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POLITICS, POSITIONALITY, AND COLONIAL PERSISTENCE IN PROXY WARS

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One of the aims of this handbook has been to exhibit the theoretical and methodological diversity within the field of proxy war studies. In this chapter, we take up the issue of diversity in the field more explicitly. It is ethically and intellectually imperative for scholars to read and cite sources from diverse backgrounds in any project, but "diversity" is a broad and vague concept and must be specified in order to be operationalized. Generally, the value of seeking "diversity" in terms of the sources we cite and the experts we consult in our academic work comes from exposing ourselves and our readers to points of view that differ from our own, or from those that prevail in a given literature. Individuals, of course, differ from one another in myriad ways. In professional settings, the term "diversity" is often used as a shorthand for racial, ethnic, and gender difference. It can be useful to think of each type or dimension of difference as an axis, and each individual as a point intersected by multiple axes of difference. For example, a white, US, male scholar might be aware that male authors in his field are "less likely to cite work by female scholars in comparison with female authors" (Mitchell *et al.*, 2013, 485; Dion *et al.*, 2018). Recognizing his own position along the axes of race and nationality as well as gender, he may seek out sources produced by others who are distant from him on one or more axis (sources by female authors, Black authors, Chinese authors), with the hope that including diverse perspectives will ensure that his work will not simply reproduce the assumptions and epistemological biases that come from his own positionality along these axes.

Of course, not all axes of diversity are equally relevant in all cases. One of the scholar's first tasks when approaching a project should be to identify the specific types of difference (gender, race, political alignment, age) that are most salient to the inquiry at hand. A study of gender discrimination in educational institutions, for instance, ought to cite authors and interlocutors representing as many gender identities as possible. Gender, race, class, and other dimensions of identity commonly invoked in discourses on diversity are often relevant to studies of armed conflict and always deserve serious consideration. In this chapter, though, we highlight some less obvious types of diversity that are intrinsically relevant to the study of proxy wars, in order to offer a theoretically grounded way to think about diversity in this context.

There are many reasons for scholars to hold a normative commitment to encouraging diversity in the academy. In this chapter, we focus on the ways that the intellectual framework of proxy war studies, like all scholarly discourses, can serve to circulate and concentrate power in the form of discursive authority in ways that harm the world we study and bias or hinder our understanding

of that world. To combat this tendency, we encourage proxy war researchers to seek out diverse viewpoints that differ along three axes: *political/factional alignment*, *degree of local knowledge concerning the site of conflict*, and *positionality relative to hegemonic discourses of knowledge and politics*. We specify these three types of diversity based on our own analysis of the prevailing biases and oversights in the literature, as well as the observations of other critical international relations scholars, some of whom are cited later. These are certainly not the only dimensions of diversity that proxy war scholars should consider, but they are types of diversity that we expect to be relevant to any case in the literature. Attending to these three dimensions requires us to discard any illusions of objectivity and acknowledge that no vantage point along any of these axes provides a uniquely clear or unbiased view. Following, we provide a brief explanation of these axes of diversity before introducing a pair of case studies that demonstrate their importance.

The first of these axes is largely self-explanatory and can refer to the author's/observer's material connections, social ties, or political sympathies with parties or factions in either the site of conflict or the site of scholarship. Considering an author's/observer's *degree of local knowledge* helps us take seriously different forms and sources of knowledge and authority. Scholars trained in Western or Western-style institutions, and who constitute what Agathangelou and Ling (2004) call the "colonial household" of international relations scholarship, tend to privilege knowledge generated through scientific processes and often view proximity or attachment to a site of conflict as a source of bias. But observers who live in or come from sites of conflict, and foreign observers who have embedded themselves in those sites, have access to types of data not available to remote researchers, as well as cultural and political frameworks that can enrich our interpretations of the data. An observer's *positionality relative to hegemonic discourses* can be related to their political alignment and their degree of local knowledge, but attending to this third axis also allows us to more explicitly examine an observer's role in the circulation of discursive power. Both foreign and local observers may advance (unintentionally or purposively) discourses produced in (and reproductive of) geopolitical power centers, or discourses that challenge hegemonic knowledge and frames of interpretation. Making the observer's positionality explicit helps us recognize "the omissions, erasures, and complicities that result from dodging the colonial, racialized roots of modern knowledge from which much international relations and security scholarship, including its critical variants, has grown" (Behera *et al.*, 2021, 9; Capan, 2017).

To illustrate the importance of these three forms of diversity, we examine two cases from the proxy war literature – the "Secret War" in Laos (1959–1975) and the Yemeni civil war (2014–present) – and the implications of some scholars' failures to attend to these three axes in those cases. The Laotian case illustrates the harm of allowing imperial interests to determine the framing of local conflicts and the ways scholars may inadvertently reproduce racialized conflict dynamics in doing so. The case of Yemen's internationalized civil war highlights how adopting a proxy war frame not only obscures local actors' interests and motives but can also constitute an act of (often unintentional) stance-taking, whereby the observer aligns themselves with particular parties to the conflict.

It is analytically valuable – essential, even – to recognize and investigate the role of external powers in civil wars. This is generally the aim of proxy war scholarship. But to apply the label and the analytical framework of *proxy war* to a given conflict is to implicitly assert a claim about the autonomy and relative importance of local versus external parties to a conflict. In civil war scholarship, a *proxy* is one who acts for or in the place of another, generally at the other's direction. According to Cragin (2015, 312), a proxy war is "a conflict in which countries oppose each other indirectly, through the use of surrogates, typically in a third country." Mumford characterizes proxy wars as "the logical replacement for states seeking to further their own strategic goals yet at the same time avoid engaging in direct, costly and bloody warfare" (2013, 11). Rauta similarly categorizes proxy war as a subtype of indirect third-party military

intervention and offers a "definitional structure whose determinants combine to form a minimal, necessary and sufficient set of attributes required to identify an empirical referent under the label 'proxy war'" (2021a, 11). This structure is made up of three features. The first of these, following Dunér (1981, 356), is at its core about, "the provision of some form of support to a proxy by an *external actor, a Beneficiary or Principal*" (emphasis ours). These conceptualizations clarify the place and purpose of proxy war studies within the broader field of scholarship on civil wars and military interventions. However, this framework risks implicitly presenting internal actors as mere instruments for foreign principals and drawing attention away from these actors' own motivations and goals. Some scholars have made efforts to explicitly consider the interests of local actors. San-Akca's "selection theory" frames relationships between external states and local actors as products of a bidirectional process (San-Akca, 2016, 25). Rauta also considers both "the Beneficiary's goal towards the Target" and "the Proxy's preference for the Beneficiary" in his framework of proxy-beneficiary relations (Rauta, 2018, 449), and elsewhere advocated theorizing causal explanations accounting for both principal and proxy agent (Rauta, 2020, 2021b). Moghadam and Wyss presented the first framework centered on non-state actors (2020) and challenged the faults of still thinking of proxy wars through Cold War lenses (Moghadam and Wyss, 2018). But to date, most of the literature has focused first and foremost on understanding the motivations and actions of the external actors in ostensibly "proxy" conflicts, often explicitly adopting a principal-agent framework and limiting discussions of local actors' agency to the possibility of proxies "shirking" the duties they owe to their principals (Groh, 2019, 119; Salehyan, 2010, 495; Karlén *et al.*, 2021).

Through the case studies that follow, we show that attending to viewpoint diversity not only highlights the epistemological pitfalls of the proxy war framework but can also expand its analytical value in a number of ways. In the next section, we focus on the "Secret War" in Laos, in which the United States recruited and coerced members of the Hmong ethnic group to fight against communist Laotian and Vietnamese forces. We take advantage of variation along the overlapping axes of *degree of local knowledge concerning the site of conflict* and *positionality relative to hegemonic discourses* to consider the role of racial justifications for intervention and proxy exploitation and the ways that the proxy war framing has reproduced the imperial dynamics of the original conflict in academic scholarship. We also show that attending to these axes can expose the hidden costs incurred by and imposed upon local actors who receive material "support" from external actors.

We then turn to the case of the civil war in Yemen. Drawing upon perspectives that vary across all three of our axes of interest, we argue that the application of a proxy war framing to this conflict has obscured the long-standing interests of local actors. We also demonstrate how attending to diversity can complicate the presumed directionality of the principal-proxy relationship and reveal the role that analytical frameworks themselves (like the proxy war concept) may play in the prosecution and perpetuation of wars. By way of example, we argue that parties to the conflict have purposively weaponized this framing to enhance their own respective claims to legitimacy and influence domestic and foreign public opinion. We follow these two case studies with a concluding section that summarizes the lessons learned from an analysis that centers diverse perspectives and offers recommendations for a diversity-informed approach to conflict studies.

Laos

"Long after the troops have been disbanded, proxy war is still at work," anthropologist Anna Tsing writes, reflecting on her work with veterans of the so-called Secret War in Laos (Tsing, 2012, 59). After the United States was prohibited by the 1954 Geneva Conference from sending troops directly to Laos to fight a communist insurgency, the Central Intelligence Agency

(CIA) proceeded instead to sponsor some 30,000 members of the Hmong ethnic group as an "irregular army." The conflict is a common case study in contemporary literature on proxy wars, with scholars pointing to the difficulties of controlling a proxy force from afar and attempting to explain why US efforts ultimately failed (Groh, 2019; Leary, 1995). Yet, by centering the United States in the narrative of the Secret War and relegating the Hmong to the status of a strategic tool, such accounts have reproduced the imperial dynamics of the original conflict, thereby furthering hegemonic discourses of knowledge and politics.

Conventionally, the Secret War is presented as a case study from which contemporary military and intelligence leaders can learn. Sometimes considered to overlap with the Laotian Civil War (1959–1975), the Secret War refers to a period following the end of French colonial rule in Laos where the communist Pathet Lao political movement fought the Royal Lao government, with Vietnamese and Thai interests also participating. The conflict was rooted in much older struggles, with various factions stemming from colonial rebellions against the French, then the Japanese and Chinese after the end of World War II, then the French again until independence in 1954. The role of the Hmong in these conflicts, driven largely by colonial oppression and the inter-ethnic hierarchies encouraged by the French, cemented a racialized notion in the colonial imagination of the Hmong as a "warlike" people naturally suited to fighting whatever war happened to be occurring at the time (Hopp, 2020; Lee, 1998, 2015). Coupled with concerns about the spread of communism in Southeast Asia and the strength of communist Vietnamese forces in the north, Laos became a microcosm of global Cold War politics and a prime space for US grand strategy to entangle with older Western colonial interests.

The Hmong themselves feature as statistics in many accounts of the Secret War: between one-tenth and one-half of the Hmong population in Laos died during the war, with Hmong soldiers dying at ten times the rate of US soldiers in Vietnam (Hmong Association of Washington, 2020; Vue, 2015). Missing from these big-picture statistics is some of the context that caused them to emerge. For example, firsthand accounts from former Hmong soldiers reveal that the United States made little effort to rescue downed Hmong pilots, even as it went to great lengths to evacuate its own soldiers (as they were not supposed to be in the country), contributing to high Hmong casualty counts (Vang and Yang, 2020). At other times, they become caricatures. Hopp describes how the United States, in recruiting Hmong men and children to fight, drew directly on French colonial documents presenting the Hmong as "warlike" and "warrior-farmers," justifying the co-optation of a local conflict for US geopolitical interests by painting the Hmong as people who would have fought regardless (Hopp, 2020, 11). Some key accounts in the proxy war literature replicate this unidimensional take on the Hmong, divorcing them from personal or community-level motivations. Commenting on the US practice encouraging entire Hmong families to move to the front lines to facilitate Hmong men's participation, Groh notes that "regardless of the moral implications, . . . , the result was that they fought harder" (2019, 147). In such accounts, the Hmong become a singular tool, and the object of inquiry becomes how to sharpen that tool. The Secret War, therefore, becomes a strategic interaction between state actors, erasing the complexity of Hmong relationships to the United States and to the local conflict.

Other accounts center the decision-making of the sponsor: the United States. Given the US desire to engage in military action in Laos, and given Geneva Conference prohibitions on doing so directly, "the CIA is really the only other instrumentality we have," U. Alexis Johnson, US Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs, explained at the time (in Leary, 1995, 507). Ironically, the decision by US policymakers to paint involvement in Laos as the only choice – and the subsequent decision of academics to reproduce this sense of constraint – mimics dynamics that during the Secret War itself were wielded against Hmong families. Engagement with ethnography and memoir demonstrates that, in a very real sense, Hmong men had little choice whether

to fight for the United States. The war caused extensive damage to crops and farmland, and so the CIA paid Hmong soldiers in food as well as money, creating a clear incentive to fight for the United States. Contemporary interviews with Hmong veterans reveal that those families who refused to allow their sons and other male family members to serve in the US-sponsored regiment were prohibited access to food aid (Faderman and Xiong, 1998; Tsing, 2012). As a result, the US presented the Hmong with the choice of dying in battle or dying from starvation, thereby co-opting an entire population into the conflict rather than only those who volunteered of their own free will. Accounts document Hmong children as young as 10 years old conscripted into fighting for the United States (Xiong, 2020).

This information illustrates the vital importance of including local perspectives on conflicts, rather than applying proxy war framings unilaterally and in isolation from larger sociopolitical contexts, and relates to our second axis of diversity, *degree of local knowledge*. Much as the CIA relied on French colonial knowledge to assess the situation in Laos, rather than knowledge from the Hmong themselves or even updated on-the-ground perspectives, scholars who do not incorporate Hmong perspectives risk reproducing hegemonic, Western characterizations of history and culture in Laos – and, moreover, of the conflict as limited to the Cold War rather than a 100-year struggle against various colonial interests.

In-group perspectives further underscore how the proxy war framing of a conflict can still be "at work" years after its cessation. Through interviews with Hmong and Lao veterans, Baird and Hillmer (2020) show the entanglement of US sponsorship activities abroad with racism at home. Faced with common narratives of free-loading or "illegal" migrants, some Hmong veterans have used their service during the Secret War to reinforce their status as Americans. Thus, Hmong veterans must constantly invoke a particular narrative of the conflict – in particular, the US's role as the key fact about it that matters – to create "a simple narrative that Americans can easily understand" (Baird and Hillmer, 2020, 28). In other instances, the US role in the conflict is almost entirely erased: legislation passed after 9/11 meant that many Hmong living outside of the United States became labeled as terrorists due to the alleged provision of "material support" to a US-sponsored force that used illegal violence under Laotian law. At least 30 Hmong refugees found their resettlement to the United States put on hold as a result (Pasquarella, 2006; Swarns, 2006). It took three years for Congress to pass an exemption to the law for the Hmong, acknowledging that their "illegal violence" took place with the full support of the very government that now called them terrorists. Unsurprisingly, positionality matters. Hmong must constantly live with legacies of the Secret War; the United States, whose actions exacerbated it, may choose when to remember, or even whether to remember at all.

We argue that this positionality also matters for scholars employing a proxy war framework, in Laos and elsewhere. Placing the experiences of Global South communities during conflict within the strategic lens of "proxy war," we contend, can sideline these communities in their own stories. Doing so reproduces from these wars the centering of hegemonic interests and narratives, not so much erasing the interests and desires of local communities as failing to imagine that these might be out of line with those of outside powers. The Laotian case illustrates dramatically the legacies of a single story imposed at a time of conflict and carried through by some scholars and policymakers to the present day. The Yemeni case, which we turn to next, shows more explicitly how local interests and processes of sense-making are complex and do not fit neatly into a single story of conflict.

Yemen

The Laotian case illustrates the harm of allowing imperial interests to determine the framing of local conflicts. The case of Yemen's ongoing internationalized civil war highlights how a lack of

viewpoint diversity – in terms of *local knowledge* and *positionality relative to hegemonic discourses* – can lead to scholarship that not only obscures local interests and motives but also advances the projects of parties to the conflict. Local and external belligerents in Yemen sometimes manipulate the Western tendency to interpret internationalized conflicts as products of geopolitical power struggles rather than local causes to delegitimize their adversaries. By depicting their enemies as proxies of foreign powers, they claim local legitimacy and the moral high ground that comes with it. Foreign scholars analyzing the conflict using a proxy war framework (generally but not exclusively writing in the Global North, for Northern audiences) thus align themselves, wittingly or not, with warring parties. In other words, belligerents can weaponize hegemonic discourses that center imperial (or more generally, foreign) interests, turning outside observers into accidental agents of conflict.

The seeds of Yemeni's ongoing civil conflict and the debate over whether it should be considered a proxy war were sewn in 2004, when Yemen's then-president Ali Abdullah Saleh ordered the arrest of Hussein al-Houthi. Al-Houthi was a prominent religious scholar and the founder of a Zaydi Shi'a revivalist organization called the Believing Youth. By the turn of the twenty-first century, Yemen's Zaydi sect had been declining in both numbers and political relevance for half a century. The Believing Youth represented the vanguard of a movement that sought to train new generations of Zaydi scholars and modernize the sect's political thought. The movement was encouraged and funded in its early years by the Saleh regime, but this relationship soured after President Saleh signaled his support for the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. The Believing Youth, who viewed the United States as an enemy of Islam and a threat to Yemen's independence, began holding weekly rallies in the capital, Sana'a, protesting the invasion of Iraq and the regime's complicity. Unable to silence the movement through patronage or intimidation, Saleh opted for a military response (Hamidi, 2009, 167).

The Yemeni military's arrest and subsequent killing of Hussein al-Houthi sparked a six-year war between the state and what came to be known as the "Houthi movement." In parallel to his military campaign, Saleh launched a rhetorical war against the Houthis, which hinged on the accusation that the movement was a proxy for the Iranian government. Saleh hoped that the international community's antipathy toward Iran, and Saudi fears of Iranian encroachment upon the Arabian Peninsula, would lead to support for his internal war. But although Iran offered occasional encouragement to the Houthi movement, there is no evidence that the movement received substantial materiel support from abroad during its first decade, and Saleh's accusations were generally dismissed by the White House and other international actors (Salisbury, 2015, 7).

As the conflict expanded across northern Yemen, the brutality of government forces led locals to support the Houthi cause, swelling the movement's ranks as networks of tribal affinity and political affiliation were activated and reshaped. President Saleh was eventually forced to declare a unilateral ceasefire in 2010, giving the Houthis de facto autonomous control over much of Yemen's northwest. When the youth-led popular uprising against Saleh's regime erupted in 2011, the Houthi leadership, now calling itself Ansar Allah, sided with the revolution and helped to oust Saleh from power. But after his negotiated exit from the presidency, Saleh began secretly funneling arms to the Houthis to destabilize the transitional government of his former vice president, Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi (Brandt, 2017). Finally, in late 2014, pro-Saleh forces collaborated with Houthi fighters to take the capital by force.

As Houthi and pro-Saleh forces swept south from Sana'a to subdue the rest of Yemen, President Hadi escaped to the southern city of Aden, and from there to Riyadh, where he re-formed an internationally recognized government-in-exile and officially requested military assistance from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Saudi, Emirati, and allied aircraft began bombing Houthi/Saleh positions and population centers in March 2015 and sent ground forces into Yemen along with Yemeni pro-government irregulars. Caught off guard by the

GCC's decision to intervene, the Obama administration in Washington, DC, reluctantly agreed to provide logistical support and expedited arms sales to Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and the other states in the intervening coalition.

After retaking Aden and other parts of the far south, the coalition's progress faltered, and a devastating stalemate set in. Since 2015, Saudi and Emirati jets – flown by US-trained pilots and often refueled by US Air Force tankers – have dropped countless tons of US-supplied munitions on Yemen's cities and towns, while pro-government forces and their GCC allies have failed to drive Ansar Allah's paramilitaries from central and northern Yemen. Houthi fighters assassinated former President Saleh after a power struggle within the rebel alliance in 2017. Saleh's old accusations of Iranian support for the Houthi movement have gradually come true, however. Since the Houthi-Saleh coup in 2014 (if not earlier), Iran has smuggled arms – including drones and medium-range ballistic missile parts – into northern Yemen. Iranian and Lebanese Hezbollah advisors, probably numbering in the low hundreds, have been present in Houthi-controlled territory since the early days of the war, and it is likely that Iranian experts have assisted with Ansar Allah's sporadic aerial bombardments of Saudi territory. Meanwhile, the Hadi government has established neither popular legitimacy nor functional control in the south. In Aden, the secessionist Southern Transitional Council (supported by the UAE) holds sway. Elsewhere, factions with a wide range of orientations and alliances hold de facto power and carry on the fight against the Houthis (Juneau, 2016; Baron, 2019).

To be certain, numerous foreign actors have played significant roles in the ongoing war in Yemen. The nature of those roles, however, is a matter of heated debate among both the parties to the conflict and foreign observers. In fact, the question of whether this conflict ought to be considered a "proxy war" has been central to the broader battle for control of the narrative. Through press releases in Arabic and English, Ansar Allah has depicted itself not as Yemen's ruling entity, but as a participant in the national government and contributor to that government's defensive war against "the US-Saudi Aggression," often shortened to simply "the Aggression" (*al-'Udwan*). Ansar Allah has also proven adept at taking advantage of and manipulating anti-imperialist and anti-war discourse in the Global North. For example, Houthi-controlled online outlets have at times used the same hashtags and talking points as activists in the United States and Europe opposing military intervention in Yemen. Perhaps the best example of this convergence is the tendency of both anti-intervention activists and Ansar Allah to date the beginning of the war to the start of GCC air strikes in March 2015. Online activists and Western advocacy organizations alike have annually marked 26 March 2015 as the "anniversary" of the war's initiation, rather than starting the clock from 21 September 2014, when the Houthis and Saleh loyalists launched their coup (Eikenberry, 2018). In so doing, these well-intentioned activists amplify the Houthi assertion that the war is a matter of foreign aggression against Yemen, rather than a war between multiple Yemeni parties and their respective foreign allies.

For its part, the Hadi government, which often refers to itself as "the Legitimacy" (*al-Shar'iah*), leans heavily in its own framing of the war on an exaggerated account of Iranian involvement. Hadi's vice president (and Saleh's former right-hand man) Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar has said, for example, that the Houthis "are one of Iran's tools" (Saba, 2017). Saudi officials have similarly accused the Houthis of "implement[ing] the Iranian project" (SeptemberNet, 2019). The Trump administration also adopted this framing of the Houthis as agents of Iran: for example, a White House press release from 2018 stated that Houthi missile attacks on Saudi territory "demonstrate[d] that Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps is continuing to disrupt a nascent political process, escalate hostilities, and destabilize the region" (The White House, 2018). Depicting the Houthi movement as an agent of Iran rather than a motivated actor in its own right allows the Hadi government to position itself as the defender of the Yemeni people against

external aggression, just as the Houthis do. With these rhetorical tactics, both sides demon-
strate their awareness of the ways hegemonic proxy war discourse leads Western pro- and anti-
interventionists alike to privilege the interests of intervening "principals" over local "proxies."

While activists and officials tend to frame one side or the other as a proxy of foreign powers,
journalists and academics often frame the entire conflict as a "proxy war" between Saudi Arabia
and Iran, obscuring the agency and motivations of all Yemeni parties involved (Tisdall, 2015;
Watson, 2016). This tendency is most pronounced among foreign writers who have little to
no personal experience or expertise in Yemeni affairs; it also extends beyond Yemen, as events
in Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere are often portrayed as manifestations of a broader Saudi-Iranian
proxy struggle, driven by "ancient" religious differences (Williams, 2015; Kessler, 2016). By
contrast, scholars and pundits who have spent time in Yemen and have a more nuanced under-
standing of local politics tend to argue vehemently against the proxy war framing of the conflict
and to emphasize the competing motivations and interests of local actors, including not just
Ansar Allah and the Hadi government, but the myriad local notables, tribal leaders, and armed
factions who have aligned themselves with one or the other of the internationally recognized
parties to the conflict (Juneau, 2016; Salisbury, 2015; Baron, 2019; Feierstein, 2020). However,
not every observer with detailed local knowledge abjures the proxy framing; one can also find
examples of well-informed experts – often Yemeni expatriates in the United States and Europe
– echoing the proxy framings used by either Ansar Allah or the Hadi government. One such
expat expert writing for a US think tank, for example, describes the Hadi government as "heav-
ily controlled by the Saudis" (Al-Dawsari, 2020), while another describes the Houthis as an
"Iranian-aligned militia" representing "the Islamic Republic's hand in Yemen" (Alasrar, 2020).

Analysts with extensive knowledge of the local context and the local actors involved are
often inoculated from politicized portrayals of foreign influence and are more likely to look for
nuance in the relationships between local and foreign actors. But local case experts may also, in
some cases, exhibit bias toward one party or another, to the detriment of their analysis. More
distant observers without local knowledge or relevant factional alignments may tend to dismiss
accounts of local motivations and place too much emphasis on portrayals of the war propagated
by "credible" international powers. It seems clear from the previous account, however, that to
portray a local actor as a "proxy" of an external power, or to portray an international actor as
playing a central role in the conflict, is often to accept an inherently biased and purposive narra-
tive. The Hadi regime and its allies advance their narrative of Iranian encroachment to justify an
intervention that has killed tens of thousands of civilians and a blockade that threatens the entire
nation with starvation. The Houthis and their supporters use their narrative of foreign aggres-
sion to legitimate the overthrow of an internationally recognized government and the violent
conquest of northern and central Yemen. Foreign activists, pundits, journalists, and academics
amplify these weaponizations of proxy war discourse, rendering them more credible. Attending
to the political alignments, degree of local knowledge, and discursive positionality of various
sources of information allows scholars to better assess those sources' accuracy and intentions.

Discussion and Concluding Thoughts

To analyze a conflict completely objectively is impossible; nevertheless, scholars may inadvert-
ently reproduce colonial narratives or pieces of political propaganda by uncritically applying a
proxy war frame. In this chapter, we have argued for taking diverse perspectives more seriously
in proxy war scholarship. By proposing three particularly relevant axes of diversity – *political/
factional alignment*, *degree of local knowledge*, and *positionality relative to hegemonic discourses of knowl-
edge and politics* – we contend that proxy war scholars must pay closer attention to how their

research may circulate and concentrate certain kinds of discursive authority. Both the Laotian and Yemeni cases show the pitfalls of centering Western, US, and/or hegemonic understandings and interests. This is not to suggest that those interests are not present and an important part of understanding a war, but rather to consider more carefully how they can be instrumentalized, overstated, and perpetuated when local actors are divested of agency in scholarly accounts and treated as strategic tools for global power players.

Our approach raises a final question: how can we avoid centering Western (imperial and colonial) interests when the object of our research is, indeed, Western involvement? Certainly, none of the definitions of proxy warfare cited herein require the sponsor country be Western, but many of the classic cases in the literature – Algeria, Laos, Vietnam, Afghanistan, and so on – do involve Western sponsors. Our axes suggest not ignoring these realities but rather considering their causes and consequences. In other words, who is framing a conflict as a "proxy war," when, and with what effects? What does casting a local actor as a "proxy" imply about that actor's interests, and do those implications line up with the empirical record of the complexities and contradictions in what that "proxy" actually wants? A first step for scholars pursuing such research could be examining everything *but* sponsor interests in a first cut – not to pretend sponsor interests do not exist but rather to foreground local dynamics and historical roots of social relations before re-introducing the sponsor to the analysis.

We conclude with three additional recommendations for proxy war studies as a field. First, is the use of memoirs, (auto)ethnographies, and other nontraditional sources to understand the dynamics of conflict. Implicitly, this is an argument for language training and fieldwork, though we caution that access to conflict zones is neither always possible nor ethically desirable, and there are further ethical issues facing Global North researchers studying the Global South (Cronin-Furman and Lake, 2018). At its core, this is a call to broaden how we recognize knowledge and where it comes from. An example drawn from our own positionality illustrates this. One of the authors is an expert on Yemen with local language proficiency and over ten years of experience in the country. Neither, however, is an expert on Laos. In order to achieve a more accurate representation of local voices, we turned to firsthand accounts from Laotians, as well as research by members of the Laotian diaspora. We relied not only on academic research and statements from US officials, but also books from nonacademic presses and unpublished research by members of the Hmong community. Such sources are no less authoritative than academic accounts and flesh out the lived experiences of people in conflict zones beyond aggregate statistics or depersonalized narratives. Broadening our sources of data, furthermore, challenges colonial knowledge structures that govern who is judged to have expertise to speak.

Second, we urge more careful attention to issues of temporality. As Yemen's civil war shows, the same narrative about a conflict may be employed by different people at different times and places, from local militants to foreign journalists to academics themselves. Attention to the context in which a particular narrative appears may shed light on the interests driving conflict actors and underscore the complexity of actors' motivations. The Laotian case, meanwhile, demonstrates that certain narratives can have lasting power decades after a conflict ends. The aftermath of proxy war includes not only the strategic implications for the sponsor, but also the legacies of violence for communities and groups involved on the ground. Such legacies are intergenerational and can manifest in unexpected ways (as in the case of terrorism designations for Hmong supporting the United States) that should be included when analyzing the consequences of sponsorship decisions.

Last, we turn to the difficulty of not becoming an accidental agent of conflict. Attending to our axes of diversity can help scholars notice when they may be promoting the agenda of one side or another, even if unintentionally. Still, furthering a particular narrative of conflict is to some extent inevitable: the choices of which cases to include, the degree to which proxy versus

sponsor interests are centered, and the perspectives described in one's research are all political choices. We, therefore, urge scholars to recognize their commitments and make those explicit. And, in the interests of clarifying our own commitments, we underscore the importance of anti- and decolonial research approaches to conflicts traditionally considered through a proxy war lens so as to make evident the hegemonic discourses embedded in much proxy war scholarship.

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