing militia interests is commonplace when the principal-agent framework is deployed. This is because there is a strong urge to analyze the principal’s interests instead of the agent’s interests. Both actors’ interests need to be examined to correct the potential overemphasis of principal’s control.

Variation between two similar cases (Hezbollah and Hamas)

In this case study, I will demonstrate that Iran and Hamas’ relationship began vertically and remained that way for decades. This was likely the case because trust never developed between the actors, due to interest misalignment. Therefore, the principal-agent framework adequately captures their relationship. In the words of scholars Joshua Gleis and Benedetta Berti: “The partnership between Iran and Hezbollah is much deeper and substantial than the convenience-based alliance with Hamas.”[[131]](#footnote-131)

Founded in 1988, Hamas was undoubtedly influenced by the 1979 Iranian Revolution.[[132]](#footnote-132) Yet, Hamas and Iran only had weak ties until 1992 when Iran “accepted a Hamas delegation, to which it pledged $30 million in annual funding as well weapons and advanced training at Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corp (IRGC) camps that existed in Iran, Lebanon, and Sudan.”[[133]](#footnote-133) Since this time, Hamas’ relationship with Iran has fluctuated, depending on the political circumstances in the region. Relations between Iran and Hamas reportedly increased in 1994 after violence “between Israel and Hamas intensified.”[[134]](#footnote-134) Researcher Matthew Levitt describes that one decade later, Hamas sought out higher levels of Iranian funding “and a direct channel to” the IRGC after the assassinations of prominent Hamas leaders.[[135]](#footnote-135) On the other side, Iran increased its relations with Hamas following the militia’s Gaza takeover in 2007 after “Iran saw an opportunity to step in and develop a stronger alliance with Hamas.”[[136]](#footnote-136) Gleis and Berti maintain that one “reason for this was the realization by Iran that Hamas was a growing power and potential ally whose relationship it needed to foster.”[[137]](#footnote-137) Koss states that in 2008, a year after the takeover, Iran and the Gulf states “provided the Hamas government with $150 million to $200 million.”[[138]](#footnote-138)

While describing Hamas’ relationship with Iran, Levitt stated that Iranian funding of Hamas “fluctuates given circumstances on the ground; Iran is known to employ a performance-based approach to determining the level of funding.”[[139]](#footnote-139) He refers to U.S. court documents that assert that between 1995 and 1996, Hamas received substantial funds from Iran as a result of carrying out several bus bombings in Israel.[[140]](#footnote-140) This is a clear example of Iran acting as a principal and Hamas acting as an agent. Levitt writes that “Palestinian leaders…resent Iranian influence and pressure” and provides another example of Iran exhibiting strong control over its militia. He points to a 2001 Palestinian intelligence document that describes a meeting between Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and Hezbollah members that had been initiated “‘after an Iranian message had been transferred to the Hamas and Islamic Jihad leaderships, according to which they must not allow a calming down [of the situation] at this period.’”[[141]](#footnote-141) In sum, Iran seems to treat Hamas as its agent, providing increased funding when it behaves according to its interests, and revoking funding when it behaves against its interests.

Unlike Hezbollah, Hamas is a Sunni Islamist group. This has translated into religious differences, which has led to interest divergence on numerous occasions. Gleis and Berti remark that “Hamas does not have a strong ideological affinity with Iran.”[[142]](#footnote-142) This is because the organization came out of the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood and “has retained a Sunni Islamist ideological outlook.”[[143]](#footnote-143) Although Iran’s and Hamas’ goals usually converge in regards to Israel and the West, especially the U.S., there is not strong interest alignment beyond that. Ostovar claims that the “sectarian divide between Tehran and its Sunni clients has remained a significant factor” because “they view the region differently.”[[144]](#footnote-144) These differences, Ostovar says, led to an “IRGC-associated news organization argu[ing] that the Palestinians’ Sunni identity has been the primary obstacle in Iran’s bilateral ties with PIJ and Hamas.”[[145]](#footnote-145) Interest divergence undoubtedly impacts trust between Iran and Hamas.

An important, recent case of interest misalignment, which significantly lowered trust levels, was over the Syrian civil war. Iran and Hezbollah sided with the Assad regime and Hamas “sided with the largely Sunni rebellion.”[[146]](#footnote-146) After finding themselves on opposite sides, Koss writes, Hezbollah, and ostensibly Iran, “blame[d] Hamas for having moved closely to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and for giving up resistance against Israel.”[[147]](#footnote-147) This disagreement soured political relations between Iran and Hezbollah, and Hamas for several years. As reported by the *Associated Press*, “Hamas and Iran did not completely cut off their alliance after the fall-out with Assad. But ties cooled considerably.” [[148]](#footnote-148) In particular, Iran significantly reduced its funding for Hamas’ armed wing.[[149]](#footnote-149) The fact that Hamas publically disagreed with Iran signifies the low trust between the two actors. It is possible that Iran reduced funding for Hamas in an attempt to punish them for failing to comply with their desired actions. This follows the logic of Berman, Lake, Padró i Miquel, and Yared: Iran tried to use a punishment “to compel the[ir] agent to carry out the actions” they wanted. In this example, Iran attempted to strengthen control over Hamas instead of allowing low control to persist. This example, and the case of Hamas in general, indicates the significant variation in Iranian control across its militias.

**Conclusion and further research**

This paper has attempted to highlight the value of bringing the alliance politics framework into the study of state control of militias. By underscoring the shortcomings of applying principal-agent theory to Hezbollah across time, I argue that a superior understanding of the relationship between the two actors emerges when Hezbollah is conceptualized more as an ally of Iran, than an agent of Iran. While the case studies presented here serve as a plausibility probe, the theory laid out in this paper needs to be further developed and empirically tested.

The theoretical questions that need further exploration are: What is the exact link between interest alignment and trust? Are there specific conditions under which trust can develop or trust cannot develop? Is there a relationship between time (the length of time there has been a relationship between the two actors) and trust? Do trust levels differ between militias that have been *created* by states as opposed to only *supported* by states? Do trust levels differ between militias that have a single state supporter and militias that have multiple state supporters? In a first attempt to further think through these questions, I have created the chart below to incorporate a second dimension: resource dependence. Resource dependence is likely influenced by the length of time a state and militia have had a relationship (via path dependence), whether or not a state actually created the militia, and the number of states supporting the militia.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Prediction of relationship type** | | *Trust* | |
| Low | High |
| *Resource dependence* | Low | Alliance politics | Alliance politics |
| High | Principal-agent | Alliance politics |

By incorporating a key second variable, resource dependence, I might be able to better understand when each framework is most useful. As seen above, most state-militia relationships (three out of four) are best understood through the alliance politics framework. Only militias that have low levels of trust and high resource dependence with the state are best characterized as agents of the state. The value of this 2x2 chart needs to be assessed further in future research.

In addition to these theoretical questions, I need to advance and evaluate plausible alternative arguments. This is needed to determine the viability of the theory I have laid out in this paper. Some alternative arguments could be: militias’ operational capability, international pressures, and domestic politics. Further time could be spent coming up with additional alternative arguments and outlining each’s specific mechanisms.

Finally, evaluating external validity is an important part of this project’s future. My two cases, Hezbollah and Hamas, could be outliers (they could be unique militia-state cases) and it is possible that my theory might not travel outside the specific context. There is a real possibility that my theory is only applicable to Iranian militias, to militias found in the Middle East, or to certain “types” of militias. By certain “types” of militias, I mean militias that have particular characteristics like militias without indigenous sources of funding (or support in general), or “foreign” militias which operate on other states’ territory. Finding additional cases across the world where I can detect my observable implications will help with my theory’s generalizability.

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1. This definition is broader than the definition outlined by Corinna Jentzsch, Stathis N. Kalyvas, and Livia Isabella Schubiger in “Militias in Civil Wars,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 59, No. 5 (2015), pp. 755-769. This is because their definition focuses specifically on militias in civil wars, while mine allows for militias outside of civil war contexts. For the purposes of this paper, militias can be fighting against rebels on behalf of the state or against another state. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Kapur, Paul S., *Jihad as Grand Strategy: Islamist Militancy, National Security, and the Pakistani State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 14-18. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
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