

Local Conflicts Versus Global Stakes: Understanding the Political Economy of Proxy Warfare in Contemporary International Relations

Boge,² Faruq Idowu, PhD & Ojo,³ Oluwole Simeon

Abstract

This paper explores the dynamics of proxy warfare in the 21st century through the lens of political economy, emphasizing the intersection between local conflicts and global strategic interests. As major powers increasingly avoid direct military confrontation, they turn to indirect engagement by supporting local actors/militias, insurgents, and governments in various conflict zones. Using case studies from Syria, Yemen, Libya, Ukraine, and the Sahel region, the study critically examines the motivations behind proxy warfare, including geopolitical rivalry, access to natural resources, ideological influence, and strategic deterrence. It further analyses the economic mechanisms that sustain these conflicts, such as arms trading, illicit financing, and war economies. By revealing the often-hidden global stakes in local conflicts, the paper underscores the urgent need for stronger international accountability, regional peace-building frameworks, and citizen awareness. Understanding the political economy of proxy warfare is vital not only for policymakers and scholars but for all global citizens committed to peace, justice, and responsible international engagement.

Keywords: proxy warfare, political economy, geopolitical rivalry, war economies

2 Dept. of History & International Studies, Lagos State University, Lagos, Nigeria.
faruq.boge@lasu.edu.ng

3 Dept. of History & Diplomatic Studies, University of Abuja, Nigeria.
ojooluwolesimeon@gmail.com

Introduction

The international security landscape of the 21st century is increasingly defined by indirect forms of warfare. Among these, proxy warfare where powerful external actors support local combatants to advance their geopolitical or economic interests has gained prominence as a strategic alternative to direct military intervention. Unlike conventional wars between sovereign states, proxy wars are characterized by their complexity, opacity, and asymmetry. These conflicts often begin as internal political or social unrest but escalate due to external sponsorship, morphing into protracted and transnational crises with devastating consequences for local populations. Proxy warfare is not a new phenomenon; it played a central role during the Cold War, as the United States and the Soviet Union vied for influence across Asia, Africa, and Latin America. However, in the contemporary global order defined by multi-polarity, technological advancements, and transnational threats proxy conflicts have taken on new dimensions. The post-9/11 era and the Arab Spring created opportunities for both state and non-state actors to engage in conflicts by proxy, often under the pretence of humanitarian intervention, counterterrorism, or regime change. In reality, these interventions are frequently motivated by less altruistic goals: the pursuit of strategic depth, access to natural resources, economic gain, or ideological expansion (Bapat, 2021).

What makes modern proxy wars particularly insidious is the fusion of local grievances and global rivalries. In many cases, local actors become instruments of external interests, while external actors manipulate domestic unrest to serve broader strategic objectives. The result is a vicious cycle in which conflict becomes normalized, governance structures collapse, and war economies emerge. Countries such as Syria, Libya, and Yemen serve as tragic illustrations of this dynamic, where geopolitical competition among global and regional powers has prolonged violence and undermined prospects for peace. Moreover, proxy warfare is intimately linked to

the global political economy. It is sustained by intricate networks of arms trafficking, resource smuggling, financial flows, and private military contracting. These networks are often facilitated or tolerated by states, corporations, and international institutions that benefit from instability in peripheral regions. In this context, war becomes not just a political instrument but an economic enterprise, creating vested interests in the continuation of conflict (Berman & Lake, 2023).

This article seeks to critically engage with these dynamics by analysing proxy warfare through the lens of political economy, which reveals how power, profit, and politics intersect in ways that fuel persistent insecurity. Using a set of contemporary case studies including Syria, Yemen, Libya, Ukraine, and the Sahel region this study examines the motivations, mechanisms, and consequences of proxy conflicts in global politics. In doing so, it highlights the hidden stakes for international actors, the economic logic that sustains these wars, and the urgent need for reforms in international governance and peace-building practices. Ultimately, the paper argues that understanding the political economy of proxy warfare is essential not only for scholars and policymakers but also for global citizens. As conflicts become increasingly interconnected, so too do their consequences ranging from regional destabilization and forced migration to the spread of extremist ideologies and the erosion of international norms. A comprehensive understanding of proxy warfare is therefore a prerequisite for crafting more ethical, effective, and inclusive approaches to global peace and security.

Conceptualizing Proxy Warfare in International Relations

Proxy warfare, in its broadest sense, refers to the practice where external actors engage in a conflict indirectly by providing material, financial, logistical, or political support to local actors state or non-state in pursuit of strategic objectives (Rauta, 2021; Mumford, 2013). These local actors, often fighting their own wars, become instruments of the external actors' foreign policy,

security ambitions, or economic goals. While the local dimension of the conflict may revolve around governance failure, ethnic divisions, territorial control, or resource competition, the external dimension adds layers of complexity, prolonging the conflict and often transforming it into a regional or even global security issue. Scholars have conceptualized proxy warfare through several lenses, including security studies, international relations theory, and political economy. From a realist perspective, proxy warfare is a rational strategy for states to maximize power and influence in an anarchic international system while minimizing risks and costs associated with direct warfare (Mearsheimer, 2001; Pfaff, 2017; Fox, 2019). For example, great powers may engage in proxy conflicts to balance against rivals, contain adversaries, or secure strategic footholds without violating international laws or provoking full-scale war. This is evident in the Cold War-era engagements in Vietnam, Angola, and Afghanistan, where the United States and the Soviet Union avoided direct confrontation while engaging heavily through local surrogates (Westad, 2005; Yeisley, 2011; Rauta and Mumford, 2017).

However, liberal and constructivist approaches emphasize the institutional, normative, and ideational aspects of proxy warfare. Proxy wars are not only about power and interests but also about legitimacy, identity, and norms. States may back proxies that reflect their ideological values or political models, such as democracy versus authoritarianism, secularism versus political Islam, or Western liberalism versus Eurasianism. The Syrian conflict, for instance, can be read not only as a battleground for strategic rivalry between the U.S., Russia, and Iran but also as a contest between secular nationalist, Islamist, and liberal democratic visions of governance (Phillips, 2016; Heydemann, 2020). Importantly, the political economy perspective offers a deeper understanding of proxy warfare by highlighting how global capital flows, market interests, and resource dependencies shape conflict dynamics. In many instances, the backing of proxies is tied

to securing access to oil, gas, minerals, transit routes, or favourable trade regimes (Hann, 2024). The presence of extractive industries, multinational corporations, and illicit trade networks often means that war becomes self-sustaining through a “war economy” where combatants profit from violence (Le Billon, 2000; Moosa, 2019; Adegbite, 2023). External actors, too, may be complicit in these dynamics, either directly as in the case of arms manufacturers or indirectly, by tolerating the laundering of conflict resources into global markets.

Unlike the cold war era, these practices have become widespread in modern proxy wars and there are recent examples to demonstrate this position. For instance, one could talk about Multi-States Sponsorship. Unlike the bipolar structure of Cold War proxy wars, modern proxy conflicts often involve multiple state and non-state sponsors with overlapping, conflicting, or opportunistic agendas. For example, in Libya, the UAE, Egypt, France, Turkey, and Russia all supported different factions, creating a “proxy mosaic” rather than a binary conflict (Wehrey, 2020). Secondly, there is Non-State Proxies which demonstrates that while state-to-state proxy relations still exist, the rise of non-state actors such as militias, private military companies, insurgent groups, and transnational jihadist networks has blurred traditional distinctions. Groups like Hezbollah, the Wagner Group, and the Houthi movement operate with considerable autonomy while still serving the strategic interests of their sponsors. Thirdly, technological and informational tools have also influenced the ways modern proxy wars are implemented. Modern proxies are also equipped with sophisticated technology, including drones, cyber tools, and surveillance equipment provided by sponsors. Furthermore, information warfare and media manipulation have become key tools in shaping public perception and diplomatic narratives around proxy conflicts (Krieg & Rickli, 2019; Krieg, 2016). Legal ambiguity and plausible deniability are also elements that allow proxy wars to fester in modern international relations.

A key advantage of proxy warfare for sponsors is the ability to maintain plausible deniability. This legal and political shield allows states to deflect blame for human rights abuses, war crimes, or violations of international law. By operating through proxies, external actors can exert influence while avoiding accountability. Hybridization of conflict has also permitted encouraged the spread of proxies. Proxy wars today often combine conventional combat with guerrilla tactics, cyber operations, disinformation campaigns, and economic coercion creating a “hybrid warfare” landscape that is hard to define, let alone regulate through international norms (Hoffman, 2021; Hoffman, 2017; Hoffman 2002).

Finally, it is important to underscore that while proxy warfare may appear to be a rational and cost-effective strategy for global powers, it has devastating implications for the societies in which it unfolds. These conflicts are frequently characterized by mass displacement, institutional collapse, long-term militarization, and intergenerational trauma. Moreover, the involvement of external sponsors often reduces the incentives for local actors to pursue peace, as continued violence brings political recognition, economic gain, or strategic leverage. Therefore, any meaningful engagement with the subject of proxy warfare must move beyond simplistic analyses of state behaviour to account for the intricate political, economic, and social structures that enable and perpetuate these conflicts. This understanding sets the stage for the case studies that follow, where the dynamics of modern proxy warfare are explored in real-world conflict zones.

Case Studies of Contemporary Proxy Wars

To illustrate the theoretical and political economy dynamics of proxy warfare in contemporary international relations, this section examines five significant conflict zones: Syria, Yemen, Libya, Ukraine, and the Sahel. These cases represent diverse geopolitical contexts and sponsor-proxy relationships, yet they all exemplify

how local conflicts are embedded within broader global contests over influence, ideology, and resources.

Syria: A multilayered proxy battlefield

The Syrian civil war, which began in 2011 as part of the Arab Spring, quickly evolved into one of the most intricate and internationalized proxy wars of the twenty-first century. What began as peaceful protests against authoritarian rule turned into a prolonged civil conflict involving numerous foreign powers with conflicting agendas. The United States, Russia, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Israel have all intervened in Syria directly or indirectly through the funding, training, and arming of various state and non-state actors (Phillips, 2016). Russia's support for President Bashar al-Assad is rooted in strategic interests, such as maintaining its naval base in Tartus the only Russian naval facility in the Mediterranean and asserting its influence in the Middle East (Oligie, 2019; Bagdonas, 2012).

Iran, in turn, has supported Assad through Hezbollah and its Quds Force, viewing Syria as a vital link in the "axis of resistance" against Israeli and Western power (Al-Moussawi, 2017; Al-Basre, 2023). The U.S. and its allies have alternately supported Kurdish-led forces and moderate opposition groups, primarily to counter the Islamic State (ISIS) and limit Iranian influence (Mamasoliev, 2024). The political economy of the Syrian war is marked by warlordism, arms trafficking, and external aid flows. Control over oil fields in Deir ez-Zor, border checkpoints, and humanitarian aid routes has become a source of revenue for various actors. Additionally, Syria has become a site for military innovation and testing ground for new weapons, drone warfare, and cyber capabilities, particularly by Russia and Iran (Lister, 2017; Lister, 2023). The long-term impact of this multi-front proxy war has been devastating: over 500,000 people killed, more than 13 million displaced, and the fragmentation of Syrian sovereignty.

Yemen: A humanitarian catastrophe and regional rivalry

Yemen's war, often described as the "forgotten conflict," is a textbook case of a regional proxy war that has spiralled into one of the world's worst humanitarian disasters. Since 2015, the conflict has primarily pitted a Saudi Arabia-led coalition comprising UAE, Egypt, and Sudan against the Iran-backed Houthi rebels, who seized the capital Sana'a in 2014. Saudi Arabia's intervention is driven by geopolitical anxieties over Iranian influence in its southern backyard, as well as a desire to project regional leadership. Iran, for its part, sees in the Houthis a strategic partner in expanding its network of allies across the Middle East. Though Tehran's support is more ideological and logistical than direct military deployment, its role has had outsized political and strategic effects. The economic dimensions of the war are equally troubling. The destruction of infrastructure, blockade of ports, and manipulation of aid have created famine conditions and economic collapse. The arms trade has flourished despite global outcry; weapons supplied by Western nations to the Saudi-led coalition have been implicated in civilian casualties (Salisbury, 2022). Additionally, local warlords and militias profit from smuggling networks, fuel sales, and extortion, creating a war economy that disincentivises peace.

Libya: Fragmentation and competing global interests

Since the 2011 NATO-backed overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi, Libya has descended into chaos, becoming a battleground for competing domestic militias and foreign actors. The conflict has seen the emergence of two rival governments: the UN-recognized Government of National Unity (GNU) in Tripoli and the Libyan National Army (LNA) led by General Khalifa Haftar in the east. Haftar received backing from Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Russia, and France, while the GNU has been supported by Turkey and Qatar. Russia's support for Haftar includes the deployment of

the Wagner Group, a private military contractor allegedly tied to the Kremlin, which has supplied mercenaries and arms (Wehrey, 2020). Turkey's involvement, on the other hand, is tied to regional maritime ambitions and ideological alignments with political Islam (Quamar, 2020). The war economy in Libya is sustained by control over oil infrastructure, arms imports, and migrant smuggling. Militias operate as hybrid actors, part criminal, part political and benefit from lucrative deals with foreign states and energy companies. International inaction and fragmented diplomacy have allowed the conflict to persist, undermining Libya's sovereignty, crippling its economy, and enabling global powers to compete at the expense of stability.

Ukraine: Great power rivalry reignited

The Russia-Ukraine war, especially following the full-scale invasion in February 2022, represents a reversion to high-intensity warfare but still contains elements of proxy engagement. The United States, European Union, and NATO members have provided Ukraine with military hardware, intelligence support, financial aid, and diplomatic backing to resist Russian aggression, while avoiding direct military engagement themselves (Mearsheimer, 2022). Russia has framed its actions as a pre-emptive strike against NATO expansion and Western encroachment, but its invasion has been widely condemned as a violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and international law. For Western powers, Ukraine has become a frontline in the defence of the post-World War II liberal order and the rules-based international system. The political economy of the Ukraine conflict involves arms shipments, sanctions regimes, control over gas transit routes, and cyber warfare. Defence contractors in the West have seen massive profits from increased demand, while Russia's military-industrial complex continues to draw on strategic reserves and support from countries like Iran and North Korea. Ukraine's resistance, meanwhile, is financially

dependent on Western assistance, raising questions about long-term sovereignty and post-war reconstruction financing.

The Sahel: A frontier of jihadism, resources, and competing powers

The Sahel region stretching from Mali to Chad and including Burkina Faso and Niger has become one of the most conflict-prone areas globally. Its instability is driven by a mixture of ethnic tensions, jihadist insurgencies, weak governance, and environmental degradation. International involvement, however, has further complicated the situation. France, through Operation Barkhane, led military operations in the region from 2014 until its withdrawal in 2022. The U.S. maintains a significant intelligence and drone presence via AFRICOM. In recent years, Russia has increasingly filled the vacuum through military aid and the deployment of Wagner Group personnel, especially in Mali and the Central African Republic (Cold-Ravnkilde and Albrecht, 2023). The political economy of conflict in the Sahel revolves around the control of gold mines, uranium reserves, and smuggling routes for arms, drugs, and human trafficking. Regional governments often rely on foreign military aid for regime security, while insurgents exploit grievances over marginalization and poverty. The result is a perpetual insecurity that invites more foreign intervention, perpetuating the proxy cycle.

The Political Economy of Proxy Warfare

While traditional analyses of proxy warfare often focus on the geopolitical strategies of powerful states or the ideological alignments between sponsors and proxies (Ivanovic, 2020; Brown 2016; Hughes, 2012), such frameworks are incomplete without considering the economic underpinnings that sustain these conflicts. The political economy of proxy warfare reveals a complex web of profit-making opportunities, resource extraction, illicit financial networks, and institutional dependencies that both local

and international actors exploit. In this sense, proxy wars are not only instruments of power projection but also systems of economic accumulation and redistribution often at the expense of human security, governance, and long-term development.

Arms Trade and the Militarization of Conflict Zones: The global arms industry is one of the most direct economic enablers of proxy warfare. State and non-state proxies rely heavily on the continual flow of weapons, ammunition, drones, and military logistics from their sponsors. Major arms-exporting countries including the United States, Russia, China, France, and the United Kingdom often supply weapons to both sides of a conflict, directly or indirectly, thereby fuelling prolonged warfare under the guise of alliance-building or security cooperation. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (Wezeman et al, 2024), global arms transfers increased significantly between 2018 and 2023, with a large portion destined for conflict zones where proxy wars are ongoing, including Yemen, Syria, and Ukraine. In many cases, weapons provided to official governments or allied militias are diverted into black markets or seized by adversarial groups. For instance, US-made weapons intended for the Afghan military were captured by the Taliban in 2021, and reports show that advanced weaponry provided to Ukrainian forces has occasionally surfaced on illicit markets in Europe and the Middle East (Berman & Lake, 2023).

Illicit Financing, Resource Extraction, and War Economies: Another central pillar of the political economy of proxy warfare is the escalation of war economies systems in which violence becomes a means of generating income and controlling territory. In such environments, the line between political rebellion and organized crime blurs. Proxies and their sponsors often exploit natural resources, taxation of local populations, trafficking, and smuggling to finance their operations. This transforms conflicts into self-sustaining enterprises. For example, in Syria, various militias have profited from the trade of antiquities, oil smuggling, and

humanitarian aid diversion. In Libya, control over oil terminals and smuggling networks has empowered local militias and their foreign backers. In the Sahel, armed groups extract wealth through artisanal gold mining, drug trafficking, and taxation of trade routes. These financial structures ensure that conflict becomes economically rational for many actors; peace, on the other hand, becomes a threat to their livelihoods. Such dynamics are not exclusive to non-state actors. Governments engaged in proxy warfare also profit from conflict economies. Military aid inflows, foreign direct investment tied to strategic cooperation, and elite corruption networks benefit from a sustained state of insecurity. External sponsors may even use proxies to gain concessions in mining, construction, or telecommunications sectors, thereby embedding economic exploitation within the broader geopolitical contest.

Private Military Companies (PMCs) and the Privatization of War: The emergence of private military companies (PMCs), a continuation of the age-long mercenary systems, adds a further economic dimension to proxy warfare. These actors, often contracted by governments or multinational corporations, provide security services, training, and even direct combat support in conflict zones. Notable among them is the Russian-affiliated Wagner Group, which has operated in Syria, Libya, the Central African Republic, and Mali. PMCs allow states to project force while maintaining plausible deniability, avoiding legal accountability under international humanitarian law. In addition, PMCs often secure economic concessions such as mining rights or infrastructure contracts in exchange for military support. This model turns warfare into a business transaction, where the battlefield becomes a site of resource acquisition and political leverage. It also undermines national sovereignty, as weak governments outsource core security functions to foreign actors with profit motives rather than political legitimacy (Krieg, 2016).

Aid Dependency and International Financial Flows: In many

proxy war-affected regions, foreign aid both humanitarian and military constitute a significant part of national income. External sponsors use aid not only as a lifeline but also as a tool of influence and conditionality. For instance, Western aid to Ukraine, which surpassed \$100 billion between 2022 and 2024, is essential to the country's war effort and economic stability. However, it also creates long-term dependencies and shapes domestic politics, governance reforms, and foreign policy alignments (Gentile et al, 2023). In Yemen and Syria, humanitarian aid has been manipulated by both state and non-state actors. Armed groups tax or divert supplies, while sponsoring states use aid as diplomatic currency to buy allegiance or reputation. These further blurs the line between economic relief and political strategy, transforming humanitarianism into another arena of proxy war engagement.

Digital Capitalism and Information Warfare: In the twenty-first century, the political economy of conflict also includes digital platforms, information manipulation, and cyber operations. Sponsors often fund and operate media campaigns, online disinformation networks, and propaganda machines to shape public opinion and discredit opponents. These activities are relatively low-cost but high-impact, capable of influencing elections, exacerbating societal divisions, and legitimizing foreign intervention. Social media platforms often based in Western democracies have become arenas of soft power projection. In conflicts like Ukraine and Syria, control over digital narratives has become as important as control over territory. Tech companies, advertisers, and data analytics firms have quietly profited from the monetization of engagement driven by war content, while state actors refine the use of bots, fake accounts, and micro-targeted disinformation for strategic ends (Krieg & Rickli, 2019).

In sum, proxy warfare is not merely a geopolitical tactic it is a complex political-economic system that redistributes power, wealth, and legitimacy in ways that reinforce global inequalities and perpetuate conflict. External actors, often immune to

the immediate humanitarian consequences, operate in these systems to extract value, achieve strategic goals, and maintain global influence. Understanding this dimension is essential for developing holistic peace-building strategies that go beyond ceasefire agreements and address the structural incentives that make warfare profitable and sustainable.

Implications for Global Security and Peace-Building

The rise and normalization of proxy warfare have profound and far-reaching implications for international security, regional stability, peace-building efforts, and the global governance architecture. As this mode of conflict proliferates across the globe from Eastern Europe to the Sahel it increasingly challenges the norms of sovereignty, undermines international legal frameworks, complicates conflict resolution, and contributes to prolonged humanitarian crises. Understanding these implications is critical for policymakers, scholars, international organizations, and civil society actors committed to building sustainable peace.

Erosion of Sovereignty and Rule-Based Order: One of the most immediate consequences of proxy warfare is the erosion of national sovereignty. Proxy conflicts often unfold in states with fragile institutions, divided societies, or contested legitimacy. The intervention of foreign actors often uninvited and unaccountable weakens the capacity of national governments to exert authority over their territory and people. In extreme cases, such as Libya or Yemen, the state ceases to function as a coherent entity, giving way to warlordism and territorial fragmentation (Wehrey, 2020; Salisbury, 2022). The broader international system also suffers. The rules-based order, anchored on principles of non-intervention, self-determination, and peaceful dispute resolution, is undermined when powerful states sponsor violence abroad without facing consequences. The proliferation of proxy wars contributes to a dangerous precedent: that might makes right, and that sovereignty can be overridden in the name of strategic or ideological necessity.

If left unchecked, this normalization of indirect aggression may lead to a world order where diplomacy is replaced by militarized competition and strategic deniability.

Humanitarian Catastrophes and Prolonged Suffering: Proxy wars are often associated with extensive civilian harm, including mass displacement, famine, sexual violence, and the destruction of critical infrastructure. Unlike conventional wars between states where clear fronts and rules of engagement may exist proxy conflicts are typically messy, decentralized, and protracted. This makes it harder for international humanitarian actors to access affected populations and harder still for warring factions to commit to peace. In Syria, over 13 million people have been displaced; in Yemen, over eighty percent of the population is in need of humanitarian assistance; in the Sahel, millions face acute food insecurity and violence-induced displacement (Lusiani & Nisadina, 2024). The continued influx of arms, resources, and political support from external patrons sustains violence and obstructs peace negotiations. Moreover, humanitarian crises caused by proxy warfare often spill across borders, destabilizing neighbouring states and creating regional refugee crises, as seen in the Syrian and Libyan cases.

Increased Regional and Global Insecurity: Far from containing violence, proxy wars tend to internationalize conflict by dragging in new actors and multiplying security threats. For instance, the Syrian war saw the convergence of state sponsors (U.S., Russia, Iran, Turkey), transnational jihadist groups (ISIS, Al-Qaeda), and foreign fighters from more than 90 countries. The resulting instability fuelled global terrorism, migration flows, and sectarian polarization (Lister, 2023). In West Africa's Sahel, external interventions have failed to reduce jihadist violence; instead, they have shifted conflict patterns, empowered local warlords, and deepened anti-foreign sentiments. The withdrawal of France from Mali in 2022 and the subsequent arrival of Russian paramilitary forces highlights how proxy turnover can perpetuate

insecurity rather than resolve it (Cold-Ravnkilde & Albrecht, 2023). At the global level, proxy warfare increases the risk of escalation between major powers. The U.S. and Russia's indirect confrontation in Ukraine, or Iran and Saudi Arabia's rivalry in Yemen, carry the potential for miscalculation and spill over. The more actors involved in a conflict, the harder it becomes to manage escalation and negotiate resolution. This is particularly dangerous in a multipolar world where institutions like the United Nations Security Council are often gridlocked by great power competition.

Obstacles to Peace-Building and Postconflict Recovery: The presence of external sponsors complicates peace negotiations, as they introduce competing interests that may not align with those of local actors or affected communities. Sponsors may pressure proxies to hold out for better terms, sabotage reconciliation efforts, or refuse to recognize peace processes that undermine their influence. In Libya, multiple internationally brokered ceasefires collapsed due to the interference of foreign powers backing rival factions. Even when peace is achieved, post-conflict recovery is hampered by the political economy legacies of proxy warfare. Warlords and militias that profited during war may resist disarmament; economies built around smuggling and extortion are hard to transform into productive sectors. Moreover, societies that have been fragmented by external ideological or sectarian divisions may struggle to rebuild national identity and social cohesion. Without addressing the structural economic incentives that sustain conflict, peace agreements remain fragile and reversible.

Implications for Global Governance and Civil Society: The spread of proxy warfare presents a major challenge for international institutions, particularly those tasked with conflict prevention, mediation, and peace enforcement. The United Nations, for example, faces legal and operational constraints in dealing with non-state actors, private military contractors, and ambiguous foreign interventions. Many proxy wars unfold in grey zones where attribution is difficult and accountability elusive. To

be effective, international responses must evolve to address the hybrid nature of modern conflicts. This includes building regional peace infrastructures, such as those led by the African Union and ECOWAS, and empowering local actors with the capacity to mediate and monitor peace processes. It also calls for reform in the regulation of arms flows, sanctions regimes, and transparency in foreign military assistance.

Lastly, civil society and global citizens must play a more active role in demanding ethical foreign policy, transparency in defence spending, and international justice. The global public has often been shielded from the human and economic costs of proxy wars due to media manipulation and political spin. Raising awareness, advocating for non-violent solutions, and supporting grassroots peace-building are essential steps in reversing the normalization of proxy warfare.

Conclusion

Proxy warfare has emerged as a defining feature of twenty-first century conflict, reshaping the landscape of international relations by transforming local disputes into global battlegrounds. This paper has demonstrated that behind the apparent localization of conflicts in places like Syria, Yemen, Libya, Ukraine, and the Sahel lies a complex web of global interests, economic transactions, and geopolitical rivalries. These wars are not merely about territorial control or ideological dominance; they are deeply embedded in global structures of power, profit, and influence. At its core, proxy warfare reflects a shift in how major powers project influence in a world where direct military confrontation is increasingly costly, unpopular, and constrained by international norms. By outsourcing conflict to local actors often in fragile or fragmented states external sponsors maintain plausible deniability while pursuing strategic objectives ranging from deterrence and containment to resource control and ideological expansion. This trend blurs the

line between domestic and international warfare, state and non-state actors, legal and illicit economies.

The political economy of proxy warfare reveals how conflict is sustained not only by political agendas but also by economic incentives and institutional weaknesses. Arms trade networks, illicit financial flows, smuggling routes, and war economies provide the means through which proxies survive and conflicts endure. In this context, war becomes profitable for a range of actors, local elites, transnational corporations, arms dealers, and mercenary firms creating powerful disincentives for peace. Importantly, proxy conflicts do not remain confined to their immediate zones of violence. They generate regional instability, encourage violent extremism, and lead to mass displacement, thereby affecting international migration patterns and humanitarian priorities. They also weaken global governance by undermining institutions such as the United Nations, which often struggles to respond to hybrid warfare and ambiguous aggression. Moreover, proxy warfare creates feedback loops of escalation among great powers, raising the risk of wider geopolitical conflict. To address these challenges, the international community must move beyond narrow military solutions or transactional diplomacy. Instead, it should adopt a comprehensive approach that includes: greater transparency and accountability in foreign military assistance and arms sales; stronger regulatory frameworks to curb illicit financing and transnational criminal networks that fuel conflict; empowerment of regional organizations and civil society actors to lead peace building and mediation efforts grounded in local realities; and sustained investment in conflict prevention, post-conflict recovery, and inclusive governance to address the root causes of fragility that make states vulnerable to proxy warfare. For scholars, understanding proxy warfare requires a multidisciplinary lens combining insights from political science, economics, international law, and security studies. For policymakers, it demands humility, cooperation, and a long-term commitment to ethical foreign policy. And for citizens, it calls for

vigilance, awareness, and advocacy against the invisible wars waged in their name. In a world increasingly shaped by indirect conflicts with direct consequences, grasping the political economy of proxy warfare is no longer optional. It is essential to building a more peaceful, just, and responsible international order.

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