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State Sponsored Terrorism as a Tool for Proxy War

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of state-sponsored terrorism as a tool in proxy wars, examining its effectiveness in achieving short-term geopolitical objectives and its long-term consequences. By analyzing historical and contemporary case studies, such as Iran's support for Hezbollah and Pakistan's backing of militant groups in Kashmir, the paper demonstrates how states use financial, military, and intelligence resources to empower non-state actors. The analysis applies realist, constructivist, and asymmetrical warfare theories to understand the motivations behind state sponsorship and the risks involved, including blowback and international sanctions. The paper concludes by assessing the future of state-sponsored terrorism in light of evolving global security dynamics and counter-terrorism measures.

Keywords: state-sponsored terrorism, proxy wars, asymmetrical warfare, global security

INTRODUCTION

State-sponsored terrorism refers to the covert or overt support of terrorist groups by a state, providing them with resources, intelligence, or protection to carry out acts of violence against another state or group (Collins 2014). This form of terrorism is often used as a strategic tool, allowing states to achieve geopolitical objectives without direct involvement or accountability. Proxy war, by contrast, involves indirect engagement in conflict, where states utilize non-state actors, militias, or other third-party groups to fight on their behalf (Rauta 2021). These two concepts often intersect when states employ terrorist groups as proxies to further their national interests, influence regional dynamics, or weaken adversaries.

Historically, state-sponsored terrorism has been a recurring feature in global geopolitics, particularly during times of heightened tension or conflict between states. A notable example is the Cold War, where both the United States and the Soviet Union supported

insurgent groups and militant organizations as part of their broader strategy of global influence (Pfaff 2024). Iran's long-standing support for Hezbollah, Pakistan's involvement with militant groups in Kashmir, and the US backing of anti-Soviet fighters in Afghanistan during the 1980s exemplify how states have effectively used terrorism as a proxy tool to exert influence and destabilize opponents (Al-Aloosy 2023; Behera 2001; Hartman 2002; Khan and Zhaoying 2020). These actions allowed states to pursue aggressive policies while maintaining plausible deniability and avoiding direct military confrontation.

This paper aims to explore the role of state-sponsored terrorism as a tool in proxy wars, with a particular focus on how and why states choose to utilize such strategies. Through an analysis of historical and contemporary case studies, the paper will examine the mechanisms of state sponsorship and the effectiveness of terrorism as a proxy tool in achieving geopolitical goals. The study will also evaluate whether such strategies provide long-term benefits or if they exacerbate instability and unintended consequences for both the sponsor and the region involved.

METHODS

The use of state-sponsored terrorism as a tool for proxy war can be analyzed through various lenses within the fields of statecraft, international relations, and conflict theory. Key theoretical approaches such as asymmetrical warfare, realism, and constructivism offer distinct perspectives on why and how states resort to supporting non-state actors for violent means in pursuit of their geopolitical objectives.

Asymmetrical Warfare theory is heavily influenced by the works of authors such as Andrew Mack in his essay, “Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars: The Politics of Asymmetric Conflict” , and Ivan Arreguín-Toft in “How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict” (Arreguín-Toft 2001; Mack 1975). These works explore how weaker non-state actors or smaller states can effectively combat stronger adversaries using unconventional tactics, such as terrorism. In the context of proxy wars, states often back terrorist groups because they offer a cost-effective means to wage warfare, targeting vulnerable areas of stronger adversaries. As Arreguín-Toft argues, asymmetrical warfare forces the more powerful state into prolonged conflicts that wear down their resources and political will, making terrorism a particularly useful tool in such engagements (Arreguín-Toft 2001).

From a Realist perspective, the motivations behind state-sponsored terrorism are rooted in the pursuit of national interest and the quest for power within an anarchic international system. Key realist theorists, including Hans Morgenthau in “Politics Among Nations” and Kenneth Waltz in “Theory of International Politics”, have highlighted that states are primarily concerned with survival and power maximization (Morgenthau 1948; Waltz 1979). Realists view terrorism as a strategic tool that allows states to undermine their rivals without resorting to direct confrontation, which could escalate into full-scale war. Iran’s backing of Hezbollah, for

example, can be understood through a realist lens as a calculated move to counter Israel's regional influence. Waltz's structural realism (also known as neorealism) reinforces this idea by focusing on the distribution of power in the international system and how states respond to security dilemmas, which in this case, involve supporting non-state actors to maintain a balance of power (Waltz 1979).

In contrast, Constructivism, developed by authors such as Alexander Wendt in "Social Theory of International Politics" and Nicholas Onuf in "World of Our Making", emphasizes the importance of ideas, identities, and norms in shaping state behavior (Onuf 1989; Wendt 1999). Constructivist scholars argue that the motivations for state-sponsored terrorism are not solely based on material power but also on shared ideologies and identities between states and the groups they support. For instance, Iran's sponsorship of Hezbollah is not just a strategic calculation, but also an expression of shared Shia identity and ideological alignment. Wendt's famous assertion that "anarchy is what states make of it" highlights that the international system is shaped by these shared beliefs, which influence the alliances states form with terrorist organizations (Wendt 1999). Constructivism suggests that such alliances are more likely to be durable and effective when they are underpinned by a common worldview or ideological connection, rather than mere strategic expedience.

When debating these theories, Realism is often critiqued for its focus on material power and security, potentially underestimating the importance of ideology and identity (Lee and Ms 2023). While realism provides a clear explanation for why states might sponsor terrorism for strategic gain, Constructivism challenges the assumption that states always act out of rational self-interest, arguing that normative and ideational factors play a critical role in the formation of state-proxy relationships. On the other hand, Asymmetrical Warfare Theory provides valuable insight into how terrorism can serve as a force multiplier for states engaging in indirect warfare, but it may not fully account for the long-term instability and blowback that often accompany state-sponsored terrorism, as highlighted by Andrew Mack's and Arreguín-Toft's work (Arreguín-Toft 2001; Mack 1975).

Together, these theoretical frameworks offer a nuanced understanding of the motivations behind state-sponsored terrorism. States frequently conduct cost-benefit analyses, seeking plausible deniability while gaining strategic advantages. In doing so, they often employ asymmetrical warfare tactics to undermine stronger adversaries. However, the dynamics of such sponsorship are also influenced by deeper ideological connections and shared norms, as suggested by constructivist theories, which can make these alliances more durable and effective in the long run.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Historical Case Studies

State-sponsored terrorism has played a central role in many geopolitical conflicts, especially during periods of heightened rivalry between states. Prominent examples

such as Iran's support for Hezbollah, Pakistan's involvement with militant groups in Kashmir, and the Cold War strategies of the United States and the Soviet Union reveal how terrorism has been used as an instrument of proxy war (Al-Aloosy 2023; Khan and Zhaoying 2020; Pfaff 2024). These examples also demonstrate how the theoretical frameworks of realism, constructivism, and asymmetrical warfare inform our understanding of the motivations and consequences of state-sponsored terrorism.

One of the most studied examples is Iran's support of Hezbollah, which began in the 1980s and continues today. This relationship is grounded in both strategic and ideological motives. From a realist perspective, Iran's support for Hezbollah serves as a strategic tool to counterbalance Israel's influence in the region (Khan and Zhaoying 2020; Mens 2024; Nilsson 2020). By financing, arming, and training Hezbollah, Iran enhances its geopolitical reach in Lebanon without engaging in direct military confrontation, an approach that aligns with Kenneth Waltz's view of states as rational actors in an anarchic international system, seeking to maximize their power and security (Waltz 1979).

However, constructivist theory, as developed by Alexander Wendt, adds another layer of understanding. Wendt's argument that state behavior is shaped not only by material interests but also by ideational factors helps explain Iran's enduring relationship with Hezbollah (Wendt 1999). Iran's sponsorship of Hezbollah is not solely driven by realpolitik considerations but is also rooted in shared Shia identity and ideological opposition to Western and Israeli influence in the Middle East (Khan and Zhaoying 2020). This ideological alignment strengthens the state-proxy relationship and demonstrates the importance of social constructs and shared beliefs in international alliances (Wendt 1999). Wendt's work underscores the significance of non-material factors, showing how state behavior is often guided by identities and ideas as much as by security interests.

Pakistan's involvement with militant groups in Kashmir offers another clear example of state-sponsored terrorism as a proxy tool. For decades, Pakistan has supported insurgent groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed to contest Indian control over Kashmir (Bhattacharya 2024). This strategy reflects the principles of asymmetrical warfare, as defined by Andrew Mack, who argues that weaker states or non-state actors often resort to unconventional tactics to challenge stronger adversaries. Pakistan, unable to match India's military strength in direct conflict, employs these militant groups to wage a prolonged, low-cost insurgency (Mack 1975). This use of asymmetrical warfare allows Pakistan to maintain pressure on India while avoiding the risks of full-scale war.

At the same time, realist theory explains Pakistan's actions through the lens of national interest and power politics. Hans Morgenthau's assertion that states act to preserve their national interest is evident here, as Pakistan's sponsorship of terrorism in Kashmir is aimed at weakening India and maintaining its own strategic position in the region (Morgenthau 1948; Wolf 2017). However, this approach has come with

significant risks, including international condemnation and internal instability, illustrating the complex cost-benefit analysis that states engage in when sponsoring terrorism.

The Cold War provides a broader context for understanding how superpowers utilized terrorism as a proxy tool. Both the United States and the Soviet Union supported insurgent and terrorist groups as part of their global strategies to undermine each other's influence. The US support for the Mujahideen in Afghanistan during the 1980s is one such example (Bhatia 2007; Kuperman 1999). The US provided arms, funding, and training to these insurgents to challenge Soviet occupation, an act that aligns with the realist focus on strategic interest (Hughes 2008). As Kenneth Waltz emphasized, states operate in a self-help system where they must rely on unconventional means to achieve their objectives, particularly when confronting a rival superpower (Waltz 1979).

Yet, this case also demonstrates the long-term consequences of state-sponsored terrorism, as the rise of extremist groups like al-Qaeda emerged from this very conflict. Asymmetrical warfare theory, as discussed by Ivan Arreguín-Toft, highlights how weaker forces can inflict significant damage on stronger ones through guerrilla tactics, but it also underscores the difficulty of controlling the long-term outcomes of these conflicts (Arreguín-Toft 2001).

Constructivism also plays a role in understanding the Cold War dynamics, particularly in how ideological conflicts between capitalism and communism shaped state behavior. The Soviet Union's support for leftist insurgencies in Latin America, Africa, and Asia was driven not only by power considerations but also by a commitment to spreading communist ideology. As Wendt suggests, the international system is shaped by ideational factors, and in the case of the Cold War, the ideological rivalry between the US and the USSR determined much of the behavior of both superpowers (Wendt 1999).

Mechanisms and Methods of State Sponsored Terrorism as a tool for proxy war

State-sponsored terrorism relies on a variety of mechanisms through which states provide material, financial, and logistical support to non-state actors. By offering financial resources, training, weapons, intelligence, and political backing, states are able to influence conflicts and extend their strategic reach, often without engaging in direct military confrontation. This section examines these key methods of sponsorship and the critical role that non-state actors play in allowing states to maintain plausible deniability**.**

One of the primary ways states sponsor terrorism is through financial support**.** This can take the form of direct monetary assistance to terrorist organizations or the establishment of covert financial channels, such as front companies or charitable organizations, that funnel money to militant groups (Carter 2012). Financial backing enables terrorist organizations to recruit, train, and sustain their operations. For instance, Iran's financial support for Hezbollah has allowed the group to maintain significant

influence in Lebanon and launch operations against Israel (Khan and Zhaoying 2020; Nilsson 2020). By funding these groups, states can achieve strategic objectives at a fraction of the cost required for conventional military engagements.

In addition to financial backing, states also provide training to terrorist groups, enhancing their operational capabilities. Training can take place in covert camps, often located in remote or allied territories, where state military or intelligence personnel impart skills in guerrilla warfare, sabotage, intelligence gathering, and advanced tactics (Carter 2012; Siqueira and Arce 2020). Pakistan's support for militant groups in Kashmir, including Lashkar-e-Taiba, involved the provision of training camps in Pakistan-controlled territories (Popovic 2015). These training facilities equip non-state actors with the skills necessary to conduct effective terrorist operations, furthering the state's geopolitical objectives while allowing for indirect involvement.

The supply of weapons is another critical mechanism by which states sponsor terrorism (Carter 2012; Bibi and Lee 2023). States often transfer arms and munitions either through direct shipments or by covertly funneling weapons through third parties. These weapons allow terrorist groups to carry out attacks with greater lethality, contributing to regional instability. The Soviet Union's supply of weapons to various insurgent groups during the Cold War is a prominent example of this tactic (Pfaff 2024). More recently, Iran has been accused of supplying missiles and other weaponry to groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas, furthering its regional agenda against Israel and other adversaries (Al-Aloosy 2023; Malakoutikhah 2020).

Another important dimension of state sponsorship is intelligence sharing (Collins 2014). States provide terrorist groups with valuable intelligence that enhances their ability to carry out successful attacks as well as to provide a form of deterrence (Ali and Lee 2022; Lee, Komšić, and Sims 2024a). This may include information on enemy positions, surveillance data, or operational tactics. Intelligence sharing allows states to directly influence the targets and timing of terrorist attacks while maintaining a degree of separation from the violence itself (Lee et al. 2025). For example, Hezbollah's close cooperation with Iranian intelligence services has significantly enhanced its capabilities in conducting sophisticated operations against Israeli targets (Al-Aloosy 2023; Collins 2014; Nilsson 2020).

In many cases, states also offer political backing to terrorist organizations, providing them with diplomatic cover and protection on the international stage (Byman 2005). This can involve using diplomatic channels to shield terrorist groups from sanctions or military retaliation, or to legitimize their cause. For instance, during the Cold War, both the United States and the Soviet Union offered political support to various insurgent and militant groups as part of their broader geopolitical strategy (Hughes 2008; Kuperman 1999). More recently, Iran's backing of Hezbollah has included attempts to legitimize the group's political wing, portraying it as a legitimate resistance

movement rather than a terrorist organization (Nilsson 2020).

Crucially, states that sponsor terrorism often do so with a deliberate focus on maintaining plausible deniability (Byman and Kreps 2010). By relying on non-state actors, states can engage in proxy conflicts while denying direct involvement in terrorist activities. This deniability is essential for avoiding direct military reprisals or international condemnation. Non-state actors, being independent entities, provide a buffer between the state and the terrorist activities they sponsor. This separation allows states to influence conflicts without risking direct confrontation with other states or international institutions (Byman and Kreps 2010).

To maintain this deniability, states employ several tactics. First, they often channel support through third parties, such as allied states or private organizations, ensuring that the connection between the state and the terrorist group is obscured (Aksoy, Carter, and Wright 2012; Byman and Kreps 2010). Second, states may deny official recognition of the groups they support, claiming that these actors operate independently (Carter 2012). For example, despite overwhelming evidence of support, Pakistan has often denied its involvement with groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba, insisting that they are autonomous (Shah 2014). Third, states may use covert operations to mask their involvement, relying on intelligence agencies and covert networks to supply and train terrorist groups without leaving a clear trail (Byman 2005; Carter 2012).

The use of non-state actors as proxies not only provides states with deniability but also offers strategic flexibility. States can support or withdraw backing for these groups depending on changing geopolitical conditions, without the constraints that come with formal military engagements. This dynamic allows states to achieve their geopolitical objectives in an adaptive and cost-effective manner while reducing their exposure to direct military conflict or diplomatic fallout.

Case Study: A Modern Example

A contemporary example of state-sponsored terrorism in proxy warfare is the ongoing conflict in Yemen, where various state actors, most notably Iran, have provided significant support to non-state actors to further their strategic interests (Oktav 2018; Seeberg 2016). Yemen's civil war, which began in 2015, has become a proxy battleground for regional powers, with Iran backing the Houthi rebels against a coalition led by Saudi Arabia (Ghoble 2019; Juneau 2016). This conflict exemplifies the role of state-sponsored terrorism in advancing broader geopolitical objectives, while also demonstrating the complexities and consequences of such strategies.

Iran's support for the Houthi rebels in Yemen is grounded in both strategic and ideological motivations. By backing the Houthis, Iran seeks to expand its influence in the Arabian Peninsula, a region dominated by its regional rival, Saudi Arabia. This mirrors realist theories of international relations, where states act to maximize their power and security in an anarchic system (Meibauer

2023; Waltz 1979; Wohlforth 1994). Supporting the Houthis allows Iran to challenge Saudi Arabia's dominance and create a foothold near critical geopolitical chokepoints like the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, a crucial maritime route for oil shipments (Arafat 2020).

The mechanisms through which Iran supports the Houthis illustrate the methods commonly associated with state-sponsored terrorism. Iran has reportedly provided the Houthis with financial resources, weapons, and training (Juneau 2024). Iranian weapons, including ballistic missiles and drones, have been used by the Houthis to target Saudi infrastructure and civilian areas, leading to significant destabilization in the region (Mutschler, Bales, and Meininghaus 2024). Furthermore, intelligence sharing between Iran and the Houthis has enhanced the rebels' operational capabilities, allowing them to carry out more precise and damaging attacks against Saudi and coalition forces (Ajili and Rouhi 2019).

Iran's backing of the Houthis also highlights the importance of plausible deniability in state-sponsored terrorism (Byman 2022). While there is substantial evidence linking Iran to the Houthis, Tehran has consistently denied direct involvement, maintaining that it provides only political support (Juneau 2016). This deniability is a crucial element of Iran's strategy, as it allows the country to challenge Saudi interests without provoking a direct military confrontation with the Saudi-led coalition or its Western allies (Ajili and Rouhi 2019). The use of the Houthis as a proxy enables Iran to achieve its objectives indirectly while shielding itself from the full diplomatic and military consequences of its actions as well as prevent the security dilemma and create an arms race (Lee, Komšić, and Sims 2024b; Lee, Sims, and Lee 2024).

The Houthis, as non-state actors, provide Iran with strategic flexibility. They offer an effective means for Iran to engage in asymmetrical warfare against a more powerful adversary. The asymmetrical warfare framework, as outlined by scholars like Andrew Mack and Ivan Arreguín-Toft, helps explain how weaker actors like the Houthis can challenge stronger state actors like Saudi Arabia through guerrilla tactics and terrorism (Arreguín-Toft 2001; Mack 1975). With Iranian support, the Houthis have been able to wage a prolonged insurgency, utilizing unconventional methods to offset the Saudi military's technological and logistical superiority (Juneau 2016).

The conflict in Yemen is also shaped by ideological factors, reflecting the constructivist dimension of state-sponsored terrorism. Iran's support for the Houthis is partly based on shared religious and ideological affiliations, as both the Iranian regime and the Houthis belong to branches of Shia Islam (Ostovar 2018; Ricotta 2016). This ideological alignment strengthens the alliance between Iran and the Houthis, making it more resilient to external pressures (Ricotta 2016). Alexander Wendt's constructivist theory emphasizes the role of identities and shared beliefs in shaping state behavior, and in this case, Iran's ideological support for the Houthis aligns with its broader regional strategy of expanding Shia

influence across the Middle East (Wendt 1999).

However, the conflict has had severe humanitarian consequences. The civil war in Yemen has caused widespread destruction, leading to what the United Nations describes as the world's worst humanitarian crisis (Lubczynski and Matusitz 2024). The use of terrorism and proxy warfare, while effective in advancing state interests, has exacerbated the suffering of the Yemeni population, causing widespread displacement, famine, and disease. The conflict has also drawn in multiple external actors, including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States, turning Yemen into a fragmented battleground for competing regional and international interests (Lawson 2022).

This case study illustrates the broader implications of state-sponsored terrorism in proxy warfare. While Iran has been able to leverage its support for the Houthis to challenge Saudi Arabia's regional influence, the conflict has also demonstrated the destabilizing effects of such strategies. The humanitarian toll, coupled with the internationalization of the conflict, highlights the risks associated with state-sponsored terrorism, particularly in terms of long-term regional instability (Lee, Bettani, and Sims 2024; Al-Aloosy 2023).

Effectiveness of State-Sponsored Terrorism as a tool of proxy war

The use of state-sponsored terrorism as a strategy to achieve geopolitical objectives has proven to be a double-edged sword. While it can offer short-term gains, such as the ability to destabilize adversaries, extend regional influence, or assert indirect control, its long-term effectiveness is often less certain and fraught with significant risks. Evaluating the effectiveness of this strategy requires a balanced analysis of its capacity to achieve lasting influence, its impact on state security, and the factors that contribute to either its success or failure.

In the short term, state-sponsored terrorism can be an effective tool for achieving geopolitical objectives. It allows states to exert influence in a conflict or region without committing conventional military forces, reducing the political and economic costs typically associated with direct military intervention. For example, Iran's sponsorship of Hezbollah has enabled it to challenge Israeli dominance in Lebanon and the broader Middle East while avoiding full-scale war (Al-Aloosy 2023; Nilsson 2020; Demeure and Lee 2023). Similarly, Pakistan's support for militant groups in Kashmir has kept the conflict alive without risking a direct confrontation with India, a militarily stronger neighbor (Behera 2001). These examples show how states can employ non-state actors to create instability in rival regions, weakening adversaries and forcing them to divert resources toward counterterrorism efforts.

However, the long-term outcomes of state-sponsored terrorism are often more complex and uncertain. While it can lead to sustained influence in some cases, such as Iran's long-standing relationship with Hezbollah, it can also generate unintended consequences that weaken the sponsoring state (Al-Aloosy 2023;

Khan and Zhaoying 2020; Nilsson 2020). One such risk is the phenomenon of blowback, where the non-state actors supported by the state turn against their sponsor or act in ways that destabilize the sponsor itself. For example, the United States' support for the Mujahideen during the Soviet-Afghan War in the 1980s contributed to the rise of extremist groups like al-Qaeda, which later carried out the 9/11 attacks against the US (Hartman 2002; Hartnell 2011; Hughes 2008). This illustrates how state-sponsored terrorism can backfire, creating long-term security threats for the sponsoring state.

The ability of state-sponsored terrorism to provide lasting influence or control depends on several factors. States that sponsor terrorism often aim to maintain influence over the groups they support, but this control can be tenuous, particularly if the interests of the state and the non-state actors diverge over time. For instance, while Iran has maintained a strong influence over Hezbollah due to ideological alignment, other states have found it difficult to control the behavior of the groups they sponsor, leading to instability and conflict within their own borders (Al-Aloosy 2023; Carter 2012; Khan and Zhaoying 2020; Nilsson 2020; Lee et al. 2024). Moreover, reliance on non-state actors can limit a state's ability to exercise direct control over the outcomes of the conflict, as the actions of the sponsored group may not always align with the sponsor's broader strategic objectives.

The impact on state security is another critical dimension of the effectiveness of state-sponsored terrorism. While sponsoring terrorist groups allows states to project power indirectly, it can also expose them to significant security risks. International pressure, in the form of diplomatic isolation, economic sanctions, and military reprisals, can undermine the sponsoring state's stability and economic health. For instance, Iran's sponsorship of groups like Hezbollah and Hamas has led to numerous sanctions imposed by the United States and its allies, significantly damaging Iran's economy and limiting its ability to engage in international trade (Byman 2018; Wang, Shen, and Han 2022). Similarly, Pakistan's long-standing support for militant groups in Kashmir has drawn criticism from the international community, contributing to its strained relations with neighboring states and global powers (Mukherjee 2016).

Additionally, the evolving dynamics of global security influence the success or failure of state-sponsored terrorism as a strategy. In an increasingly interconnected world, the actions of non-state actors can have far-reaching consequences, drawing international attention and intervention. The rise of international counterterrorism efforts, including the Global War on Terror led by the United States and its allies, has made it more difficult for states to sponsor terrorism without facing severe consequences (Boyle 2008; Dumbrell 2006; Ullman 2006). Increased intelligence sharing, enhanced military capabilities, and coordinated international efforts to combat terrorism have reduced the effectiveness of state-sponsored terrorism as a tool for achieving geopolitical gains. Moreover, the growing influence of international organizations such as the United Nations in condemning and sanctioning state

sponsors of terrorism has further constrained the effectiveness of this strategy (Collins 2014; Heupel 2013).

However, state-sponsored terrorism can still be successful under certain conditions. Factors that contribute to its success include strong ideological alignment between the state and the non-state actor, as seen in Iran's relationship with Hezbollah, and the ability to maintain plausible deniability, allowing the sponsoring state to avoid direct attribution of terrorist activities (Al-Aloosy 2023). Additionally, the absence of robust international pressure or sanctions can allow states to continue their support for terrorist groups with minimal consequences, as seen in cases where global powers are unwilling or unable to intervene due to competing interests.

Therefore, while state-sponsored terrorism can be an effective tool for achieving short-term geopolitical objectives, its long-term success is far less certain. The risks of blowback, international pressure, and the challenges of maintaining control over non-state actors often outweigh the initial benefits. The evolving dynamics of global security and counterterrorism efforts further constrain the effectiveness of this strategy, making it a highly volatile and unpredictable means of pursuing state interests.

CONCLUSION

State-sponsored terrorism has long been employed by states seeking to advance their geopolitical objectives through proxy warfare. The case studies examined, such as Iran's support for Hezbollah and Pakistan's involvement with militant groups in Kashmir, highlight the methods by which states use financial, military, and intelligence resources to empower non-state actors (Khan and Zhaoying 2020; Mukherjee 2016). These actions align with realist theories, as states act in their self-interest to destabilize rivals and project influence. Constructivist insights also reveal how ideological alignment between states and non-state actors, such as Iran and Hezbollah, can solidify long-term alliances (Wendt 1999). However, the broader analysis also demonstrates the risks associated with this strategy, where unintended consequences, such as blowback, may ultimately weaken the sponsoring state.

In the short term, state-sponsored terrorism can be an effective instrument of asymmetrical warfare, as outlined by scholars like Andrew Mack and Ivan Arreguín-Toft. Weaker states leverage non-state actors to undermine stronger adversaries without engaging in direct military confrontation (Arreguín-Toft 2001; Mack 1975). The use of terrorist proxies allows these states to project power indirectly and maintain a degree of plausible deniability. Yet, the long-term consequences of this strategy are complex. Realist scholars, such as Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz, would argue that states, driven by power and security concerns, may find this strategy beneficial in the immediate context (Morgenthau 1948; Waltz 1979). However, as seen with US support for the Mujahideen, this tactic can lead to destabilization and blowback, creating security threats for the sponsor in the future.

The effectiveness of state-sponsored terrorism is further constrained by the shifting dynamics of global security and growing international pressure. As constructivist theories suggest, the evolving norms around terrorism and state sovereignty, as well as the increasing global emphasis on human rights and stability, play a significant role in how these actions are perceived and countered. The rise of coordinated counter-terrorism measures and international sanctions has increased the costs of sponsoring terrorist groups, challenging the long-term utility of this strategy. Moreover, international organizations like the United Nations and the global coalition against terrorism have made it increasingly difficult for states to act with impunity in sponsoring non-state actors (Collins 2014; Heupel 2013).

Looking ahead, the role of state-sponsored terrorism in proxy wars will likely evolve as international relations continue to shift and new security threats emerge. The realist pursuit of power and influence may still drive states to support non-state actors in regions where geopolitical competition remains intense, such as the Middle East and South Asia (Waltz 1979). However, the growing sophistication of global counter-terrorism measures and the increased ability of states to detect and expose covert sponsorship may reduce the efficacy of this approach. Additionally, constructivist insights into how evolving norms and global cooperation shape state behavior suggest that alternative methods, such as cyber warfare or economic leverage, may increasingly replace traditional terrorist proxies as states adapt to these new challenges.

In conclusion, while realism explains the initial appeal of state-sponsored terrorism for achieving short-term geopolitical objectives, constructivism and asymmetrical warfare theories provide a deeper understanding of the long-term consequences and limitations of this strategy. The evolving dynamics of global security and counter-terrorism efforts suggest that states may need to reconsider their reliance on terrorist groups as proxies in future conflicts. As international norms and cooperation continue to strengthen, the strategic utility of state-sponsored terrorism will likely diminish, pushing states to seek alternative, less risky means of pursuing their interests.

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