



## Diploma Thesis Evaluation Form

Author: Adam Kotrbáček

Title: The Study of Use of Heavy Armoured Vehicles by Non-State Actors in Syrian Conflict

Programme/year: BS/2021

Author of Evaluation (~~supervisor~~/external assessor): Ondřej Rosendorf

Criteria	Definition	Maximum	Points
<b>Major Criteria</b>			
	Research question, definition of objectives	<b>10</b>	6
	Theoretical/conceptual framework	<b>30</b>	15
	Methodology, analysis, argument	<b>40</b>	38
<i>Total</i>		<b>80</b>	59
<b>Minor Criteria</b>			
	Sources	<b>10</b>	6
	Style	<b>5</b>	5
	Formal requirements	<b>5</b>	5
<i>Total</i>		<b>20</b>	16
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>100</b>	75



## Evaluation

Major criteria:

The thesis addresses the issue of armored vehicles (AVs) deployments by violent nonstate actors in the region of north-western Syria. The author compiles and analyzes an original dataset on the use of AVs by violent non-state actors and identifies three different “patterns” of use. The primary research question, though implicit, asks whether military outcomes from individual engagements between insurgents and government forces can be attributed precisely to the use of AVs.

There are several strong points, which deserve to be mentioned: (1) the thesis builds on the analysis of a new large-N dataset compiled by the author, which can be potentially used by other researchers interested in the topic; (2) it presents a new typology of insurgent deployment “patterns” of AVs derived from author’s own observation; and (3) the addition of intervening variables in the analysis – e.g., external actor involvement and the role of terrain – makes for a convincing conclusion (i.e., the use of AVs by insurgents affects military outcomes).

The author’s effort to provide a detailed description of the use of AVs by violent nonstate actors deserves praise. Unfortunately, there are several issues which prohibit me from awarding a higher score. The most obvious issue relates to the weak – if not absent – link between the author’s research and the existing literature.

Academic research on the proliferation of military innovations – and, more specifically, military technology – among violent nonstate actors has been growing steadily over the years. It is certainly one of the most fascinating and under-researched aspects of the current research on military diffusion.<sup>1</sup> To most readers, however, the significance of the topic is not necessarily self-evident. This is problematic since a discussion of the previous literature is virtually absent in the thesis (aside from a few mentions about the study of conventional warfare and violent nonstate actors in the very introduction).

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<sup>1</sup> On the proliferation of drones, see, e.g., Chávez, Kerry, & Swed, Ori (2020), “The proliferation of drones to violent nonstate actors,” *Defence Studies*, 21(1), pp. 1–24. On the proliferation of suicide terrorism, see, e.g., Gilli, Andrea, & Gilli, Mauro (2014), “The Spread of Military Innovations: Adoption Capacity Theory, Tactical Incentives, and the Case of Suicide Terrorism,” *Security Studies*, 23(3), pp. 513–547; or Horowitz, Michael (2010), “Nonstate Actors and the Diffusion of Innovations: The Case of Suicide Terrorism,” *International Organization*, 64(1), pp. 33–64. On the proliferation of mechanized infantry battalions across nation states, see, e.g., Sechser, Todd S., & Saunders, Elizabeth, N. (2010), “The Army You Have: The Determinants of Military Mechanization 1979–2001,” *International Studies Quarterly*, 54(2), pp. 481–511.



Rather than building on previous contributions, the author adopts an a priori descriptive and conceptually inductive approach. As the author themselves points out: “The thesis does not rely on any general theory found in the study of international relations or security studies” (p. 6). Obviously, this makes the evaluation of the thesis rather difficult. On the one hand, the inductive approach improves upon the originality of the findings. On the other hand, it exacerbates concerns over their reliability and validity.

At many points in the texts, the author uses terms and concepts without prior definition. Are the terms such as “strong point warfare”, “partial frontline warfare”, or “pure frontline warfare”, author’s own inventions (see pp. 8–24)? References to any source material describing these terms is lacking. Even if the categories were developed inductively, this still requires some discussion about their meaning. A similar issue relates to lacking definitions of “conventional warfare”, “violent nonstate actors” or even “armored vehicles”.

#### Minor criteria:

The length and formatting are adequate. There is, however, a notable issue with the number and proportion of academic sources used. Most sources (approx. 90%) include primary sources – datasets, media reports, YouTube videos, or tweets. I do understand that the main aim of the thesis was to examine original source material, but the fact that the list of references includes exactly two peer-reviewed articles (Mair, 2013; Šmid & Šmídová, 2021) is problematic.

#### Overall evaluation:

In some ways, the presented thesis is significantly above the average. The overall impression is, unfortunately, hindered by the absence of a substantive discussion of the previous literature and its connection to author’s own research. This should be addressed during the defense.

#### Suggested grade:

I suggest grade “C”.

Signature: