



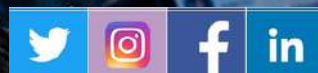
CENJOWS
ISSUE BRIEF

VOL.10
ISSUE.79

SYRIA: PROXY BATTLEFIELDS AND THE NORMALISATION OF HYBRID WARFARE

MS ANSHIKA GUPTA

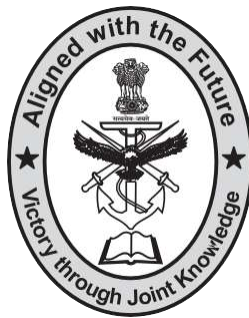
www.cenjows.in



CENJOWS ISSUE BRIEF

Volume 10 Issue 79

OCT 2026



CENJOWS **(Established: 2007)**

Room No 301, B-2 Wing, 3rd Floor
Pt Deendayal Antyodaya Bhawan,
CGO Complex, Lodhi Road
New Delhi –110003 (INDIA)

Telephone Nos: 011-24364881,
24366485

Fax: 011-24366484

Website: www.cenjows.in

E-mail: cenjows@cenjows.in

ABOUT US

CENJOWS was raised in 2007 as an independent think tank, registered under the Societies Registration Act, 1860. This aims to promote Jointness as a synergistic enabler for the growth of Comprehensive National Power and provide alternatives in all dimensions of its applications through focused research and debate.

Starting Year : 2017

Year of Publication : 2026

Frequency : Weekly

Language : English

Publisher : Maj Gen (Dr) Ashok Kumar, VSM (Retd) Director
General, CENJOWS

301, B-2 Wing, 3rd Floor

Pt. Deendayal Antyodaya Bhawan CGO Complex,
Lodhi Road
New Delhi-110003

Editor : Maj Gen (Dr) Ashok Kumar, VSM (Retd) (dg@cenjows.in)

Deputy Editor : Dr Ulupi Borah, Distinguished Fellow
(distinguishedfellow1@cenjows.in)

Editorial Board :

Brig K Ranjeev Singh, YSM (ddg@cenjows.in)

Col Ajay Kumar Rajak, SM
(secy@cenjows.in)

Gp Capt Ashish Kumar Gupta (Retd)

(seniorfellow2@cenjows.in)

Dr Ulupi Borah, Distinguished Fellow
(distinguishedfellow1@cenjows.in)

Dr Monojit Das, Senior Fellow, PRO
(monojit.das@cenjows.in)

301, B-2 Wing, 3rd Floor

Pt. Deendayal Antyodaya Bhawan

CGO Complex, Lodhi Road

New Delhi-110003

Publication Head : Ms Vaibhavi Katal

All correspondence may be addressed to:

Editor
Centre for Joint Warfare Studies (CENJOWS) 301, B-2 Wing, 3rd
Floor
Pt Deendayal Antyodaya Bhawan CGO Complex,
Lodhi Road
New Delhi-110003
Telephone: (91-11) 24366485/Telefax: (91-11) 24366484 e-mails:
cenjows@cenjows.in / cenjows@yahoo.com Website: <http://cenjows.in>

© Centre for Joint Warfare Studies

Price: Rs 300/- INR

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system without permission from the DG, CENJOWS, New Delhi.

SYRIA: PROXY BATTLEFIELDS AND THE NORMALISATION OF HYBRID WARFARE

CONTENTS

Title	Page No
Abstract	5
Introduction	6
The Syrian Conflict as a Proxy Battlefield: Genesis and Evolution	7
Mapping the Proxy Ecosystem	8
Hybrid Warfare as Doctrine and Practice in the Syrian Theatre	10
Normalisation: Syria as a Template for Contemporary Conflict	12
Urban Warfare in the Syrian Theatre: Aleppo, Ghouta, and Raqqa	13
Indian Focus I: Implications for Counter-Insurgency Doctrine	14
Indian Focus II: Urban Warfare Preparedness	16
Policy Recommendations	18
Conclusion	19
References	21



CENJOWS

Syria: Proxy Battlefields and the Normalisation of Hybrid Warfare



Ms Anshika Gupta is a Research Assistant at CENJOWS

Abstract

The Syrian conflict has become the paradigmatic case of contemporary proxy warfare, in which the United States, Iran, Russia, and Turkey each built, financed, and directed local militias to pursue strategic objectives while avoiding direct confrontation with one another. The paper argues that the resulting combination of proxy sponsorship, deniable private military deployment, drone-enabled irregular combat, and large-scale urban siege warfare has diffused well beyond Syria, becoming a normalised template rather than a regional aberration. It traces the genesis of Syria's proxy ecosystem, situates it within the hybrid and grey-zone warfare literature, and examines the conflict's urban battles in detail. It then draws specific, actionable implications for India's counter-terrorism doctrine and urban warfare preparedness, arguing that India's long experience of externally sponsored proxy conflict positions it to draw targeted lessons regarding sponsorship interdiction, counter-drone readiness, and

institutionalised urban combat doctrine for sub-conventional and counter-terrorism operations.

Keywords: Syria; Proxy War; Hybrid War; Grey-Zone Conflict; Militias; Counterterrorism; Sub-Conventional Warfare; Urban Warfare; India

Introduction

The Syrian civil war, which began as a domestic uprising against the government of Bashar al-Assad in March 2011, developed over the following decade into one of the most internationalised conflicts of the twenty-first century. By the time the Assad government collapsed in December 2024, the war had drawn in the United States, Russia, Iran, Turkey, Israel, and the Gulf states, each sponsoring, arming, or directing local partners rather than relying solely on its own uniformed forces.¹ This pattern was not incidental. It reflected a strategic logic, shared across sponsors of otherwise opposed persuasions, that indirect intervention through local militias could achieve significant strategic effect while limiting cost, casualties, and the political liability of direct attribution.²

This paper forms part of a wider volume examining how conflicts shaped substantially by United States intervention have produced strategic ripples reaching India's own security environment. Syria is a central case within that frame. Washington's evolving posture from support to select opposition factions, to the “by, with, and through” partnership with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) against the Islamic State (ISIS), to the congressionally authorised Train and Equip programme, and now to calibrated engagement with Syria's transitional government did not unfold in isolation. It interacted continuously with, and provoked countermoves from, Iran's regional militia network, Russia's expeditionary intervention, and Turkey's cross-border proxy architecture.³ The resulting contest produced a repeatable, exportable combination of proxy militias, private military contractors, drone warfare, and urban siege operations that has since reappeared, in varying configurations, in Libya, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Ukraine. For India, a country that has itself endured more than three decades of externally sponsored proxy conflict in Jammu and Kashmir, Syria is less a distant war than a diagnostic mirror.

While earlier Middle Eastern conflicts exhibited elements of indirect or unconventional combat, Syria is analytically distinctive from Lebanon, Iraq and the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war due to its unprecedented multi-polar proxy saturation, concurrent external major-power interventions and operational tech-hybridity. Unlike the Lebanese Civil War, which was primarily a regional state collapse marked by localised proxy militias⁴, or the 2003 Iraq War, which was defined by a single foreign hegemon's regime-change occupation and subsequent counter insurgency⁵, Syria featured four major external powers: the United States, Russia, Iran and Turkey, simultaneously constructing and manoeuvring distinct proxy architectures within the same territorial space without descending into direct interstate war.⁶ Furthermore, whereas the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah conflict served as the foundational prototype for a single non-state actor employing hybrid capabilities against a state military⁷, Syria normalised these hybrid dynamics across a multi-decade, multi-sponsor ecosystem. In Syria, private military contractors, low-cost weaponised drones, transnational sectarian mobilisation, and urban siege warfare were integrated simultaneously across multiple competing state-proxy dynamics.⁸ Syria thus evolved beyond a regional civil war or bilateral proxy fight into a normalised, exportable laboratory for contemporary grey-zone war.

The Syrian Conflict as a Proxy Battlefield: Genesis and Evolution

Syria's transformation from domestic uprising into a multi-sponsor proxy battlefield occurred in discernible phases. The protests of March 2011, part of the broader regional wave of unrest, were met with a coercive state response that accelerated the opposition's militarisation through 2012 and 2013.⁹ As the Assad government's conventional forces came under strain, Iran moved to shore up its ally through the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its Lebanese partner, Hezbollah, marking the first major instance of organised external militia deployment in the conflict.¹⁰

The 2013-2015 period saw the conflict fragment further with the rise of ISIS, which exploited the collapse of state authority across the Syria-Iraq border to seize substantial territory. ISIS's emergence catalysed a second wave of external involvement: a United States-led international coalition assembled to counter the group, working increasingly through the Kurdish-led SDF rather than through direct ground deployment.¹¹ Russia's direct military intervention in September 2015,

combined with the deployment of the nominally private Wagner Group, tipped the balance decisively in the Assad government's favour and opened the conflict's most territorially static phase.¹²

Turkey, meanwhile, pursued its own proxy strategy from 2016, using cross-border operations to build a centralised force, the Syrian National Army (SNA), out of what had been a fragmented armed opposition, with the aim of containing Kurdish territorial consolidation and extending Turkish influence along its southern border.¹³ By 2018 the conflict had settled into a prolonged stalemate: the Assad government controlling most of the country, Turkish-backed forces holding a northern buffer, the SDF administering the northeast under a US security umbrella, and an Idlib enclave held by the Islamist faction Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).

This equilibrium ended abruptly in late November and early December 2024, when an HTS-led offensive advanced with unexpected speed, capturing Aleppo and Hama before entering Damascus; the Assad government collapsed on 8 December 2024.¹⁴ Neither Russia nor Iran intervened to preserve their long-standing client, constrained respectively by the war in Ukraine and by the cumulative degradation of Tehran's regional position.¹⁵ Ahmed al-Sharaa, HTS's leader, was installed as Syria's interim president in January 2025 and has since presided over a fragile transition marked by recurring sectarian violence in the Alawite-majority coastal region and in the Druze-majority Suwayda, an unresolved relationship with the SDF, and continuing Turkish, Russian, and Israeli military presence on Syrian soil.¹⁶ Syria's proxy ecosystem, in short, has outlived the regime around which it was originally organised, and continues to shape the country's post-war trajectory.

Mapping the Proxy Ecosystem

Understanding Syria's contribution to the normalisation of hybrid warfare requires examining, in turn, the distinct proxy models each external sponsor constructed. All four principal sponsors shared an interest in avoiding direct confrontation with one another, yet each built a materially different kind of proxy relationship, reflecting different strategic cultures, risk tolerances, and objectives.

- **Iran's Forward-Defence Model**

Iran's approach extended a long-standing doctrine of "forward defence", in which threats are absorbed through proxy depth rather than confronted on Iranian soil.¹⁷ Beyond Hezbollah, the IRGC-Quds Force organised and commanded transnational Shia militias recruited from vulnerable migrant populations: the Liwa Fatemiyoun, composed principally of Afghan Hazara Shia drawn from Iran's undocumented Afghan population, and the smaller Liwa Zainabiyoun, composed of Pakistani Shia.¹⁸ Both militias, at their peak, fielded several thousand fighters, were trained, armed, and paid by the IRGC, and were formally designated by the United States as terrorist organisations. This model, mobilising transnational sectarian identity into disposable, deniable manpower under a single external command, proved a scalable innovation whose remnants dispersed into Iraq following Assad's fall, illustrating how such networks persist independently of the conflict that produced them.¹⁹

- **Russia's Intervention and the Wagner Model**

Russia combined overt airpower with a deniable ground presence supplied through the Wagner Group, a private military company with close ties to the Russian state that first saw major deployment in Syria from 2015.²⁰ Wagner's Syrian operations allowed Moscow to sustain ground combat capability and secure energy-sector concessions without those casualties appearing in official Russian statistics.²¹ The approach offered a template of deniability through commercial camouflage, subsequently exported to Libya, the Central African Republic, and Mali.²²

- **Turkey's Syrian National Army**

Turkey's proxy-building was distinguished by its degree of centralisation. Rather than loosely coordinating with dozens of independent factions, Ankara consolidated some thirty groups that had participated in Operation Euphrates Shield into a unified SNA under a single command structure, providing salaries, training, and equipment in exchange for participation in Turkish operations.²³ This centralised model gave Turkey a force it could deploy flexibly. SNA units

were later mobilised to both Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh, making it an exportable instrument of Turkish foreign policy in its own right.²⁴

- **The United States and the “By, With, and Through” Model**

Washington's approach centred on partnering with the SDF against the ISIS, complemented by a congressionally authorised Train and Equip programme intended to build a vetted, capable Syrian partner force.²⁵ The programme's early iteration, an overt effort to build a new conventional opposition force, produced disappointing results and was substantially reworked after 2015 into support for existing, already-organised local forces such as the SDF, a shift that proved considerably more durable.²⁶ By late 2024, US officials assessed the SDF as capable of independent battalion-level counter-terrorism operations, illustrating both the promise and the multi-year investment the “by, with, and through” model requires.²⁷

- **The ISIS: A Hybrid Quasi-State Actor**

The ISIS deserves separate treatment, since it was not a sponsored proxy but a hybrid actor in its own right, combining territorial governance, conventional-style combined-arms operations, terrorism, and transnational recruitment within a single organisation that was an extension, at greater scale, of the blended-force-type logic that Hoffman's original hybrid warfare framework anticipated.²⁸ Its emergence showed how the vacuum created by competing external interventions could be exploited by a non-state actor capable of behaving simultaneously as an insurgency, a terrorist network, and an aspirant state, holding significant territory for several years before its defeat in the Raqqa campaign.²⁹

Hybrid Warfare as Doctrine and Practice in the Syrian Theatre

While proxy, hybrid, grey-zone and irregular warfare frequently overlap in contemporary conflict, maintaining analytical distinction among them is essential. Proxy warfare is defined by indirect sponsorship; wherein external states utilise non-state or surrogate forces to achieve strategic ends without incurring the costs or liabilities of direct interstate war. Hybrid warfare describes the simultaneous

operational blending of conventional weaponry, irregular guerrilla tactics, terrorism, and criminal activity within a single battlespace. Grey-zone warfare refers to the broader strategic envelope where coercive activities are deliberately calibrated to remain below the threshold of open, conventional military conflict. Finally, irregular warfare denotes the overarching population-centric struggle for legitimacy and control employing non-traditional methods. In Syria, these four modes operated in tandem: sponsors engaged in proxy warfare to maintain grey-zone competition against rival powers, while local actors on the ground deployed hybrid tactics within an irregular combat environment.

The concept of hybrid warfare predates the Syrian conflict. Frank Hoffman's foundational 2007 study defined hybrid wars as those incorporating conventional capabilities, irregular tactics, terrorism, and criminal activity within the same battlespace, often within the same force.³⁰ Hoffman's framework was initially developed with reference to Hezbollah's performance against Israel in 2006, but Syria provided the most sustained real-world demonstration of the concept to date: a conflict in which conventional armour and airpower, irregular militia combat, siege warfare, drone strikes, and information operations were deployed simultaneously, and often by the same actor.

What distinguished Syria was not any single hybrid tactic but the routinisation of the combination. Iran's use of sectarian militias alongside conventional Syrian army formations, Russia's pairing of regular airpower with deniable private contractors, and Turkey's blending of irregular proxy forces with conventional cross-border operations all reflected the same underlying logic: combine force types to maximise strategic effect while minimising the political and material cost of direct, attributable state action.³¹ This logic aligns closely with the broader concept of grey-zone competition, coercive activity that remains deliberately below the threshold that would trigger a conventional military response.³² Syria demonstrated that this logic could organise not only discrete, low-intensity incidents but an entire multi-year, high-intensity war.

Drone warfare exemplified the dynamic. Syria functioned, in the assessment of one detailed non-governmental study, as a genuine laboratory in which state and non-state actors alike tested and refined unmanned systems under real combat conditions.³³

Turkish, Iranian, Russian, and American drones of widely varying sophistication operated simultaneously over Syrian territory, used for reconnaissance, strike, and loitering-munition roles by government forces, opposition militias, and Kurdish forces alike. The platforms and lessons refined in this environment were subsequently exported directly into other conflicts: Turkish Bayraktar systems combat-tested in Syria were deployed to decisive effect in Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh, while Russian reconnaissance drones tested in Syria informed Moscow's approach in Ukraine.³⁴

Therefore, Syria did not merely exhibit hybrid warfare, it normalised it as a template, demonstrating to a wide range of observers that militia sponsorship, deniable private military deployment, and low-cost drone warfare could be combined into a durable, exportable method of contesting territory and influence without triggering direct interstate war. As Andrew Mumford has argued in his foundational study of proxy warfare, indirect intervention allows a benefactor state to pursue strategic objectives while avoiding the domestic political costs of conventional deployment³⁵; Syria shows that this calculation holds even under prolonged, high-intensity conditions and even for sponsors operating under significant economic constraint.

Normalisation: Syria as a Template for Contemporary Conflict

The clearest evidence for Syria's role in normalising hybrid warfare lies in the subsequent diffusion of its constituent tactics to conflicts with no direct connection to the Levant. Three cases illustrate this diffusion with clarity.

First, in Libya, Turkey redeployed elements of its Syrian proxy structure, alongside combat-proven drone systems, in support of the UN-recognised government against forces backed by Russian private contractors, reproducing the Syrian pattern of dual proxy-and-drone competition between the same two external sponsors.³⁶ Second, the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war between Armenia and Azerbaijan featured extensive use of Turkish Bayraktar drones and Israeli loitering munitions, platforms whose operational concepts had been refined in the Syrian theatre, demonstrating to global military observers that inexpensive, exportable drone systems could achieve decisive effect against conventional armoured formations.³⁷ Third, elements of the Syrian toolkit are visible in Russia's invasion of Ukraine: reconnaissance-strike drones combat-tested in Syria, the use of ostensibly private military companies to supplement

regular forces while diffusing accountability, and information operations targeting civilian morale all reappeared, adapted to a different theatre and scale.³⁸

This diffusion pattern demonstrates that the Syrian template is a portable method rather than a regional curiosity. RAND's quantitative research on proxy warfare since 1946 similarly finds that geopolitical competition among major powers is again driving increased recourse to proxy warfare as an instrument of strategic competition, precisely because it has repeatedly proven capable of producing significant strategic effect at a fraction of the cost and risk of conventional confrontation.³⁹ For India, situated between two neighbours with established records of employing proxies and grey-zone coercion, the normalisation of this template in its wider neighbourhood is not an abstract trend but a proximate planning assumption.

Urban Warfare in the Syrian Theatre: Aleppo, Ghouta, and Raqqa

If proxy militias and drones represent the hybrid template's force-generation dimension, Syria's urban battles represent its most consequential operational dimension and the one with the most direct relevance to Indian preparedness. Successive sieges of Aleppo through 2016 and of Eastern Ghouta in 2018 saw pro-government forces employ encirclement, sustained bombardment, and restricted humanitarian access as instruments of coercion, blurring the line between military operations and the weaponisation of civilian suffering.⁴⁰ These sieges established a grim operational pattern: defenders embedded within dense civilian populations and tunnel networks, while attacking forces faced an acute trade-off between accepting greater own-force risk to limit civilian harm or accepting greater civilian and structural harm to shorten the battle.

This trade-off was studied in unusual empirical depth in the 2017 battle for Raqqa, in which a US-backed coalition supported SDF ground forces in dislodging ISIS from what had functioned as the group's de facto capital. A RAND Corporation study commissioned by the US Department of Defence found that the coalition's choice to encircle rather than gradually push ISIS fighters toward the city's periphery, while militarily efficient, foreclosed the option of establishing humanitarian corridors and likely increased both civilian casualties and structural destruction, with 60 to 80 per cent of the city rendered uninhabitable by the time it was declared liberated in October

2017.⁴¹ The study found that ISIS's deliberate use of civilians as cover compounded the coalition's difficulty but concluded that better ground-level intelligence, more deliberate planning for civilian exit corridors, and more systematic post-battle harm assessment could have reduced civilian suffering without compromising the operation's objectives.⁴²

Two transferable findings follow. First, tactically efficient encirclement strategies can carry a disproportionate strategic cost in reconstruction burden and post-battle legitimacy, since urban destruction on this scale significantly complicates subsequent governance and stabilisation.⁴³ Second, the institutional capacity to plan for and mitigate civilian harm, rather than treating it as an unavoidable by-product, is itself a force-multiplying capability that affects both campaign tempo and the durability of any resulting settlement.⁴⁴ The Modern War Institute at West Point's Urban Warfare Project draws a broader conclusion from Raqqa and comparable battles: dense urban terrain, now home to a majority of the world's population, is becoming the default rather than the exceptional battlespace of contemporary conflict, and most conventional militaries are trained and organised primarily for open-terrain manoeuvre that remain institutionally under-prepared for this shift.⁴⁵ This finding, developed from a Middle Eastern case, translates directly into the Indian context.

Indian Focus I: Implications for Sub-Conventional and Counter-Terrorism Operations

India's relevance to the Syrian case is not merely comparative; it is experiential. India has, for more than three decades, contended with an externally sponsored proxy conflict in Jammu and Kashmir, in which groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed, both designated Foreign Terrorist Organisations by the United States since 2001, and both assessed by the US Congressional Research Service to operate from Pakistani territory with a documented history of high-profile attacks on Indian targets have received sponsorship, training, and safe haven from across the border.⁴⁶ India's own strategic studies community has itself engaged directly with the proxy-war literature that this paper draws upon, including Mumford's framework⁴⁷, and research has examined how ambiguity, deniability, and proxy sponsorship function as instruments of grey-zone coercion against India specifically.⁴⁸ Read against the Syrian

case, this convergence of experience and scholarship yields several concrete doctrinal implications.

- The first concerns sponsorship diversification. India's Doctrine for Sub-Conventional Operations, issued in 2006 and subsequently updated through a tri-service Joint Doctrine for Sub-Conventional Operations in 2010, was designed principally around a bilateral sponsorship relationship: a single external state sponsor supporting a relatively coherent set of proxy groups.⁴⁹ Syria demonstrates a materially more complex pattern: multiple external sponsors simultaneously building, arming, and directing distinct proxy forces within the same theatre, with proxies capable of shifting patronage or fragmenting into new configurations as sponsor priorities change.⁵⁰ Although India's proxy threat remains substantially state-centric, doctrine would benefit from greater analytical and operational capacity to track and interdict diversified support networks, financing, training pipelines, and cross-border facilitation rather than treating sponsorship as a static, single-source relationship. This is particularly relevant as successor front organisations illustrate how sponsor networks generate new proxy labels to circumvent international sanctions and attribution.⁵¹
- The second implication concerns technologically enabled irregular capability. Syria, and subsequently Nagorno-Karabakh, demonstrated that inexpensive drone technology can materially extend the reach of irregular and proxy forces, narrowing the technological gap between state militaries and their non-state or state-sponsored adversaries.⁵² India's own experience with cross-border drone-enabled smuggling and hostile aerial incursions along its western border suggests that this is an active and evolving threat rather than a hypothetical one. Sub-conventional doctrine, framed substantially around ground infiltration and area-domination concepts, would benefit from more explicit integration of Counter-Unmanned-Aerial-System (C-UAS) capability into standard counter-terrorism force packages, alongside the detection and electronic-warfare infrastructure such systems require.

- The third implication concerns inter-agency de-confliction. Syria offered a cautionary illustration of how externally sponsored proxies, even when nominally aligned against a common adversary, can work at cross purposes, as documented in contemporaneous US congressional oversight of separately funded opposition factions.⁵³ India's own sub-conventional and counter-terrorism architecture, spanning the Army, Central Armed Police Forces, state police, and multiple intelligence agencies, has made significant strides in coordination since the 2006 doctrine's emphasis on unified command, but Syria's experience underscores the continuing value of formalised de-confliction mechanisms as India's security establishment increasingly operates joint and integrated formations under its broader jointness reforms.

India's institutional thinking has already begun to internalise these lessons: the Army's senior leadership has recently framed grey-zone and hybrid threats, including AI-enabled information operations and technologically democratised irregular capability, as core priorities for the force's modernisation.⁵⁴ The Syrian case reinforces the direction of this thinking and provides some concrete, extensively documented empirical basis on which to further refine it.

Indian Focus II: Urban Warfare Preparedness

India's urban warfare experience, though extensive, has historically been under-doctrinated relative to its scale. In an influential and still largely valid assessment, C Christine Fair found that despite India's considerable practical experience conducting military operations in urbanised terrain across counter-terrorism, low-intensity conflict, and peacekeeping contexts, the country had not developed a formal, unified doctrine for such operations and lacked robust mechanisms to disseminate the operational lessons of individual engagements across the wider security establishment.⁵⁵ India's own most searing urban security experience, the November 2008 Mumbai attacks, illustrated both the stakes of this gap and the scale of subsequent reform. A detailed RAND Corporation study found that ten-armed assailants were able to hold multiple sites across India's largest city for some sixty hours, exploiting gaps in coastal surveillance, inter-agency communication, and the availability of specialised equipment for the National Security Guard (NSG) commandos ultimately tasked with

resolving the sieges.⁵⁶ The study's central recommendation that urban terrorism and siege response required dedicated capability rather than an extension of conventional policing has substantially informed India's subsequent investment in regional NSG hubs, a dedicated Coastal Command, and strengthened maritime domain awareness.⁵⁷

Syria's urban battles, fought under different conditions but against a comparably hybrid adversary, offer further, more specifically military lessons that build on this foundation. The first concerns the encirclement-versus-corridor trade-off documented in the Raqqa study: forces conducting urban clearance against an adversary embedded among civilians face a genuine tactical dilemma between operational tempo and civilian harm mitigation, and the RAND findings suggest that pre-planned egress corridors, better ground-level intelligence, and more granular post-action harm assessment can improve outcomes on both dimensions rather than presenting a strict trade-off.⁵⁸ This is directly applicable to Indian forces conducting cordon-and-search operations in urban and peri-urban settlements in Jammu and Kashmir, where the same embedded-civilian dynamic recurs on a smaller scale.

The second lesson concerns institutionalised training infrastructure. India possesses genuine centres of excellence for irregular warfare, most notably the Counter Insurgency and Jungle Warfare School, but Fair's finding regarding the absence of a formal, joint military-operations-on-urban-terrain doctrine has not been fully superseded.⁵⁹ Syria's urban battles and comparable fights elsewhere in the region have prompted partner militaries to establish dedicated urban warfare study programmes, of which the Modern War Institute's Urban Warfare Project is a leading example, precisely because dense, vertically complex terrain punishes forces trained principally for open manoeuvre.⁶⁰ Given India's own rapid urbanisation and the concentration of high-value targets in its major cities, the case for dedicated, joint Army-CAPF-police urban combat training infrastructure is reinforced by the Syrian record.

The third lesson concerns technology and reconstruction planning. Raqqa demonstrated that inadequately planned urban clearance operations generate reconstruction burdens that can outlast the military engagement itself, with post-conflict reconstruction needs for Syria as a whole estimated by the World Bank at over

200 billion dollars.⁶¹ For India, this underscores the value of precision-enabled urban operations with improved ISR, discriminating munitions, and close civil-military coordination for post-operation restoration as both a humanitarian and a fiscal imperative in any future large-scale urban contingency.

Taken together, Fair's diagnosis and the empirical record from Syria's urban battles point toward a consistent conclusion: India's considerable operational experience in urban and quasi-urban counter-terrorism settings needs to be more systematically codified into joint doctrine, exercised through dedicated training infrastructure, and paired with the ISR, precision, and counter-drone technologies that increasingly define the urban battlespace.

Policy Recommendations

Drawing together the analysis above, the paper offers four specific recommendations for India's defence and security establishment.

- First, doctrine review. India's sub-conventional operations doctrine and its associated joint doctrine should be periodically reviewed against the evolving international proxy-war record, with particular attention to multi-sponsor threat environments and the integration of counter-drone capability into standard sub-conventional and counter-terrorism force packages.
- Second, dedicated urban warfare training capacity. Building on existing institutions such as the Counter Insurgency and Jungle Warfare School, India should invest in joint, tri-service and CAPF-inclusive urban combat training infrastructure, incorporating dense, reconfigurable training environments comparable to those developed by partner militaries in response to the Syrian and Iraqi urban battles.
- Third, C-UAS integration. Given the demonstrated role of low-cost drones in extending irregular and proxy capability in Syria and Nagorno-Karabakh, India should accelerate the fielding of layered detection and interdiction systems

along the Line of Control, the international border, and in urban centres of high symbolic or economic value.

- Fourth, harm mitigation and precision planning as a standing operational requirement. Reflecting the Raqqa findings, Indian forces engaged in urban and semi-urban clearance operations would benefit from formalised pre-planning for civilian egress, systematic post-action harm review, and continued investment in precision capability, both as an operational-legitimacy safeguard and as a means of reducing post-operation stabilisation costs.

None of these recommendations implies a wholesale departure from India's existing approach, which has already demonstrated substantial adaptive capacity, from the post-Mumbai reforms in coastal security and specialised response capability to the Army's recent explicit doctrinal attention to grey-zone competition. Rather, they represent an incremental, evidence-based sharpening of an already sound foundation, informed by the most extensively documented proxy and hybrid conflict of the past decade.

Conclusion

Syria's civil war offers no exact parallel to India's own security environment; the scale of state collapse, sectarian fragmentation, and multi-power direct military intervention that characterised the Syrian theatre has no equivalent on the subcontinent. What Syria offers instead is arguably more useful for doctrinal purposes: a densely documented, empirically studied demonstration of how proxy sponsorship, private military deployment, drone warfare, and urban siege operations combine into a coherent, repeatable, and exportable template for contemporary conflict below the threshold of direct interstate war. That template has already diffused well beyond the Levant, appearing in Libya, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Ukraine, and there is no structural reason to assume India's own neighbourhood is exempt from its further spread.

India's decades of experience managing an externally sponsored proxy conflict in Jammu and Kashmir mean it is not approaching these lessons from a position of inexperience. The task, rather, is to ensure that hard-won doctrinal and institutional learning keeps pace with an adversary toolkit evolving rapidly elsewhere in the world,

particularly with respect to drone-enabled irregular capability, diversified sponsorship networks, and the operational demands of dense urban terrain. India's ongoing investment in jointness, technological self-reliance, and grey-zone-aware doctrine, reflected in recent Army leadership statements and in the research programmes of institutions, indicates that this task is already well under way. Sustained attention to the Syrian case, and to the wider comparative record of hybrid and proxy warfare it has helped generate, can help ensure that India's adaptation remains proactive rather than reactive in the face of the strategic ripples that conflicts shaped by external intervention continue to send outward toward South Asia.

Declaration

I declare that this manuscript is being submitted exclusively to CENJOWS for publication consideration, is original, and has not been published or submitted elsewhere. I further certify that it contains no classified, restricted, or sensitive information and is based entirely on open-source material suitable for publication in the public domain.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Congressional Research Service. 2026a. Syria: Transition and U.S. Policy. RL33487. Washington, DC: Library of Congress. <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/RL33487>.
- ² Mumford, Andrew. 2013. Proxy Warfare. War and Conflict in the Modern World. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- ³ Congressional Research Service. 2026b. Syria and U.S. Policy. IF11930. Washington, DC: Library of Congress. <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IF11930>.
- ⁴ Norton, Augustus Richard. 1987. *Amal and the Shia: Struggle for the Soul of Lebanon*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- ⁵ Kilcullen, David. 2009. *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- ⁶ Hughes, Geraint. 2014. "Syria and the Perils of Proxy Warfare." *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 25 (3): 522-538. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2014.913542>; Byman, Daniel. 2018. "Why States Support Insurgencies: Globalization and the Changing Nature of Proxy War." *Political Science Quarterly* 133 (1): 41-70.
- ⁷ Hoffman, Frank G. 2007. *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars*. Potomac Institute for Policy Studies. https://www.potomacinstitute.org/images/stories/publications/potomac_hybridwar_0108.pdf
- ⁸ Renz, Bettina. 2016. "Russia and 'Hybrid Warfare'." *Contemporary Politics* 22 (3): 283-300. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2016.1201316>; Adamsky, Dmitry. 2018. "Russian Hybrid Warfare and the Syrian War: Smoke and Mirrors." *Isis*, 109 (1): 1-15.
- ⁹ Congressional Research Service. 2026a. Syria: Transition and U.S. Policy. RL33487. Washington, DC: Library of Congress. <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/RL33487>.
- ¹⁰ Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs. 2026. "The Degradation of Iran's Proxy Model." Harvard Kennedy School, April 1, 2026. <https://www.belfercenter.org/research-analysis/degradation-irans-proxy-model>.
- ¹¹ Congressional Research Service. 2026b. Syria and U.S. Policy. IF11930. Washington, DC: Library of Congress. <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IF11930>.
- ¹² Washington Institute for Near East Policy. 2023a. "The Wagner Group in Syria: Profiting Off Failed States." July 21, 2023. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/wagner-group-syria-profiting-failed-states>.
- ¹³ Clingendael Institute (Netherlands Institute of International Relations). 2019. Strategies of Turkish Proxy Warfare in Northern Syria. The Hague: Clingendael. <https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2019/strategies-of-turkish-proxy-warfare-in-northern-syria/>.
- ¹⁴ Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs. 2026. "The Degradation of Iran's Proxy Model." Harvard Kennedy School, April 1, 2026. <https://www.belfercenter.org/research-analysis/degradation-irans-proxy-model>.
- ¹⁵ RAND Corporation. 2024. "Fallout from Syria: Q&A with RAND Experts." December 11, 2024. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2024/12/fallout-from-syria-q-and-a-with-rand-experts.html>.
- ¹⁶ Congressional Research Service. 2026a. Syria: Transition and U.S. Policy. RL33487. Washington, DC: Library of Congress. <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/RL33487>.
- ¹⁷ RAND Corporation. 2026. "War in Iran: Q&A with RAND Experts." March 10, 2026. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2026/03/war-in-iran-qa-with-rand-experts.html>.
- ¹⁸ Washington Institute for Near East Policy. "Hundreds of Iran-Backed Fatemiyoun and Zainabiyoun Terrorists Warehoused at Iraqi Government Bases." Militia Spotlight, January 29, 2025. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hundreds-iran-backed-fatemiyoun-and-zainabiyoun-terrorists-warehoused-iraqi>.
- ¹⁹ Washington Institute for Near East Policy. "The Fatemiyoun/Zainabiyoun Influx: Iraq's Intensified Hosting of Two U.S.-Designated Terrorist Groups." Militia Spotlight, February 11, 2025. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/fatemiyounzainabiyoun-influx-iraqs-intensified-hosting-two-us-designated-terrorist>.
- ²⁰ Center for Strategic and International Studies. N.d. "Band of Brothers: The Wagner Group and the Russian State." The Post-Soviet Post (blog). Accessed August 2026. <https://www.csis.org/blogs/post-soviet-post/band-brothers-wagner-group-and-russian-state>.
- ²¹ Washington Institute for Near East Policy. 2023a. "The Wagner Group in Syria: Profiting Off Failed States." July 21, 2023. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/wagner-group-syria-profiting-failed-states>.
- ²² Royal United Services Institute. N.d. "Wagner Group and Russia's Presence in Africa and the Middle East." Research project. Accessed August 2026. <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/projects/wagner-group-and-russias-presence-africa-and-middle-east>.

-
- ²³ Clingendael Institute (Netherlands Institute of International Relations). 2019. Strategies of Turkish Proxy Warfare in Northern Syria. The Hague: Clingendael. <https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2019/strategies-of-turkish-proxy-warfare-in-northern-syria/>.
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ Congressional Research Service. 2026b. Syria and U.S. Policy. IF11930. Washington, DC: Library of Congress. <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IF11930>.
- ²⁶ Ibid.
- ²⁷ Congressional Research Service. 2026a. Syria: Transition and U.S. Policy. RL33487. Washington, DC: Library of Congress. <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/RL33487>.
- ²⁸ Hoffman, Frank G. 2007. Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars. Arlington, VA: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies.
- ²⁹ Congressional Research Service. 2026a. Syria: Transition and U.S. Policy. RL33487. Washington, DC: Library of Congress. <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/RL33487>.
- ³⁰ Hoffman, Frank G. 2007. Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars. Arlington, VA: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies.
- ³¹ Watts, Stephen, Bryan Frederick, Nathan Chandler, Mark Toukan, Christian Curriden, Erik E. Mueller, Edward Geist, and Ariane M. Tabatabai. 2023a. Proxy Warfare in Strategic Competition: Overarching Findings and Recommendations. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA307-1.html.
- ³² Mazarr, Michael J., Jeffrey W. Hornung, Stephanie Pezard, Anika Binnendijk, and Marta Kepe. 2019. Gaining Competitive Advantage in the Gray Zone: Response Options for Coercive Aggression Below the Threshold of Major War. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2942.html.
- ³³ PAX. 2022. A Laboratory of Drone Warfare: Effects of Military Drone Use in Syria. Utrecht: PAX for Peace. https://paxforpeace.nl/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/import/2022-11/PAX_Syria_A%20Laboratory%20of%20Drone%20Warfare_2022.pdf.
- ³⁴ Ibid.
- ³⁵ Mumford, Andrew. 2013. Proxy Warfare. War and Conflict in the Modern World. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- ³⁶ PAX. 2022. A Laboratory of Drone Warfare: Effects of Military Drone Use in Syria. Utrecht: PAX for Peace. https://paxforpeace.nl/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/import/2022-11/PAX_Syria_A%20Laboratory%20of%20Drone%20Warfare_2022.pdf.
- ³⁷ Kricorian, Katherine, Kaveh Khoshnood, and Sharon Chekijian. 2022. "Hybrid Warfare and Public Health: Conflicts in Ukraine and Nagorno-Karabakh Raise the Alarm." Public Health in Practice 4: 100342. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.puhip.2022.100342>.
- ³⁸ Ibid.
- ³⁹ Watts, Stephen, Bryan Frederick, Nathan Chandler, Mark Toukan, Christian Curriden, Erik E. Mueller, Edward Geist, and Ariane M. Tabatabai. 2023b. Proxy Warfare in Strategic Competition: State Motivations and Future Trends. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA307-2.html.
- ⁴⁰ Congressional Research Service. 2026a. Syria: Transition and U.S. Policy. RL33487. Washington, DC: Library of Congress. <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/RL33487>.
- ⁴¹ McNerney, Michael J., Gabrielle Tarini, Nate Rosenblatt, Karen M. Sudkamp, Pauline Moore, Michelle Grisé, Benjamin J. Sacks, and Larry Lewis. 2022. Understanding Civilian Harm in Raqqa and Its Implications for Future Conflicts. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA753-1.html.
- ⁴² Ibid.
- ⁴³ Ibid.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid.
- ⁴⁵ Modern War Institute at West Point. N.d. "Urban Warfare Project." Accessed August 2026. <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/urban-warfare-project/>.
- ⁴⁶ Congressional Research Service. 2024. Terrorist and Other Militant Groups in Pakistan. IF11934. Washington, DC: Library of Congress. <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IF11934>; National Counterterrorism Center. N.d. "Lashkar-e-Tayyiba." Office of the Director of National Intelligence. Accessed August 2026. https://www.dni.gov/nctc/terrorist_groups/lashkar_e_tayyiba.html.
- ⁴⁷ Tomar, Sanjiv. 2014. Review of Proxy Warfare, by Andrew Mumford. Journal of Defence Studies 8 (2). New Delhi: Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses. https://www.idsa.in/system/files/JDS_8_2_2014_SanjivTomar.pdf.
- ⁴⁸ Centre for Joint Warfare Studies. 2022. China's Gray Zone Activities against India. New Delhi: CENJOWS. <https://cenjows.in/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/China-Gray-Zone-Monograph-9-7-22.pdf>.

-
- ⁴⁹ Headquarters Army Training Command (ARTRAC). 2006. Doctrine for Sub-Conventional Operations. Shimla: Indian Army; Headquarters Integrated Defence Staff. 2010. Joint Doctrine for Sub-Conventional Operations. New Delhi: Ministry of Defence, Government of India.
- ⁵⁰ Watts, Stephen, Bryan Frederick, Nathan Chandler, Mark Toukan, Christian Curriden, Erik E. Mueller, Edward Geist, and Ariane M. Tabatabai. 2023a. Proxy Warfare in Strategic Competition: Overarching Findings and Recommendations. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA307-1.html.
- ⁵¹ Congressional Research Service. 2024. Terrorist and Other Militant Groups in Pakistan. IF11934. Washington, DC: Library of Congress. <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IF11934>.
- ⁵² PAX. 2022. A Laboratory of Drone Warfare: Effects of Military Drone Use in Syria. Utrecht: PAX for Peace. https://paxforpeace.nl/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/import/2022-11/PAX_Syria_A%20Laboratory%20of%20Drone%20Warfare_2022.pdf; Kricorian, Katherine, Kaveh Khoshnood, and Sharon Chekijian. 2022. "Hybrid Warfare and Public Health: Conflicts in Ukraine and Nagorno-Karabakh Raise the Alarm." *Public Health in Practice* 4: 100342. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.puhip.2022.100342>.
- ⁵³ Congressional Research Service. 2026b. Syria and U.S. Policy. IF11930. Washington, DC: Library of Congress. <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IF11930>.
- ⁵⁴ Press Information Bureau, Government of India. 2025. Press release on the Chief of the Army Staff's address at the Officers Training Academy on the changing character of warfare. Ministry of Defence, August 4, 2025. <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2152204>.
- ⁵⁵ Fair, C. Christine. 2003. "Military Operations in Urban Areas: The Indian Experience." *India Review* 2 (1): 49-76. Reprinted, Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, RP-1063. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/reprints/RP1063.html>.
- ⁵⁶ Rabasa, Angel, Robert D. Blackwill, Peter Chalk, Kim Cragin, C. Christine Fair, Brian A. Jackson, Brian Michael Jenkins, Seth G. Jones, Nathaniel Shestak, and Ashley J. Tellis. 2009. The Lessons of Mumbai. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, OP-249-RC. https://www.rand.org/pubs/occasional_papers/OP249.html.
- ⁵⁷ Ibid.
- ⁵⁸ McNerney, Michael J., Gabrielle Tarini, Nate Rosenblatt, Karen M. Sudkamp, Pauline Moore, Michelle Gris , Benjamin J. Sacks, and Larry Lewis. 2022. Understanding Civilian Harm in Raqqa and Its Implications for Future Conflicts. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA753-1.html.
- ⁵⁹ Fair, C. Christine. 2003. "Military Operations in Urban Areas: The Indian Experience." *India Review* 2 (1): 49-76. Reprinted, Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, RP-1063. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/reprints/RP1063.html>.
- ⁶⁰ Modern War Institute at West Point. N.d. "Urban Warfare Project." Accessed August 2026. <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/urban-warfare-project/>.
- ⁶¹ Congressional Research Service. 2026b. Syria and U.S. Policy. IF11930. Washington, DC: Library of Congress. <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IF11930>; McNerney, Michael J., Gabrielle Tarini, Nate Rosenblatt, Karen M. Sudkamp, Pauline Moore, Michelle Gris , Benjamin J. Sacks, and Larry Lewis. 2022. Understanding Civilian Harm in Raqqa and Its Implications for Future Conflicts. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA753-1.html.