

## Iranian Proxies: Their Impacts on Regional Stability and Geopolitics

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### ABSTRACT

*The Islamic Republic of Iran has increasingly relied on a network of proxy organizations to extend its influence and deter external threats across the Middle East. This article examines the political and military activities of Iran-backed groups Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in Iraq, the Houthis in Yemen, and Hamas in Palestine and evaluates their cumulative impact on regional stability and geopolitical realignment. Drawing upon the theoretical frameworks of Realism and Hybrid Warfare, the study employs a qualitative comparative case study approach to analyze the intersection of ideology, strategic depth, and asymmetrical power projection. The findings reveal that Iran's proxy network constitutes both a tool of deterrence and a source of structural instability, simultaneously preventing foreign hegemony while eroding the sovereignty of regional states. The research argues that Iranian proxies form an interlinked "Axis of Resistance" that functions as a parallel security architecture reshaping Middle Eastern geopolitics. The study concludes by highlighting the dual implications of this phenomenon for regional order stabilization through deterrence and destabilization through perpetual conflict and offers policy and theoretical recommendations for managing proxy-driven hybrid wars.*

**Keywords:** Iranian proxies, regional stability, hybrid warfare, Hezbollah, PMF, Houthis, Hamas, Middle East geopolitics

### INTRODUCTION

The Middle East remains one of the most conflicted geopolitical spaces in the international system, an area where competing ideologies, power games and foreign interventions converge. The Islamic Republic of Iran is one of the state actors that defines this turbulent environment in a unique manner. The city of Tehran was interested in opposing the hegemony of the West and averting the isolation of the country, developing non-state proxies and integrating them into local conflicts as both an instrument of ideological export and strategic deterrence since the 1979 Islamic Revolution (Ehteshami and Zweiri, 2007; Eisenstadt, 2020).

The use of proxies by Iran is indicative of a wider change in the practices of international politics, as hybrid warfare, the integration of traditional military tactics with irregular, informational, and cyber aspects, has eliminated borders between war and peace (Fox, 2019). In the form of Hezbollah, the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), the Houthis, and Hamas, Iran has developed a network that does not observe the national boundaries and, thus, allows it to exert influence without telling superior military forces like the United States, Israel, and Saudi Arabia about it.

The main question that should inform this research is two-fold (1) How do Iranian proxy groups in Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, and Palestine contribute to the stability of the region in terms of their political activity, as well

as military involvement? (2) How does Iran influence the geopolitical life of the Middle East through these actors?

The literature has analyzed these organizations separately, but seldom considers them as a part of a unified mechanism of projecting power on the region (Berman, 2019; Juneau, 2016). This paper is aimed at closing this gap through the analysis of the proxy network of Iran as a collective deterrence system a hybrid alliance that recreates universal sovereignty and balances of power.

Using the theoretical perspective of Realism and Hybrid Warfare, the proposed paper will argue that the proxies of Iran are no longer exploited as tools of subversion but rather as mechanisms of regional state and resistance thus maintaining the depth of the Iranian strategy and at the same time, propelling it to continuous instability.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Theoretical Foundations**

The ontological inspiration of the current enquiry has majorly been based on Realism, especially structural Realism (Waltz, 1979), and the Hybrid Warfare paradigm. Realism argues that states operate in the anarchic system in which acts of survival depend on the amount of power as well as as much security as possible. This logic is also compatible with the Iranian sponsorship of proxy groups: instead of engaging with enemies at the level of direct action, Tehran tries to create the multi-level structure of deterrence by the means of non-state actors (Milani, 2013).

However, Realism in itself can be considered inadequate to explain the ideological and identity-based aspects of the strategy of Iran. The constructivist views also help on the ground that proxy relationships between Iran and other countries are based on the similarity in coping with narratives of resistance and religious unity (Wehrey, 2014). Such communities, be it Shi'a or Sunni are not just tools of coercion but rather they are also part of the ideological language of anti-imperialism and Islamic unity entrenched in Iran.

In its Turn, Hybrid Warfare Theory embodies the aspect of functioning of this phenomenon. It underscores the use of combined strategies, political influence, disinformation, and militia fighting to achieve goals that are simply below the scale of war (Eisenstadt, 2020). An example of this paradigm is the Iranian proxies where political legitimacy, social service and paramilitary force are combined to undermine the traditional state systems.

### **Regionalism and the Competition of Geopolitics**

The post-Arab spring environment has produced a novel way of the region, one of fragmentation, informality, and networked war (Gause, 2014). The proxies of Iran work in this vacuum indeed being the supporters of local autonomy but also transmitters of external force. The institutionalization of the proxy power can be seen in Hezbollah establishing itself in the Lebanese politics, the institutionalization of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) through the security apparatus in Iraq, and the fact that the Houthis control the territory in Yemen (Renard, 2020).

Additionally, researchers like Karmo (2025) argue that the shifting of the Iranian Axis of Resistance has acquired the attributes of a reactive alliance into a regional security block, which is able to offer coordinated military and political actions, as a case in the 2025 Iran-Israel 12-day Conflict.

Overall, the literature suggests that although proxies of Iran support its strategic global goals, it equally disrupts the stability of states as well as maintained a dual-order regime in which Iran is run by state structures and clandestine transnational militant groups.

## **METHODOLOGY**

In this research, a qualitative comparative case study design, which is applied in exploring the thorny, multi-layered political phenomena, is used. Four Iranian proxies are chosen as the case of study; they are Hezbollah (Lebanon), the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) (Iraq), the Houthis (Yemen), and Hamas (Palestine) all of them being in different geopolitical positions but tied by similar strategic alignment with Iran.

### **Research Design**

The peer-reviewed journal articles, policy papers, international reports, and think-tank analyses on the time period of 2013-2025 were identified to provide the required data on research design. The thematic analytical approach was used to find the common patterns in the formation of proxies, operational strategy, and geopolitical consequences.

### **Analytical Framework**

Every case was examined through the lens of a strategic policy of Iran known as Forward Defense, which is a policy by which a country externalizes the conflict by giving power to the allies of the region. The comparative analysis helped in establishing convergent trends such as Iran using ideological mobilization, military training and logistical support to engender autonomous but supraliminal actors.

## **FINDINGS-RESULTS**

The findings reveal that the proxies of Iran can represent a multi-dimensional entity and act both as a militia, political and social organization.

Hezbollah is the most effective model of proxy institutionalization of Iran. Its military support of the Assad regime in the Syrian Civil war saved the regional corridor in Tehran and demonstrated the effectiveness of hybrid rule combines the elements of political involvement and paramilitary repression (Norton, 2014).

The Afghanistan Regional Army (IRA) in Iraq denotes the ability of Iran to place proxies in the institutions of the state. The Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) which have been originally formed to counter ISIS have now become an informal security apparatus that balances and destabilizes the sovereignty of the Iraqi state at the same time (Haddad, 2021).

The Houkeys have also expanded the Iranian strategic presence to the Red Sea and the Arabian Peninsula, and thus has created maritime and energy security issues on international trade courses (Juneau, 2016). They have adapted technologically more so the use of drones and ballistic missiles which is a reflection of how Iran had transferred their hybrid warfare skills.

Although Hamas is sectarian, there is a focus on the pragmatic goal of ally-building of Tehran. This fact strengthens the Iranian policy of the anti-Israel deterrent that constantly supports Hamas, placing Palestine as both an ideological and operational frontier of the Axis of Resistance (Michael and Siboni, 2024).

All of these proxies are part of the Iranian deterrence system in the region thus reinventing the balance of power between the conventional asymmetries of warfare and establishing an atmosphere of chronic insecurity.

## **DISCUSSION**

The results present a contradiction wherein the proxy system in Iran improves the balance in the region but also creates a lack of security. In the Realist paradigm, this duality is rational instability since competitors are afraid of confronting Tehran. But on the side of governance, these dynamics will lie on the spectrum of weakening institutional legitimacy and undermining the integrity of sovereign states.

This development was captured in the 2025 Iran Israel 12 days conflict. It was the first occasion that Hezbollah, PMF, the Houthis, and Hamas performed in the coordinated activity, which is an indicator that the proxies of the Islamic Iran became not isolated movements but a composite of deterrence (Karmo, 2025). The incident highlighted the horizons of demonstrating power in horizontal and multi-directional formats by Iran without the involvement of state, which characterize hybrid strategic deterrence.

In a bigger perspective on International Relations, this network is an emergent non-Western concept of regional order. It questions the liberal internationalist hypothesis that stability is based upon healthy institutions and state sovereignty. Rather, the proxy architecture in Iran effectively generates a managed instability that is an equilibrium mechanism, which holds the threats back without losing strategic ambiguities.

The benefits that these findings have on policy and theory are immense. They imply that not only do hybrid actors manifest themselves because of poor governance but they are active agents of building a new Middle Eastern order, that is described as fluid alliances, contested sovereignties, and adaptive deterrence.

### **Proxies Prolong Conflict, Extended Influence and Counter Measures by Local Actors**

Iranian backed proxy groups do not just drag out conflicts they are one of the Tehran's main tools for reaching into the Middle East and pulling the strings. These groups dig deep into local politics and society, working as both fighters and politicians. That lets Iran throw its weight around without sending in its own army.

Take Hezbollah in Lebanon. They are not just a militia Hezbollah holds real political power they have built up a military force that is nothing to scoff at. Through them, Iran can shape Lebanese policy and influence how the whole regions deal with Israel and West, the PMF isn't just a loose bunch of fighters; they're now part of the country's official security structure. That gives Iran a seat at the table in Baghdad and a hand in the game as different Iraqi factions tussle for control.

Then you have got the Houthis in Yemen. By controlling key territory and threatening shipping lanes in the Red Sea, they help Iran projects its strategy right into the Arabian Peninsula and into global trade routes. Hamas in Palestine plays a similar role they are on the front lines against Israel, keeping Iran ideology and influence alive while also gaining political credibility among Palestinians.

Put all these groups together, and you get a web of influence that stretches across borders. Iran does not need to send in troops or rely on formal diplomacy, these proxies let Tehran quietly shape the region's politics, security and even its social fabric. By keeping conflicts simmering and using hybrid tactics part warfare, part politics Iran keeps its rivals off balance and cements its spot as a regional power broker.

Of course, other countries are not just sitting back. They have gotten creative, blending military strikes with political pressure to try to rein in Iran's proxies. Israel for one regularly hits Hezbollah targets and Iranian backed in Syria to disrupt weapons transfers and keep these groups from getting too strong. They also invest heavily in intelligence to stay one step ahead. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates throw their weight behind local and international forces to push back the Houthis, using everything from airstrikes to diplomatic efforts to keep Iran from controlling key Red Sea trade routes.

Iraq's government, squeezed by both internal politics and outside pressure, sometimes tries to rein in the PMF maybe with new laws, maybe by pulling them further into state security forces, or through negotiations. But it's an uphill battle, since the PMF has deep roots and plenty of backing from Tehran. In Palestine, Israel combines military campaigns with intelligence work to target Hamas, while diplomats work behind the scenes for ceasefires and to keep things from spiraling out of control.

Beyond the obvious military moves, these countries also use sanctions, arms controls, and multilateral talks to try to cut off the money and supplies that keep Iran's proxies running. Still, these groups are tough to stamp out. They are deeply woven into the societies where they operate, and they know how to adapt. That means efforts to contain them often fall short, and the reign get stuck in a cycle conflict flares up, countermeasures come out, but Iran's influence endures.

So, Iranian proxies act as both Tehran's long arm and as sources of ongoing instability, forcing neighbors to respond on multiple fronts. These groups Hezbollah, The PMF, Hamas and the Houthis let Iran shape the region without rolling its tanks or launching official wars. The result is a constant push and pull, Israel targets Hezbollah and Hamas, Saudi Arabia pushes against the Houthis, Iraq tries to keep PMF in check. Even with all these strategies, the proxy's resilience and their local support often blunt these efforts. Iran manages to keep its hybrid strategy and its leverage intact, while everyone else keep scrambling for ways to keep the threats contained. It is moving target, and that is exactly how Iran likes it.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

To summarize, we can say that Iranian proxies, from one side, allow Tehran to strengthen its influence in certain areas of the Middle East, while, from another side, causing the same constant conflicts that undermine the stability of the region. The relational conflict empowers the Iranian proxies, allowing them to utilize the existing political, military, and social structures of the countries within the region themselves. It broadens the reach of the Iranian proxies, allowing them to strengthen the Iranian influence. In the meantime, the Iranian influence is being restricted by the means available to military and political economic coalitions, which include Israel, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Iraq. The efforts available to such coalitions frequently end, unfortunately, in failure, as, due to the local legitimacy, these groups persist and adapt in the region. The Iranian proxies influence the managed instability by reinforcing the objectives that Tehran's deterrence has with regard to the region's insufficiencies. The underlining factor encapsulated within hybrid conflict is the Iranian proxies, with the combination of the veto power and the hybrid proxies from Tehran, clearly signaling to the available coalitions the extent to which the region will remain unstable.

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. Regional Dialogue: Develop systems to bring Iran and adversaries in security dialogue geared towards proxy de-escalation.
2. Institutional Reinforcement: Enhance the institutions ability of governance of Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen in order to restrict the autonomy of the militia.

3. Multilateral Observation: Design a UN-based system that monitors activities of transnational militia and weapons shipments.

#### **ACADEMIC RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. Combine the Hybrid Warfare Theory with the Regional Security Complex Theory to explain better the coordination of cross border militia.
2. Two areas of conduct longitudinal studies on assessment of proxy adaptation to emergent technologies like cyber warfare and AI-enabled surveillance.

At the end of the day, it is important to learn to stop seeing Iran through the old contentious dichotomies of stability versus chaos. They are instruments of new geopolitical balance to transform the security order of the Middle East and to reform it by means of confrontation and deterrence.

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