

**Wingman in Bombing:  
State Support to Nonstate Actors and Drone Strikes to Erode the Power Base<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract**

What explains the variation in weaponized drone strikes among nonstate actors? Specifically, why are some groups capable of launching audacious and relentless power-base-erosion strikes deep inside the metropole of a target state, while others remain confined to skirmishes along the battlefronts? This paper argues that external support from a state actor is likely to be a determining factor. A nuanced examination of air power theory, proliferation of drones, and state support to rebels literature demonstrates that sponsor states - particularly those engaged in a balance-of-power rivalry or possessing a conflict history with the target state - have strong incentives to empower a nonstate actor to conduct power-base-erosion attacks. The analysis also finds that a group's longevity and the regime type of the target state influence the strategic calculus behind such strikes. These statistically significant findings introduce new explanatory factors, contributing to the emerging empirical literature on drone warfare.

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## Introduction

What explains the variation in weaponized drone strikes among nonstate actors? Specifically, what enables some groups to conduct audacious and relentless power-base-erosion strikes deep inside the metropole of a target state, while others cannot? This paper argues that external support from a state actor engaged in a balance of power rivalry or conflict history with the target state is more likely to empower a nonstate actor to conduct power-base-erosion drone strikes. Alongside the sponsor state's security aspirations, the nonstate actor's expectations for weapons, materiel, and financing further embolden it to undertake daring strikes deep inside the adversary's territory. In this context, my enemy's enemy becomes my friend.

The power-base-erosion strategy threatens the adversary regime's relationship with its power base. It entails targeting important backers of a regime, targeting the assets of the elites, destroying backers' personal property, and otherwise placing pressure on key supporters. Such strikes may turn elites against a regime or foster concern among decision makers. A conventional air power example is NATO's 1999 air campaign in Yugoslavia - Operation Allied Force - during which Slobodan Milošević ultimately agreed to sign the peace terms after NATO intensified its strikes against assets linked to the regime's elites (Allen and Vincent 2011; Olsen 2010).

There is distinct variation in nonstate actors' weaponized drone employment: some groups strike deep inside enemy territory, while others remain confined to border skirmishes. An illustration from a nonstate perspective is that between 2016 and 2023, the Houthis launched 125 drone attacks against politically, economically, and militarily sensitive targets in the interior of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (Nevola 2023; "ACLED" 2023) - despite a profound power asymmetry. These sustained strikes imposed significant political costs on Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, ultimately pressuring them to seek a negotiated peace (Nevola 2023). By contrast, ISIS conducted only 15 drone strikes, largely limited to battlefield zones against coalition forces in Iraq and Syria, and was ultimately defeated by U.S.-led and Russian military campaigns in 2019 (Haugstvedt 2021).

A key distinction between Houthis and ISIS is the state sponsor. Iran provided the Houthis with advanced loitering munitions, training, and expertise, while ISIS lacked comparable state

sponsorship (“UCDP - Uppsala Conflict Data Program” 2023). If so, the question becomes whether state support serves as the decisive enabler for nonstate actors to conduct audacious power-base-erosion drone strikes deep inside a target state’s metropole.

Contrary to prevailing realities in the international security landscape, events similar to those experienced by Saudi Arabia are often treated as anomalies rather than analytically meaningful cases (Doctor and Walsh 2021). Much of the scholarship remains overwhelmingly skewed toward the claim that drone proliferation among nonstate actors is primarily driven by lateral networks among ideological brethren (Chávez and Swed 2023a; 2021a) and access to commercial marketplaces, with effects largely confined to battlefield boundaries (Doctor and Walsh 2021; Haugstvedt and Jacobsen 2022). While the use of commercially available drones may originate from lateral networks, access to commercial markets, and group-level goals, deploying long-range, high-yield military-grade loitering munitions, which are necessary for power-base-erosion strikes, largely depends on the preferences and capabilities of the sponsoring state.

Building on concepts from airpower theory, the literature on nonstate actors’ use of drones, and scholarship on state support to rebel groups, this paper theorizes why some nonstate actors can conduct power-base-erosion attacks while others cannot. Based on the literature, this study hypothesizes that external support from a state actor is more likely to enable a nonstate group to conduct power-base-erosion strikes than other commonly cited factors such as lateral networking with peer organizations, access to the commercial drone market, or ideological affinities within the sponsor–group–target triad.

A time-series cross-sectional dataset with a count dependent variable representing the number of drone attacks per year-month, analyzed using a negative binomial model, provides partial support for this expectation. While the strategic interest of security-seeking states shows a positive and statistically significant effect - indicating that such states are more inclined to empower rebels - the expectations of nonstate actors for resources and autonomy display a negative association with erosion strikes. The empirical results further suggest that a group’s age and the regime type of the target state also shape the calculus behind adopting power-base-erosion strategies. Overall, these findings complement the drone warfare literature by identifying an underexamined determinant -

state support - that offers a more nuanced explanation for variation in nonstate actors' employment of long-range coercive drone attacks.

The paper first reviews the literature on air power, nonstate actors' drone employment, and state support for rebel groups to develop a coherent theoretical framework. It then presents a research design tailored to this framework and conducts an empirical analysis to test the proposed expectations. Finally, the paper discusses the results and concludes with the broader policy implications and directions for future research.

## **Air Power Theory and Power-Base-Erosion Strategy**

From an air power theory perspective, there are four primary strategies in aerial warfare. The first coercive air strategy is increasing the cost of war through attacks on the broad population designed to damage to the country as a whole (Douhet and Ferrari 2019; Clodfelter 2011), which Pape (1996) call punishment strategy. The objective of punishment is to incite unrest and to weaken national resolve (Byman and Waxman 2002), and the resulting social and economic disruption would lead different segments of the population to revolt, overthrowing the ruling elites and foreign policy change (Pape 1996).

The second coercive air strategy is denial, which is defined as threatening the adversary with defeat or otherwise preventing it from achieving its military objectives (Byman and Waxman 2002; Pape 1996; Warden 1998; Mueller 1998). According to Pape (1996), denial strategies seek to thwart the enemy's military efforts to seize or holding its territorial objectives, compelling concessions to avoid futile expenditures of future resources. However, denial is a conditional term where the interpretation depends on the context of high-stakes conflicts such as territorial sovereignty with an ongoing ground campaign (Slessor 1936; Pape 1996).

Decapitation or threats to the leadership's physical security are the third strategy. They involve personal threats such as assassination or the threat of harm to the leadership itself, aiming for a change in leadership that would adopt a more conciliatory policy or, in the case of a threat of decapitation, to intimidate enemy leaders into making concessions (Warden 1998; Byman and Waxman 2002)<sup>2</sup>. While decapitation focuses on inflicting physical harm on enemy leadership, power-base-erosion exploits the leader's inherent desire to maintain political incumbency (Byman and Waxman 2002). In this strategy, coercers seek to induce concessions by threatening to undermine the adversary's leadership support within its power base (Byman and Waxman 2002).

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<sup>2</sup> Decapitation is a direct threat to the decision makers themselves, rather than manipulating the fortunes of others in the hope of moving the decision makers' policy preference (Byman & Waxman 2002). These counter leadership raids also cause little collateral damage if intelligence about the targets is right.

From the perspective of a nonstate attacker as a rational actor, exploiting a regime's power base and incumbency vulnerabilities is likely to offer greater returns than alternative strategies. Nonstate actors generally lack the capacity to induce mass unrest through sustained industrial bombing, as envisioned by punishment strategies, and they are unable to conduct conventional operations sufficient to deny a state military victory. Despite the optimism of some proponents (Warden 1998; Olsen 2010), skeptics question the effectiveness of decapitation: physically targeting leaders is challenging due to their protective measures and dispersion, and it remains unclear whether removing a leader reliably produces systemic collapse or strategic paralysis in the adversary.

Conversely, striking the metropole - attacking installations prized by leaders or the selectorate - is well within the present capabilities of some emboldened nonstate actors. In democratic systems, core constituencies often include elected representatives of the ruling party, influential civic leaders, and opinion entrepreneurs who shape public sentiment (Byman et al. 1999). By contrast, in autocratic regimes, the power base typically comprises the military, internal security apparatus, dominant tribes, or key ethnic groups whose control over coercion, patronage, and cooperation underpins regime stability. By targeting or threatening assets valued by these constituencies, coercers seek to fracture the cohesion of the leadership's support network, thereby increasing internal pressure on the regime to modify its behavior (Byman and Waxman 2002)<sup>3</sup>.

State militaries, including those of major powers, are finding it increasingly difficult to defend against small, slow, low-flying drones because such platforms often present a faint or no radar signature. Even multi-million-dollar, sophisticated air defense systems (for example, U.S. Patriot batteries or Russia's S-400) can struggle to detect and intercept these small drones. On November 13, 2024, Hezbollah reportedly struck an Israeli military headquarters in central Tel Aviv with drones<sup>4</sup> despite the city's layered air-defense architecture - most notably the Iron Dome. Therefore, nonstate actors currently possess the capabilities to impose significant costs on state actors. The

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<sup>3</sup> A leadership's *power base* sustains its hold on authority, yet this very dependence creates a potential *pressure point* that a coercer can exploit to influence adversary decision-making. The same elite groups essential to a regime's survival also possess the capacity to overthrow it. Consequently, threats to the power base can induce concessions either because elites compel the leadership to alter its policies or because the leadership, fearing criticism and possible defection from its core supporters, preemptively concedes to avert greater threats to its incumbency (Byman & Waxman 2002).

<sup>4</sup> [Hezbollah says it launched attack on military base in Tel Aviv, no sirens heard in city | Reuters](#)

statistics - indicating that more than 20% percent of drone attacks between 2017 and 2023 targeted critical infrastructure such as oil refineries, civilian aviation facilities, and military and civilian bureaucracies within the heart of the enemy state (ACLED 2022) - demonstrate that under certain circumstances, nonstate actors are capable of escalating the level of violence to get the big bang for the buck. If so, what empowers this escalation in violence? First, the study examines the factors that enable nonstate actors to acquire drones in the first place

## **Enablers of Nonstate Actors' Drone Acquisition**

The emerging literature on nonstate actors' use of drones extensively examines the factors enabling commercial drones for tactical roles such as ISR and direct support to rebel ground troops by dropping grenades at enemy positions (Doctor & Walsh 2021; Chavez & Swed 2023). However, despite its significance in increasing the probability of achieving their political goals, less attention has been given to the enablers of drones' strategic utility, such as in power-base erosion missions. For instance, the Houthi movement's sustained drone campaign against Saudi Arabia's critical infrastructure - targeting energy facilities, airports, and military installations - appears to have exerted sufficient coercive pressure to prompt a recalibration of Saudi policy, culminating in Riyadh's unilateral peace declaration in April 2023. This begs the question of what enables rebels like the Houthis to weaken the power of an enemy state's leader through erosion attacks, while others cannot?

The existing literature advances several hypotheses to explain the variation in enabling conditions and mission types associated with nonstate actors' adoption of drones. The first emphasizes the role of interorganizational networks among nonstate actors as a primary enabler of drone diffusion. Proponents of the network hypothesis argue that the network access with other militant drone users provides a clear pathway to material transfer, organizational learning, and tactical diffusion (Doctor 2025; Chavez & Swed 2023; Haugstvedt 2021). Such patterns of horizontal diffusion suggest that drone employment is shaped as much by organizational learning as by material access. Studies further suggest that groups learn not only from their allies, but from their adversaries as well (Chavez & Swed 2023). For example, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) reportedly expanded its use of drones against Turkish targets following its exposure to the operational practices of the Islamic State (ISIS) in Iraq in 2016, illustrating how adversarial learning can catalyze technological and institutional adaptation (Özgen and Kurt 2025).

From an organizational capabilities perspective, a second line of argument suggests that larger and more established rebel groups - particularly those that exercise territorial control - are more likely to develop and operationalize drone capabilities (Chavez and Swed 2023). This perspective emphasizes that organizational maturity, human capital, and access to resources collectively

enhance the capacity to experiment with and sustain emerging technologies. Complementing this view, several studies posit that access to global or regional supply chains for advanced drone components significantly shapes both the feasibility and nature of drone employment (Saman 2020; Chavez and Swed 2021; Doctor 2025). The expanded access to civilian commercial drone markets has substantially diversified rebels' operational repertoires - from explosive-laden kinetic strikes against military assets to non-kinetic ISR missions (Saman 2020; Chavez and Swed 2021; Doctor 2025).

Literature in the third hypothesis suggests that a group's resolve and political motivation in shaping the character and intensity of drone employment (Chavez and Swed 2023). According to this perspective, the underlying political objectives - whether ideological transformation, regime change, or territorial consolidation - inform operational choices of nonstate actors. The degree of commitment to these objectives influences how groups calibrate the ferocity of force. Organizations with limited ambitions or moderate resolve tend to confine their operations to localized conflict zones and employ drones in less escalatory roles, such as reconnaissance or tactical support (Doctor, n.d.). In contrast, groups exhibiting strong ideological commitment and higher resolve are more likely to escalate the scope of violence by targeting politically salient or symbolically charged assets, including critical infrastructure within the adversary's territory (Nevola 2023; Chávez and Swed 2021b; 2023b). However, given technological constraints, commercial drones are likely to remain confined to battlefields.

Based on the three hypotheses mentioned above, the discussion about the employment of drones by nonstate actors focuses on their network connections with other rebel groups, organizational capabilities and capacities to exploit the expanding commercial drone markets, and their commitment and resolve in pursuing their political goals. Despite their utility in explaining enablers, one significant limitation is their ability to explain the strategic utility of nonstate actors' drone use. Power-base-erosion strikes require technologically advanced unmanned systems - such as one-way loitering munitions - that remain beyond the technical and financial capabilities of most rebel groups. Consequently, an alliance with a state sponsor is far more likely to equip a nonstate actor with the requisite technology, expertise, and logistical support to conduct such deep-penetration erosion strikes.

A key argument in the literature on asymmetric conflicts concerning the enhancement of nonstate actors' capabilities is the role of state support. Much of the current discourse on the proliferation of drones among nonstate actors focuses on Iranian assistance and the use of explosive-laden commercial drones for deep kinetic strikes (Chávez and Swed 2023b; Doctor, n.d.). Empirical studies, thus far, have been unable to establish a strong correlation between state support and the likelihood of drone adoption by nonstate actors. However, several states beyond Iran - such as those in Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, and Turkey - have also extended material or logistical support to insurgent and rebel groups (Byman 2005; "UCDP - Uppsala Conflict Data Program" 2023). At the same time, many of these groups have diversified their use of weaponized platforms, evolving from improvised quadcopters to more advanced and modified unmanned systems with greater range, payload capacity, and precision. Therefore, a more nuanced analysis is necessary to assess the relationship between state sponsorship and the operational employment of drones by nonstate actors, particularly in missions aimed at eroding the adversary's power base.

## **State Support to Nonstate Actors**

How does state support influence the strategies adopted by nonstate actors - especially why some groups are able to launch audacious and symbolically charged violent strikes deep into the metropole of the enemy state, while others remain restricted to operations confined strictly to the boundaries of the battlefield? The state-support literature argues that it is not merely the provision of external assistance that matters. Rather, it involves a calculus shaped by the conditions under which a state decides to support a nonstate actor, as well as the expectations the nonstate actor holds regarding the type and reliability of support the sponsor can provide (San-Akca 2016). Accordingly, this paper argues that, contrary to explanations centered solely on ideational or domestic factors, a sponsor state motivated by security concerns tied to the balance of power in the international system is more likely to empower a nonstate actor to pursue a power-base-erosion strategy.

### **Sponsor State Decision to Support a Nonstate Actor**

From the sponsor state's perspective, both the international system and domestic politics significantly influence its decision to support a nonstate actor, especially given the illegitimate and often controversial means of violence pursued by such groups. Maoz (2017) argues that the "enemy of my enemy is my friend" – a principle based on power balances, historical ties, regime type, and existing network structures for alliances with nonstate actors. Despite the potential diplomatic costs, political controversies, and unsavory reputational costs, under certain circumstances, states may still choose to extend support to nonstate actors. Scholars note three primary motivations: strategic interests, ideational or ideological affinity, and domestic political incentives (Byman 2005; San-Akca 2016, 2017).

First, from a strategic interest perspective, the decision to support might be based on foreign policy benefits associated with a state backing a rebel group against another state. It could stem from a history of rivalry or conflict between the rebel group's target and the supporter (San-Akca 2016). Given that the external environment influences foreign policy (Waltz 1959, 1979; Morgenthau 1963), in potential international disputes, states are likely to balance power by forming alliances with other states (Waltz 1979; Walt 1985; 1987) or by mobilizing internally through arms buildup (Jervis 1989).

However, the current post–Cold War international system makes it increasingly unlikely that states will pursue balance-of-power objectives through direct war, largely because the final outcome of interstate conflict has become highly uncertain as technological advancements have enhanced nearly every state’s ability to inflict significant harm. Added to this, political leaders face considerable difficulty in justifying war in contemporary liberal societies (Fearon 1994; De Mesquita et al. 1999), which further reduces the likelihood of direct military confrontation. As a result, states are more likely to support nonstate actors as a policy instrument of balancing against their adversaries when they are unable or unwilling to achieve parity through conventional internal or external balancing (San-Akca 2017).

Under these conditions, alliances with nonstate actors become a probable alternative mechanism for projecting influence beyond a sponsor state’s borders - potentially destabilizing or weakening an opponent, altering regime preferences, or shaping the domestic opposition of the target state (Byman 2015). Empirically, San-Akca (2016) finds that a state is more likely to support a rebel group when both share a common adversary. Likewise, rebel groups are more likely to obtain material resources and political backing from states that are adversarial toward their target (San-Akca 2016).

Ideational cooperation is the second reason a state may consider supporting a nonstate actor (Byman 2005; San-Akca 2016, 2017). From a constructivist perspective, foreign policy outcomes are likely to be shaped by a state’s perception of its international environment, which is itself influenced by ideational characteristics (Checkel 1998; Jepperson et al. 1996; Wendt 1992). Based on this logic, states are more likely to extend support to nonstate groups that share similar ideational traits - such as ethnic kinship, religious affinity, or a compatible worldview and belief system (San-Akca 2017).

Byman (2015) further argues that states may use such ideational affinities to export political systems. For example, after the 1979 Iranian Revolution, exporting the Islamic Revolution was highly likely to be a central foreign policy goal for Tehran, a motivation that increased the probability of its cooperation with a wide range of radical nonstate actors around the world. San-Akca (2016) finds that states form alliances with ideologically contiguous rebels, whether or not

the latter targets an adversary. Furthermore, states are less likely to provide support to rebels that target ideationally contiguous states (San-Akca 2016; 2017).

The final selection criterion for a state choosing a nonstate actor is domestic political incentives. From a liberal perspective, democratic institutions present both constraints and opportunities that influence alliances with nonstate actors. The concern for the lives of their citizens constrains leaders of democracies from engaging in interstate conflicts. Therefore, in such situations, leaders may resort to nonstate actors to carry out their bidding against an adversary state. From a democratic peace standpoint, it could be argued that the likelihood of supporting a nonstate actor decreases if both the target and sponsor states are democracies (Maoz & Russett 1993; Beuno de Mesquita et al. 1999; San Akca 2017). Additionally, regimes may want to support oppressed kin (whether ethnic or religious), thereby strengthening their political position at home by associating with a popular cause (Byman 2015).

### **Nonstate Actors' Expectations from the Sponsor State**

The types of support expected by nonstate actors typically include training and operational assistance; money, arms, and logistics; diplomatic backing; organizational support; ideological guidance; and sanctuary. San-Akca (2016) argues that rebel groups select their state sponsors based on a calculus shaped by their desire for resources and autonomy. Among these forms of assistance, sanctuary plays a particularly significant role in shaping the balance between support and autonomy. On the one hand, territorial space within a sponsor state provides operational freedom, secure logistics, and immunity from the target state's retaliation; on the other hand, accepting sanctuary often requires the rebel group to sacrifice some degree of organizational independence.

Byman (2015) notes that although arms tend to draw the most public attention, money is often a more vital and flexible form of assistance. Despite the common assumption that nonstate actors operate cheaply, financial support remains essential for recruitment, organizational development, and the acquisition of technology. Better-funded groups can disseminate more propaganda, pay their fighters higher wages, and expand social welfare activities, all of which enhance their appeal relative to rival groups. For example, Lebanese Hezbollah and the Kashmiri group Hizb-ul-Mujahideen took advantage of financial backing from Iran and Pakistan, respectively, to provide

services to the families of their fighters and build organizational networks that allowed them to outpace competitors and consolidate dominance (Byman 2005).

In summary, the likelihood that a nonstate actor receives state sponsorship is shaped by the opportunities and constraints embedded in both the sponsor state's domestic politics and the broader international system, as well as by the expectations of the nonstate actor itself. For the sponsor state, strategic interests, ideological alignments, and domestic political incentives all influence the decision to provide support. For the nonstate actor, expectations are conditioned by anticipated resources and autonomy. Given these determinants, what factors are most likely to shape a state actor's decision to support a nonstate actor engaged in power-base-erosion strikes?

## **State Support and Power Base Erosion Strategy**

The primary argument of this paper is that state support to nonstate actors is likely to be a key enabling factor that allows some groups - but not others - to conduct power-base-erosion attacks. In particular, the strategic interests of the state sponsor and the provision of financial resources and equipment are likely to give greater impetus for such erosion strikes. In sum, the strategic motivations of the supporting state, combined with the financial and material requirements of the nonstate actor, are central conditions that enable nonstate actors to undertake power-base-erosion attacks.

The first enabling factor, state support for nonstate actors, is shaped by both the choices of the sponsor state and the expectations of the rebel group (San-Akca 2016; 2017; Byman 2005). On the state's side, the strategic interest of the sponsor, ideational affinities, and domestic political incentives constitute the dominant factors that shape the calculus behind supporting a nonstate actor. When considering the specific strategy of conducting power-base-erosion air strikes against a target state, strategic interest is likely to play a more decisive role than the other two factors. Because erosion strikes have the potential to shift or signal changes in the balance of power between the target state and the sponsor, a state motivated by strategic considerations in the international system is more likely - compared to ideationally driven or domestically constrained states - to enable a nonstate actor to carry out such attacks.

San-Akca (2016) finds that the highest level of support occurs when a state and a rebel group share a common adversary and/or exhibit ideational ties, and when the state possesses a relative power advantage vis-à-vis the rebel group. However, ideational motivations, sometimes could impede state support to rebels, especially when there is escalations of violence characteristic with power-base-erosion attacks. For example, a nonstate actor receiving sponsorship from a democracy is more likely to resort to discriminate, restrained, and less violent escalatory methods because democratic institutions impose political, legal, and normative constraints on the sponsor state, which then extend to the supported actor (San-Akca 2017).

Importantly, the motivations underpinning strategically oriented support - such as destabilizing an adversary, toppling a rival regime, or shaping the political behavior of another state - align most closely with the logic of power-base-erosion. This suggests that states pursuing strategic interests are the most likely to enable nonstate actors to conduct erosion strikes. For example is Iran's support for the Houthis against Saudi Arabia in pursuit of a regional balance of power. Saudi Arabia, a regional competitor with a protracted conflict history with Iran, represents a strategic adversary (Nevola 2023). This rivalry has likely contributed to Iran's willingness to provide the Houthis with increasingly advanced drones, such as the Burkan-2H, which have enabled the group to strike civilian, military, and critical infrastructure targets deep inside Saudi territory, including in the capital, Riyadh (Mutschler et al. 2024; Horowitz 2022). Such support illustrates how strategic motivations - more than ideational or domestic factors - can empower nonstate actors to engage in audacious and symbolically significant power-base-erosion attacks.

The second likely factor that enables nonstate actors to conduct power-base-erosion attacks is the provision of material and financial support (San-Akca 2016; 2017; Byman 2005). External assistance to nonstate actors typically includes training and operational support; money, arms, and logistics; diplomatic backing; organizational assistance; ideological guidance; and sanctuary. Although San-Akca (2016) argues that sanctuary is often a decisive factor in a rebel group's selection of a sponsor - given the appeal of territorial space, operational freedom, and protection - it can also constrain a nonstate actor's ability to pursue its preferred strategy.

Sanctuary may reduce strategic autonomy, especially when the sponsor state exerts direct control or when the international system imposes coercive pressure to curtail explicit forms of support. Consequently, in the context of power-base-erosion attacks, nonstate actors are more likely to prioritize financial and material resources over sanctuary, particularly when advanced weaponry such as drones or ballistic missiles is required. This pattern is evident in the cases of the Houthis and Hamas, both of whom receive sustained material assistance - including drones and missiles - from Iran without seeking sanctuary within Iranian territory, enabling them to execute long-range erosion strikes against their respective adversaries.

Thus, the hypothesis is,

**Hypothesis 1:** The strategic interest of the sponsor state and the material expectations of the nonstate actor are most likely to enable power-base-erosion attacks on a target state.

## Research Design

This study intends to examine the factors that enables nonstate actors to conduct power-base-erosion drone strikes. Since the scholarship is yet to publish a replicable data set in the public domain, this study employs a cross-sectional time-series dataset of air attacks carried out by nonstate actors from 2006 to March 2023, aggregating from numerous data sources and organized according to actor, month, year, and the number of events. It consists of data from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) (“GTD Search Results,” n.d.), the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) (ACLED 2022), the Bellingcat project on drone attacks (Bellingcat 2023), UCDP External Support Dataset, Armed Group Dataset, Mapping Militants Project, and web sources. The data encompasses events from all six regions of the world – Africa, the Middle East, Latin America and the Caribbean, Europe and Central Asia, Asia-Pacific, and the United States and Canada.

Accordingly, the dataset consists of 316 events from 2006 to March 2023, and the study utilizes Negative Binomial estimation for the analysis. The unit of analysis for this study is the actor-month-number of events, capturing the number of drone strikes conducted by nonstate actors within a specific target state during a given month of the year.

### Dependent Variable

The dependent variable in this study is *power-base-erosion air strikes*, represented as a count variable (EROSION\_MONTHLY) in the aggregated dataset. A drone attack qualifies as a power-base-erosion strike when it is carried out deep inside the enemy state reflecting Byman and Waxman’s (2002) causal mechanism of threatening a regime’s relationship with its key supporters. Byman and Waxman (2002) further posit that air strikes can eliminate important regime backers, destroy the assets of praetorian guards and elite units, damage the personal property of supporters, and otherwise impose coercive pressure on core constituencies. Such strikes may weaken elite loyalty or heighten anxiety among decision-makers. Schelling (1967) conceptualized this as striking “things people in power value,” thereby inflicting political costs.

In line with these theoretical foundations, the variable captures drone air strikes conducted away from the immediate battlefield and directed at politically sensitive, high-value targets such as military installations, oil facilities, energy-production grids, and major civilian or military airports. To distinguish power-base-erosion from strategic denial, the classification rule follows Slessor (1936) and Pape (1996): a transportation or communication network target - such as a railway hub - counts as a denial target only when there is an ongoing ground campaign depending on such infrastructure (Pape 1996; Horowitz and Reiter 2001). If an active ground operation does not exist, the same strike qualifies as a power-base-erosion attack rather than a denial strike because now the purpose of the strike is to undermine the credibility of the incumbency among its selectorate and the electorate. It counts an average of approximately 0.5 events, with a maximum of 16, a minimum of 0 events, and a standard deviation of 1.77.

TABLE 1. Descriptive Statistics

| Variables                                       | Mean  | Standard<br>Deviation | Minimum | Maximum | Observations |
|-------------------------------------------------|-------|-----------------------|---------|---------|--------------|
| Monthly Power-base-<br>erosion<br>Drone Strikes | .51   | 1.77                  | 0       | 16      | 316          |
| Strategic Sponsor<br>State                      | .53   | .49                   | 0       | 1       | 315          |
| Expectation of<br>Nonstate Actor                | .72   | .44                   | 0       | 1       | 315          |
| Nonstate Actor Age                              | 22.04 | 9.96                  | 4       | 37      | 299          |
| Regime Change                                   | .48   | .50                   | 0       | 1       | 299          |
| Target Regime Type                              | -2.63 | 6.67                  | -9      | 8       | 315          |
| Safe Haven                                      | .36   | .48                   | 0       | 1       | 301          |
| Transnational Ties                              | .92   | .27                   | 0       | 1       | 301          |

## **Independent Variables:**

### **State Support**

State support is represented by two independent variables: the strategic interest of the sponsor state (STRAT\_SPONSOR) and the material expectations of the nonstate actor (EXT\_WMF). The strategic interest variable tests the “enemy of my enemy” assumption developed by Maoz (2007). Strategic interest reflects whether the sponsor state perceives the target state as a security challenge. This variable takes the value of “1” if the potential sponsor and the target state have experienced a militarized dispute within the last five years or a war within the last ten years, and “0” if neither occurred (San-Akca 2016, 2017).

The presence of a conflict history shapes states’ threat perceptions and strategic calculations. States frequently use rebel groups as substitutes to weaken, pressure, or indirectly confront their adversaries. Therefore, conflict history is expected to be instrumental both for the initial decision to support a rebel group and for the level of support provided. Further to conflict history, the STRAT\_SPONSOR variable will take the value of ‘0’ for ideational or domestic incentives support types. Strategic sponsor is a dichotomous variable with a standard deviation of .5, with a mean of .53.

The second independent variable is the expectation of nonstate actors (EXT\_WMF), which captures the weapons (ext\_w), material assistance (ext\_m), and funding (ext\_f) received by nonstate actors, as coded in the UCDP External Support Dataset. These three forms of support are aggregated into a single variable, EXT\_WMF. The variable takes the value “1” if a nonstate actor receives at least one of these types of support during a given actor–nonstate dyad–month–year observation, and “0” if none of them are received.

This variable reflects the argument that nonstate actors receiving weapons, material resources, or financial support are more likely to conduct power-base-erosion strikes, as such forms of assistance enhance their operational capabilities, technological sophistication, and ability to conduct attacks beyond the immediate battlefield. Expectation of sponsor is a dichotomous variable with a standard deviation of .44, with a mean of .72.

## **Control Variables**

Besides the strategic interests of the sponsor state and the expectations of nonstate actors, several additional characteristics are likely to influence a group's ability to carry out power-base-erosion attacks. The maturity of the nonstate actor (AGE) may affect its organizational capacity, operational sophistication, and ability to sustain long-term offensive campaigns. The political regime type of the target state (TGT\_REGIME\_TYPE) can constrain the decision to support, as a democratic sponsor is unlikely to back a nonstate actor against a democratic target state. Transnational ties (TRANSNATIONAL\_TIES) indicate whether a rebel group has ethnic kin or co-ethnic communities in the sponsor or target state, which increases the likelihood of external support. Finally, the presence of a safe haven within the sponsor state's territory (EXT\_L) is another important enabling condition. Access to territorial sanctuary can facilitate recruitment, training, planning, storage, and logistics, but it may also impose constraints on autonomy. Together, these characteristics serve as additional controls that help isolate the effects of strategic interests and material expectations on the likelihood of nonstate actors initiating power-base-erosion attacks.

### ***Rebel Group Age***

The duration of a rebel group (AGE) must be controlled for to increase the robustness of the empirical findings. Groups that remain active for longer periods have a higher potential to attract state sponsors, who may be more willing to accept the risks of retaliation and provide higher levels of support. As the opportunity window expands, the likelihood that a rebel group will receive backing from a state increases. Rebel group age is measured using the NAS dataset and captures the total number of consecutive years a rebel group has remained active (San-Akca 2016; Chavez and Swed 2023).

### ***Regime Change***

Regime change (REGIME\_CHANGE) indicates that the nonstate actor's objective is to orchestrate a change in national power or authority within the area of its operation (Chavez and Swed 2023). Nonstate actors may aspire to overthrow incumbent regimes when doing so aligns with their political objectives. Groups with sufficient organizational capacity and access to advanced technologies - such as drones - are better positioned to project force beyond the battlefield and

challenge the state's political core. These capabilities enable rebels to escalate beyond localized violence and target the regime's key supporters, infrastructure, and symbols of authority, thereby weakening its power base. When such actors also receive material or strategic external support, the perceived feasibility of regime change increases because the balance of power tilts further in their favor. Thus, aspirations for regime change emerge when nonstate actors combine internal capacity with external backing that enables coercive strategies aimed directly at the state's political center.

### **Regime Type of the *Target State***

Representing the argument that domestic constraints and opportunities may also influence a state's decision to provide support, the level of democracy in a potential target state (TARGET\_REGIME\_TYPE) is likely to shape its willingness to back a nonstate actor (San-Akca 2016, 2017). A democratic sponsor state is unlikely to ally with a nonstate actor targeting another democracy. This reflects the political, normative, and institutional limitations democratic leaders face when considering cooperation with violent nonstate entities. To operationalize this variable, the Polity IV "Polity2" scores are used: states scoring above +6 are categorized as democracies, whereas those scoring +6 or below are coded as non-democracies.

### ***Sanctuary to Nonstate Actor***

Sanctuary (EXT\_L) captures whether the nonstate actor has access to territorial sanctuary within the sponsor state's borders, operationalized as a binary variable coded '1' when the NAS dataset identifies that the group was granted territorial access and '0' otherwise.

### ***Transnational Ties***

Representing the ideation argument (Byman 2015, San-Akca 2016, 2017), transnational ethnic kin (TRANSNATIONAL\_TIES), particularly when present inside the borders of a potential sponsor state, often contribute to the diffusion of ethnic conflict across state boundaries by encouraging support for rebel groups operating in neighboring states (San-Akca 2016). Accordingly, states that host ethnic kin of a nonstate actor within their territory are more likely to provide support to that group. This is measured as a binary variable coded as "1" if transnational representation exists according to the EPR dataset, and "0" otherwise.

## Empirical Analysis and Discussion

Table 2 shows the findings on the relationship between state support and the frequency of power-base-erosion strikes carried out by nonstate actors' drone attacks within a month. Model 1, the base model, includes the dependent variable (EROSION\_MONTHLY) and the independent variable (STRAT\_SPONSOR). Model 2 is the full model, and the Wald chi-square is reported but not numerically estimated, likely due to the small number of clusters (9 dyads) and the use of cluster-robust standard errors. The model reports a Pseudo  $R^2$  of 0.0935, indicating that about 9.35% of the variation in EROSION\_MONTHLY (the count of monthly power-base-erosion strikes) is explained by the predictors in the model. In nonlinear count models, especially with rare events like drone-based erosion strikes, Pseudo  $R^2$  values tend to be lower than in linear models. This partially supports hypothesis 1, which states that the strategic interest of the sponsor state and the material expectations of the nonstate actor are most likely to facilitate power-base-erosion attacks on a target state.

Model 1 evaluates the relationship between external support and the likelihood of nonstate actors conducting power-base-erosion drone strikes, using two core predictors: strategic interest of the sponsor state (STRAT\_SPONSOR) and the expectations of the nonstate actor (EXT\_WMF). The results partially support the theoretical expectations.

The coefficient for Strategic Sponsor State is positive and statistically significant at 5% level, indicating that nonstate actors who are supported by a state that has strategic interests - especially the "enemy of my enemy" dynamic - are significantly more likely to conduct power-base-erosion strikes. This aligns directly with the theoretical argument that states driven by balance of power competition are more willing to empower rebels with capabilities needed for deep strikes into an adversary's interior. This finding reinforces the proposition that strategic interest is a key enabling condition for erosion attacks, particularly because these strikes advance the sponsor state's goal of weakening or destabilizing a rival.

TABLE 2 – Negative Binomial Estimate for Power Base Erosion

| Variables                             | Model 1<br>or base model | Model 2<br>or full model |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
|                                       | (Robust Standard Error)  | (Robust Standard Error)  |
| Strategic Sponsor State               | 1.564**<br>(.723)        | 1.8380**<br>(.75956)     |
| Expectations of the<br>Nonstate Actor | -0.070<br>(.497)         | -0.9160<br>(.6259)       |
| Nonstate Actor Age                    |                          | .0817***<br>(.0226)      |
| Regime Change                         |                          | -0.3383***<br>(.1279)    |
| Target Regime Type                    |                          | -.0725*<br>(.03733)      |
| Constant                              | 1.705***<br>(.497)       | -3.38971***<br>(.7488)   |
| α                                     | 5.657<br>(2.531)         | 3.6462                   |
| N                                     | 315                      | 299                      |
| Log-likelihood                        | -248.27                  | -228.0433                |

\*p<0.10, \*\* p<0.05, \*\*\* p<0.01,

In contrast, Expectations of the Nonstate Actor (EXT\_WMF) - a binary measure of receiving weapons, materiel, or funding - has a negative but statistically insignificant coefficient. This suggests that material support alone, independent of the sponsor's strategic motivations, does not consistently increase the likelihood of erosion attacks. The insignificance aligns with the earlier theoretical claim that material support must be interpreted through the sponsor state's underlying

motives. Material support without strategic alignment does not necessarily translate into the transfer of advanced systems, training, or permissive operational environments that erosion attacks require. Thus, Model 1 confirms the primacy of state strategic interest over generic material flow.

The model's constant is positive and significant, reflecting the baseline probability of erosion strikes when no strategic or material support is present. Overall, Model 1 provides initial evidence that strategic interest - not material support alone - is the primary predictor of erosion attack behavior.

Model 2 incorporates the full set of theoretical predictors: strategic sponsor (STRAT\_SPONSOR), nonstate actor expectations (EXT\_WMF), rebel age (AGE), regime change indicator (REG\_CHANGE), and target regime type (TGT\_REG\_TYPE). The expanded model provides a more nuanced picture.

Consistent with theoretical expectations, Strategic Sponsor State again shows a positive and statistically significant effect at 5% level. This robust finding across both models strongly supports the argument that sponsor states with strategic motivations - particularly rivalry, balancing, and security-driven objectives - are most likely to empower nonstate actors to launch deep, high-impact strikes against an adversary's power base. The significance reinforces primary hypothesis that strategic sponsorship is likely to be the strongest enabler of erosion attacks.

The variable Expectations of the Nonstate Actor (EXT\_WMF) remains negative and statistically insignificant. This further supports the argument that material support without a strategic alignment does not independently drive erosion attacks. Nonstate actors may receive weapons or funding, but unless the sponsor's strategic goals align with the objectives of destabilizing the adversary's interior, the material support is unlikely to include advanced systems like long-range drones.

The variable Age is positive and highly significant at 1%. This reflects the theory that older, more organizationally mature groups are more capable of developing the logistical, technological, and planning capacities required for high-risk erosion operations. Experienced organizations are more adept at cultivating state sponsors, managing cross-border networks, and sustaining long-term

military campaigns - all of which increase the likelihood of adopting advanced strategies like deep-strike drone operations.

Unexpectedly, Regime Change (REG\_CHANGE) yields a negative and statistically significant coefficient at the 1% level. This suggests that when the target state experiences leadership turnover, the likelihood of erosion attacks decreases. A plausible theoretical interpretation is that the power dynamics between the sponsor state and the nonstate actor may act as an intervening variable, calling for more nuanced examination of this phenomenon.

The variable Target Regime Type (TGT\_REG\_TYPE) is negative and marginally significant at the 10% level, indicating that higher levels of democracy are associated with a reduced likelihood of experiencing power-base-erosion strikes. This finding is broadly consistent with institutional explanations from the democratic peace literature, which posit that democracies possess stronger mechanisms of accountability and are generally perceived as more resolved in the face of external aggression - particularly when the aggressor is an autocratic actor. Because democratic leaders are vulnerable to audience costs if they appear weak or fail to respond to threats, potential adversaries may anticipate firm retaliation and therefore refrain from escalating to deep-penetration erosion strikes.

Overall, Model 2 supports the central theoretical claim: strategic sponsorship is the primary enabler of power-base-erosion attacks, with organizational maturity reinforcing this effect. Material support, without strategic alignment, does not increase erosion behavior. Political conditions inside the target state also condition the feasibility and payoff of erosion strategies.

## Conclusion

This paper examined the conditions under which some nonstate actors are able to conduct power-base-erosion drone strikes while others are not. Drawing on insights from the air power literature, emerging scholarship on drone use, and research on state support for rebel groups, the study finds that the main factor determining a group's ability to carry out deep-strike erosion attacks is external support from a state sponsor. While the use of commercially available drones may originate from lateral networks, access to commercial markets, and group-level goals, deploying long-range, high-yield military-grade loitering munitions largely depends on the preferences and capabilities of the sponsoring state. States with security-driven motives - especially those involved in previous or ongoing conflicts with the nonstate actor's target state - are significantly more likely to enable rebels to execute politically impactful strikes deep within an adversary's territory. Additionally, the analysis shows that a group's longevity and the regime type of the target state further influence the strategic calculus behind such erosion attacks. These findings are statistically significant and introduce new explanations to the variables, providing a detailed contribution to the growing empirical literature on drone warfare.

These determinations present important policy and future research implications. From a policy standpoint, three issues stand out for international security. First, despite the renewed focus on great-power competition and waning interest in global war on terror, asymmetric conflicts - especially insurgencies and terrorism - are unlikely to diminish and may intensify, as nonstate actors become instruments of interstate balance-of-power rivalries. Given that states facing security constraints are often unwilling or unable to resolve disputes through direct military confrontation, they may increasingly rely on nonstate actors to pursue their foreign-policy objectives. In such contexts, rebels with state sponsorship are more likely than unsupported groups to escalate and intensify violence, as patron states empower them to conduct deep power-base-erosion strikes inside the territory of a target state in an effort to raise its political and military costs.

The second fact is that policy discussion on the proliferation of drones among nonstate actors should take both endogenous and exogenous factors into account. The proliferation during the primary stages may be influenced by endogenous factors such as resolve, organizational

capacity, and the actor's access to markets and networks; however, as the conflict escalates, it is likely to spill beyond the confines of a single geography and involve more state actors. The transnational nature of the conflict likely to change the character and the intensity of a conflict. A state infested with rebel drone strikes within the territorial bounds is likely to have significant economic, political, and social implications due to its inability to provide national security, a public good.

The third policy factor is that nonstate actor drone warfare is highly likely to persist, requiring states to integrate counter-drone strategies into their national security policies and allocate appropriate personnel, resources, and funding. For rebels, drones offer strong incentives in both human and material terms: they allow groups to wage low-cost warfare against a target state while avoiding the human and reputational costs once associated with suicide bombers. Drone operations eliminate the need for expendable fighters and simultaneously amplify propaganda value through audacious, attention-grabbing strikes. Current trends already show a sharp decline in human suicide attacks, underscoring this shift. While drone attacks have risen from 55 in 2017 to 603 in 2023, human-based suicide attacks have sharply declined from 368 in 2017 to just 31 in 2023, signaling a broader strategic shift toward aerial platforms (“GTD Search Results” 2023).

Materially, drones provide a “poor man’s air force,” lowering entry costs to exploiting the air domain and probably leveling the playing fields. Moreover, the asymmetry between inexpensive drones and costly air-defense systems imposes a disproportionate financial burden on the target state. Such asymmetry may ultimately compel targeted governments into making unfavorable concessions due to the heightened political risks that sustained, deep-strike drone attacks pose to incumbents.

In terms of future research, several avenues stand out as both necessary and promising. Advancing this field will require the development of more comprehensive datasets, increased empirical studies, and stronger collaboration between practitioners and academic researchers. Despite the growing role of drones not only as military tools but also as a political and foreign policy instrument, empirical scholarship on drone warfare - whether interstate or intrastate - remains in its infancy. For example, there’s only a handful of empirical research on drone warfare.

As with conventional air power research, drone studies need systematic analyses that move beyond war-and-peace outcomes to examine the social, political, and economic dynamics shaping drone use. One of the most significant obstacles to such progress is the lack of robust, reliable datasets. Although drones may not represent a paradigm shift comparable to major historical innovations in warfare, recent cases - such as the Gulf states' vulnerability to Houthi drone attacks - demonstrate their undeniable coercive utility. Finally, meaningful progress in this domain will depend on sustained collaboration between scholars and practitioners, whose combined expertise is essential for building a rigorous and policy-relevant body of drone research.

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