Under what conditions are using nonstate actors in the Middle East as proxies effective in fighting terrorism for the United States? How do their complex religious communities interact with U.S. counterterrorism policy?

With no strategic doctrine for special operations forces and a growing pressure to find a more cost-effective way to fight terrorists, there are emerging uncertainties regarding the strategic use of nonstate groups. Through a comparative case study of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the Afghan Local Police (ALP), my research explores the conditions of nonstate actors under which contemporary U.S. counterterrorism policy is most (or least) successful.

1. Nonstate groups are more likely to succeed if they have sovereign (or semi-sovereign) territory. *Limitation:* When nonstate groups have their own sovereign territory, it provides a unique motivation to fight, but it may come at the cost of significant ethnic or religious clashes.
2. Nonstate groups are more likely to succeed if they have experience in conventional and unconventional warfare.
3. Nonstate groups are more likely to succeed if they have at least a politically benevolent relationship with their host government.
4. Smaller nonstate groups are more likely to succeed if their missions are limited to village level security and surveillance. *Limitation:* While this hypothesis has support, it does so only if the unit is protecting the local community from which they reside; if not, there is a significantly higher chance of religiously-invoked human rights abuses.

Counterterrorism policy that uses nonstate actors has rarely considered the long-term effects of these partnerships. Ensuring that nonstate groups are not violating human rights, are ethnically and/or religiously amicable with the people they protect, and providing a transition plan from the beginning to hand over control of the proxy will protect the integrity of the policy and the stability of the region.