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Proxy Wars in the Middle East: An Analysis of Iran's Strategic Engagement and its Regional Impact

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Abstract

Objectives: This study provides a comprehensive analysis of Iran's influence in the Middle East, with a focus on the war in Gaza. It examines Iran's role in shaping the evolving regional landscape by analyzing geopolitical dynamics, historical contexts, and current events. The study also explores proxy warfare; particularly how ideational factors influence state behavior in asymmetric conflicts.

Methods: An interdisciplinary approach is employed, incorporating reviews of diplomatic discourse, official statements, and media narratives. This allows for a nuanced analysis of Iran's diplomatic, economic, and military strategies, as well as its relationships with proxy actors.

Results: The findings indicate that Iran's pursuit of regional hegemony is driven by ideological, economic, and strategic factors. Its network of proxies enables it to exert significant influence while avoiding direct conflict. The study highlights the security dilemma in the Middle East resulting from Iran's expanding military capabilities and proxy warfare.

Conclusion: Proxy warfare has become a cornerstone of Iran's power projection in the Middle East, with significant implications for regional security. Iran's strategy has contributed to destruction and fragmentation across the region. The study calls for concerted efforts to contain Iran's influence to foster a more stable Middle East. While the region's future remains uncertain, diplomatic engagement, conflict resolution, and socio-economic development are essential for long-term stability.

Keywords: Iran, Middle East, Proxy War, Geopolitics, Hegemony, Security Dilemma, Regional Stability.

حروب الوكالة في الشرق الأوسط: تحليل انخراط إيران الاستراتيجي وتأثيره الإقليم

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ملخّص

الأهداف: تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تقديم تحليل شامل لنفوذ إيران في الشرق الأوسط مع التركيز بشكل خاص على الحرب المستمرة في غزة. كما وتسعى الدراسة لتقديم منظور آني لتأثير إيران على المشهد المتطور في الشرق الأوسط من خلال استكشاف الديناميكيات الجيوسياسية والسياقات التاريخية والأحداث الجارية.

المنهجية: تعتمد الدراسة البحثية منهجية متعددة التخصصات تتضمن مراجعة موسعة للخطاب الدبلوماسي، والبيانات الرسمية، والسرد الإعلامي. ومن خلال هذه المقاربة، تهدف الدراسة إلى تعميق الفهم النظري للحروب بالوكالة، مع التركيز على كيفية تأثير العوامل الفكرية على سلوك الدول في الصراعات غير المتماثلة.

النتائج: تُظهر الدراسة أن إيران تستخدم مجموعة من الأدوات الدبلوماسية والاقتصادية والعسكرية لتعزيز نفوذها في المنطقة، بالإضافة إلى وجود علاقة وثيقة بين إيران والجهات الفاعلة في حروب الوكالة مما ساهم في زعزعة الاستقرار الإقليمي.

الخلاصة: تشير النتائج إلى أن إيران تلعب دورًا محوريًا في الحرب في غزة من خلال استراتيجيات معقدة تشمل الدعم للفاعلين المحليين والإقليميين. علاوة على ذلك، تساهم هذه الأنشطة بالوكالة في تعزيز مكانتها الإقليمية وتشكل تهديدًا مباشرًا لاستقرار المنطقة.

الكلمات الدالة: إيران، الشرق الأوسط، حروب الوكالة، الجغرافيا السياسية، الهيمنة، معضلة الأمن، استقرار المنطقة

1. Introduction

The Middle East is a region of great geopolitical importance, shaped by complex struggles for influence and competing powers for control. Iran is one of the main actors in this regional landscape, relying on proxy militias to enhance its influence beyond its borders. This study aims to analyze Iran's role by reviewing three main topics: the nature and motives of proxy wars, the Iranian strategy in employing these wars, and the resulting regional implications. The study seeks to answer the following central question: How do Iranian-backed militias contribute to destabilizing the Middle East and reshaping the global order? The first issue focuses on the nature and motives of proxy wars in the Middle East. These wars, in which external powers fund non-state groups to achieve their interests, have become prominent features of regional conflicts. These wars are fueled by multiple factors including ideology, sectarianism, and geopolitics. The Sunni-Shiite divide, struggles for regional hegemony, and international interventions also provide a fertile environment for the escalation of proxy wars. As a Shiite-majority country, Iran has used these factors to its advantage, supporting factions that are compatible with its ideological and geopolitical ambitions, allowing it to expand its influence without the need for direct military confrontation.

The second issue deals with the Iranian strategy of using proxy wars. Iran has succeeded in building a wide network of armed militias, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, and several Shiite factions in Iraq. These groups are used as arms of Iranian foreign policy, allowing Tehran to project its power, confront its opponents, and protect its interests without engaging in direct military conflicts. Iran relies on providing funding, armament, training, and ideological guidance to support these militias, making them effective tools for enhancing its regional influence. Through this strategy, Iran has been able to impose its presence in several countries and influence geopolitical developments on a wide scale.

The third issue sheds light on the regional repercussions of the proxy wars that Iran is waging. These conflicts have exacerbated instability in the Middle East, contributed to the collapse of some states, left behind severe humanitarian crises, and displaced millions. Iranian interventions have also escalated tensions with major regional powers such as Saudi Arabia and Israel, thus exacerbating conflicts and continuing the cycle of escalation and retaliation. Internationally, the repercussions of Iranian proxy wars have extended to include attracting global powers to the region, influencing energy markets, and threatening international security systems. Therefore, understanding Iran's strategy in managing proxy wars is essential to understanding the broader challenges facing security and stability in the Middle East.

2. General Framework of the Study

2.1 Problem of the study

The problem of the study is to examine the extent to which Iran's proxy activities can affect the region's stability. The study focuses on the increasing importance of proxy wars, their various repercussions, and their role in enabling the parties to avoid confrontations. This study targets academics, decision-makers, and analysts, as it aims to provide in-depth insights that contribute to understanding the dimensions of regional instability and global security challenges.

2.2 Hypothesis of the Study

This study, in short, proposes that Iran's pursuit of regional hegemony is driven by a combination of economic ambitions, theological motivations, and aspirations to revive the legacy of the Persian Empire.

2.3 Questions of the Study

This study will address the following research questions:

1. What are the nature and underlying drivers of proxy wars in the Middle East?
2. How does Iran strategically utilize proxy warfare to achieve its objectives?
3. What is the regional impact of Iran's proxy wars in the Middle East?

2.4 Objective of the Study

This study seeks to offer insights, through analysis and better understanding, into Iran's strategy and power play in the region and its proxy wars in the Middle East, and t**o analyze the nature and drivers of proxy wars in the Middle East, also to examine Iran's strategic engagement in proxy warfare,** and t**o assess the regional and global impact of Iran's proxy wars. A**dditionally, it aims to investigate the implications of the proxy militias' response to the war on Gaza, highlighting the direct threats posed to the interests of the U.S. and its allies in the area.

2.5 Significance of the Study

As a regional power, Iran has consistently attempted to assert its regional hegemony through proxy wars in the Middle East, which in turn represent direct and imminent threats to regional stability. The conflicts that have plagued the Middle East for decades despite countless efforts to resolve them create fertile ground for proxy wars to further inflame regional conflicts and potentially spread them to countries that have been spared so far. Such escalations threaten the regional interests of the U.S. and other international and regional powers, not to mention triggering a more encompassing regional power struggle that could be managed only on sub-regional fronts.

2.6 Limitations of the Study

2.6.1 Temporal limitations

The analysis focuses primarily on Iran's proxy activities from the early 21st century to the present, with particular attention to developments following the 2003 Iraq War and the Arab Spring uprisings. While providing the historical context necessary to understand these events, the study does not extensively address events preceding this period.

2.6.2 Spatial limitations

The study highlights Iran's influence in key Middle Eastern countries, including Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, Syria, and Palestine, and does not address Iran's activities in other regions.

2.7 Determinants of the Study

This study is guided by key determinants that shape its analysis of Iran's proxy warfare and its regional impact. These determinants include geopolitical, sectarian, and ideological dynamics, the influence of some contemporary historical events, as well as economic and strategic interests, such as Iran's desire to counter American and Israeli influence, and the dynamics of Iranian-backed proxy groups, the study also examines regional and global responses to Iran's actions. These determinants provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the drivers, strategies, and consequences of Iran's proxy activities in the Middle East.

2.8 Terms of the Study

- **Proxy War**

Conflicts in which a third party intervenes indirectly in a pre-existing war to influence the strategic outcome in favor of its preferred faction. (Brown, G. W., McLean, I., & McMillan, A., 2018).

- **Regional Hegemony**

The dominance or leadership of one state over others in a specific region (Mearsheimer, 2001).

- **Sectarianism**

Division or conflict based on religious or sectarian differences, particularly the Sunni-Shia divide in the Middle East, which plays a significant role in shaping proxy conflicts (Hashemi & Postel, 2017).

- **Axis of Resistance**

A term used to describe the alliance of Iran-backed groups and states that oppose Western and Israeli influence in the region, including Hezbollah, Hamas, and others (Mousavian, 2024).

- **Asymmetric Conflicts**

A form of conflict where weaker actors use unconventional tactics to counter stronger opponents (Arreguín-Toft, 2001).

- **Security Dilemma**

A situation in which two or more countries are in an arms race due to the problematic nature of one state's security efforts potentially making other states feel insecure (Herz, 1950).

- **Ideational Factors**

The role of ideas, ideologies, and beliefs in shaping state behavior (Wendt, 1999).

3. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

3.1 Theoretical Framework

This study draws on the principles of realism in international relations, emphasizing how relationships are shaped by national interests. These interests often lead to security dilemmas as nations fortify their military capabilities and expand their influence, prompting others to respond in kind, thus leading to arms competition toward the creation of deterrent weapons. The theoretical framework for this study is grounded in the Security Dilemma Theory (Herz, 1950), which highlights the importance of understanding superpowers foreign policies and their impact on global dynamics. The emphasis on studying foreign policy is significant as the aura of foreign policy provides a broad perspective of conditions prevalent within the international system and acts as a platform for understanding the national strategies of states.

The security dilemma theory is applied to analyze how Iran leverages its military strategies to create and perpetuate a security dilemma for neighboring states. The study explores the dynamics of these interactions, focusing on how regional actors respond to Iran's actions and the broader implications for the Middle East.

Iran has been an influential power in the Middle East since ancient times, particularly during the Persian Empire. Following the Islamic conquest, Iran became the stronghold of Shia Islam, especially during the Safavid period (1501–1736), which shaped its national identity and cultural influence through the mass conversion to Shia Islam and their cultural influence over the broader Islamic world. These elements, together with an educated population, abundant natural resources, and a considerable geostrategic stance, have cemented Iran's position as a key regional actor.

The overthrow of the Shah in Iran by the Islamic Revolution of 1979 brought on a state run by a regime that was revolutionary, anti-imperialist and Islamist, in stark contrast to the pro-Western Iran under the Shah. Since then, combating Western hegemony has been a cornerstone of Iran's foreign policy, resulting in heightened tensions with Western powers and their regional allies, and often leading to direct conflicts with countries such as the U.S., Israel and Saudi Arabia (Sadjadpour and Ben Taleblu, 2015).

The seeds for modern Iran's emergence as a regional power were sown during and after the 1980s Iran-Iraq War, and its efforts were further accelerated by challenges that arose from U.S. and Western imposed sanctions and isolation policies. Iran capitalized on these circumstances to expand its regional influence by forming alliances and cultivating proxy forces. Iran's backing of groups like Hamas, Hezbollah and the Houthis, among others, and its military roles in Syria and Iraq, have made it a key influencer of the geopolitical dynamics of the region. Today, the aspiration to revive the legacy of the Persian Empire is still central to Iran's foreign policy. However, it has also faced some crushing blows, namely, U.S. encirclement and U.S. and Western sanctions aimed at curbing its influence (Alonso-Trabanco, 2022).

Iran's regional influence became more pronounced following the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, a turning point that significantly impacted Iran's military and foreign policy trajectories in the region. Iran seized the opportunity to consolidate its influence with Shiite factions in Iraq and amplify its power in the region. Not long after, the 2006 Hezbollah-Israel war catapulted Hezbollah to legendary status and emerged a prominent political and military power to be reckoned with in Lebanon that enjoys essentially unlimited Iranian and Syrian support (Muñoz, 2008).

Proxy wars have allowed Iran to keep a foothold in key parts of the Middle East while avoiding direct military confrontations with the U.S. and Israel, its most powerful international and regional adversaries. Iranian-backed militias in countries such as Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Yemen operate to advance Tehran's interests, extending its influence across the

region. Although these proxies often act independently, they are coordinated by the IRGC under the broader strategic framework known as the "Axis of Resistance" (Mousavian, 2024).

Iran's support for Palestine is based mainly on its ideological affinity toward resistance movements, especially Hamas. The isolation of Hamas by the U.S., Israel and European countries, formed a vacuum for Iran to increase its influence in Palestine by extending military and financial support while strengthening its image as the supporter of anti-Zionist factions (Muñoz, 2008).

Beyond its proxy networks, Iran has sought to expand its influence throughout the Middle East by leveraging both military and economic power. These efforts underscore the complex interplay between historical and contemporary foreign policies that position Iran as a central player in the region's power dynamics (Mousavian, 2024). Its geopolitical strategies have solidified its role in shaping the current and future trajectory of Middle Eastern geopolitics (Levitt, 2024).

3.2 Literature Review

- Herz's work "Idealist Internationalism and the Security Dilemma" on the Security Dilemma Theory provides the theoretical backbone for this study. The security dilemma describes a situation in which two or more countries are in an arms race due to the problematic nature of one state's security efforts potentially making other states feel insecure. This context is very useful for understanding Iran's proxy activities, because its support for non-state actors and military expansion has, in turn, drawn defensive reactions from great powers in the region like Saudi Arabia and Israel (Herz, 1950).
- The policy brief entitled "Iran in the Middle East: Leveraging Chaos" by Karim Sadjadpour and Behnam Ben Taleblu examines how Iran exploits regional instability to expand its influence through proxy networks. They argue that Iran's strategic use of chaos is not just in response, but instead suggests that it is a central part of Iran's geopolitical objectives. The study provides insight into some violent actors on the regional stage that Iran sponsors such as Hezbollah, the Houthis, and Shiite militias in Iraq, explaining how Iran exercises influence in the Middle East (Sadjadpour and Ben Taleblu, 2015).
- Levitt's study entitled "Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God" offers a detailed analysis of the group's origins, structure, and operational strategies. It explores how Iran's support has enabled Hezbollah to become a dominant political and military force in Lebanon, with significant regional influence (Levitt, 2024).
- Mousavian's study "The US Strategic Shifts Necessary for Stability in the Middle East" provides an insider's perspective on Iran's foreign policy and its implications for regional stability. The article discusses the need for a strategic shift in U.S. policy toward Iran, emphasizing the importance of diplomatic engagement and conflict resolution (Mousavian, 2024).

The book "Guardians of the Revolution: Iran and the World in the Age of the Ayatollahs" by Takeyh provides a historical analysis of Iran's foreign policy since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, focusing on its ideological and strategic foundations. He explores how Iran's revolutionary ideology has shaped its support for proxy groups and its broader regional ambitions, and that helps in understanding the historical continuity of Iran's proxy warfare and its role in shaping the Middle Eastern geopolitical landscape (Takeyh, 2009).

3.3 What Distinguishes This Study from Previous Studies

This study examines Iran's proxy wars and regional influence, focusing on contemporary events like the war on Gaza. It also uses a multidisciplinary approach, analyzing geopolitical, historical, and ideological aspects, and it links regional dynamics to global security challenges.

4. Methodology of the Study

This study addresses a critical issue in international relations: Iran's interference in the domestic and foreign politics of various Middle Eastern countries. These interventions have far-reaching implications, affecting both the targeted states and

the broader network of international stakeholders. Amid an escalating crisis and a struggling economy, the Iranian regime positions itself as a supporter of the Palestinian struggle against Israeli barbarism. However, its actions often foster instability and internal discord, undermining opportunities for coexistence and regional integration. This approach, pursued for Iran's strategic gains, poses significant threats to regional security. This study mainly focuses on the theoretical and practical dimensions of this political phenomenon.

4.1 Study's Approaches

The study employs an interdisciplinary approach based on theoretical frameworks from the fields of international relations and security studies as well as regional studies. It applies Security Dilemma Theory to explain how Iran's proxy actions lead to insecurity in the neighboring states, which in turn induce defensive reactions and thereby increase regional instability. Furthermore, the study features ideational variables such as ideology and identity to explain the reasons behind Iran's support of proxy groups.

4.2 Study's Area

The study area includes the Middle East, with emphasis on countries where Iran's impact is most significant: Lebanon through Hezbollah, Yemen through the Houthis, Iraq through Shiite militias and Palestine through Hamas. It also looks at Iran's regional strategies including its policy in Syria, conflict with Saudi Arabia as well as the conflict with Israel.

4.3 Study's Data Collection

Sources of data include both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include official statements, diplomatic communications, UN reports while secondary sources include scholarly articles, books, policy briefs and news reports.

5. The Study Topics

5.1 The Nature and Drivers of Proxy Wars in the Middle East

Proxy wars are common in the Middle East due to geo-strategic rivalries, fragile state systems, internal sectarian conflicts, and foreign interference. Because of the region's energy resources and its geographic location, it has become a theater of war for competing regional and international powers such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, the US, and Russia. Lack of governance and sectarian violence in many of the states provide a space for foreign actors to manipulate internal dissatisfactions and fund proxy groups. Moreover, the avoidance of direct fighting and the presence of major world powers encourage the use of proxies to achieve international goals as an effortless and profitable technique for attaining power in the area.

5.1.1 Diplomatic Strategies

Tehran's foreign policy was transformed by the 1979 revolution that toppled the Pahlavi monarchy and ushered in the Islamic Republic. This shift introduced a new diplomatic framework rooted in ideological argumentation and the promotion of Islamic values. Since then, Iran's approach to Middle Eastern diplomacy has combined strategic aspirations with ideological goals, adapting to regional and global developments. This strategy integrates soft power, security threats, anti-imperialist rhetoric, and economic entanglement, resulting in persistent tensions with regional and international actors.

These dynamics have been further complicated by the interplay of geopolitics, where competing influences and interests exacerbate fears and hostilities, particularly between Iran and adversaries like Saudi Arabia and Israel. Consequently, the region remains plagued by instability, fueled by sprawling proxy wars, sectarian geopolitics, and power struggles. In this study, proxy wars are examined as a key tool used by Iran to extend its influence, undermine adversaries, and reshape the regional order in the Middle East without direct confrontation. Proxy wars in this context refer to conflicts in which a third party intervenes indirectly in a pre-existing war to influence the strategic outcome in favor of its preferred faction. Proxy wars are the product of a relationship between a benefactor who is a state or non-state actor external to the dynamic of the existing conflict and the chosen proxies who are the conduit for the benefactor's weapons, training, and funding (Brown, G. W., McLean, I., & McMillan, A., 2018).

A significant development in 2023 was the agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran to restore diplomatic relations, marking a major reconfiguration of the Iranian project in Middle Eastern geopolitics. The move is part of a more widespread trend in governments putting aside historic enmities to work together. The big winner of this reconfiguration would be Iran and its proxies. Tehran also collected a string of diplomatic wins in 2023, including a prisoner deal with the United States, deeper military cooperation with Russia in the Ukraine war's aftermath, a spot in BRICS and many more. However, these gains have caused an upheaval in the region (Sheriff, 2023), highlighting the contentious nature of Iranian foreign policy.

Iran's aspirations for nuclear technology have brought it into collision with the international community, in particular with the United States. The JCPOA was a diplomatic success until it wasn't. It was hoped it could be transformed into a more formal success agreement but became a mere interstate agreement following the United States withdrawal from the project which subsequently led to heightened tensions between Tehran and Washington.

Despite the fact that Iran seeks to elevate its international standing, its ties with Arab governments remain fraught. Arab states are now more open to restoring relations with Iran and cooperating on various issues. Iran, by contrast, did not have to make such overtures to test Arab waters. On the contrary, it continues with its ballistic missile program and leverages its extensive list of proxies to increase its footprint in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen, often at the expense of the stability of these nation-states (Sheriff, 2023).

5.1.2 Economic Role

The Iranian economy has faced challenges for years from international sanctions, especially those imposed by the United States, but it has shown itself to be adaptable and inventive, always looking for new avenues to keep its economy going. Yet, persistent problems like inflation and slow growth have been serious hurdles for the Iranian economy, with complications for both the state and the people. Moreover, some of the anti-Western foreign policies of the Iranian government, which aggravated those adversarial relations, have also extended the reach of US-led sanctions and increased the country's economic blockade (The Economic Challenge Ahead for Iran, 2024).

To overcome these economic hurdles, Iran has pursued innovative strategies, these economic measures not only address immediate economic needs, but they also lie at the center of Iran's involvement in proxy wars. Proceeds from unauthorized oil exports and cryptocurrency transactions are often redirected to fund its proxy militias. These proxies give Iran leverage to either confront or combat with regional opponents, exert force and retain its strategic clout and foothold in significant regions. Simultaneously, Iran's economic ties with countries like China and Russia enable it to access critical material and logistical supplies, enabling it to integrate its economic policies with broader geopolitical and military goals (The Economist, 2024).

The revolutionary Iran of yesteryear strives to find its way through the maze of mashed-up national interests, sanctions and geopolitical rivalries. Iran's resilience in navigating sanctions and geopolitical rivalries reflects a strategic pivot from heavy reliance on oil revenues to a more diversified economic approach. This shift is evident in the adoption of digital currencies, the promotion of domestic production, and enhanced regional cooperation, which collectively bolster the country's economic stability despite external pressures (Aditya, 2023).

The global ostracism of Russia, exacerbated by its war on Ukraine, has reshaped energy dynamics, highlighting the Gulf region's strategic importance as an alternative energy source. For Iran, this geopolitical shift underscores its adversarial relationships with the United States and Israel, both of which seek to curtail its regional influence. Iran's economic flexibility supports its involvement in regional conflicts, including alliances with the Houthi rebels in Yemen and groups challenging Gulf monarchies. This dual strategy of economic adaptation and regional engagement further destabilizes an already volatile region.

5.2 Iran's Strategic Engagement in Proxy Warfare

Iran utilizes proxy warfare as a powerful pillar of its regional strategy for power projection, deterrence, ideological expansion as well as undermining the sovereignty of its adversaries. Iran furthers its influence across the Middle East

through support of the Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen and Shia militia in Iraq and Syria. Proxy networks also serve as a deterrent to regional rivals such as Israel and Saudi Arabia while serving Iran's revolutionary agenda of resisting western dominance and spreading Islamic rule. This low-cost approach enables Iran to achieve its objectives without risks associated with direct confrontation, but it has contributed to regional instability and prolonged conflicts.

5.2.1 Iran's Regional Influence and Escalating Proxy Conflicts

Iran is perceived as a legitimate security threat by the Gulf monarchs; Bahrain regards it as an existential challenge; Qatar and the UAE have normalized diplomatic relations, and Saudi Arabia has warily dealt with Iran in the past, as the kingdom has expressed fears over Iranian ambitions. Israel, by contrast, views Tehran as the single biggest existential threat in the region, given its nuclear aspirations, militant regional policies, support for Hezbollah and Hamas, and denial of Israel's right to exist. The Gulf has increased in significance due to Russia's actions in Ukraine and Iran's undeniable aspiration to dominate regional powers (Theo, 2023).

The Islamic Republic of Iran continues to pose a permanent threat to the national security of the United States and its allies as it seeks nuclear capabilities and pursues other regional destabilizing activities. Iran's increasing involvement in Russia's war in Ukraine and its repressive domestic policies only magnifies its destabilizing role. A part of its strategy is its network of proxy militias that play a vital function in expanding Iranian footprints and protecting Iranian interests in the region (Maloney, 2023).

Since Hamas mounted its surprise attack against Israel on Oct. 7, 2023, hostilities from Iranian-affiliated militias have surged dramatically, creating a wrenching challenge for the international community. Militia groups have been launching strikes nearly every day at sites across the Middle East, sometimes in multiple locations at the same time. The Houthis in Yemen have been targeting vessels in the Red Sea for nearly a year by now, resulting in considerable diversions and delays and additional costs of maritime shipping. Groups like Hezbollah and Iraqi factions have simultaneously escalated attacks on U.S. bases in Iraq and Syria, alongside the regular engagements of Hezbollah with Israeli forces along the Israel-Lebanon border (Sly, Salim and Haidamous, 2024).

Against this backdrop, the U.S. administration has been, in some ways, restively clear, in fact decisive, in its pushback against the challenge of Tehran and its "Axis of Resistance" after the Israeli operation in Gaza. Tensions between the U.S. and Iran have reached a critical point, marked by incidents such as a drone assault reportedly linked to Iranian-backed forces targeting U.S. troops stationed in Jordan. The Biden administration sees the attack as a violation of an unspoken red line, prompting retaliatory strikes against another Iranian-backed group. As Yemen's Houthi rebels continue to strike Red Sea shipping, the Biden administration has vowed a "very consequential" response, and in fact the U.S. along with the UK and other allies have launched several strikes against the Houthis. However, the situation still offers the U.S. troubling choices because any direct confrontation with Iran brings the risk of a spiral of escalation and the chance of getting sucked into a regional war. This dilemma highlights the historical challenges and limitations of diplomacy with Iran, offering little room for decisive geopolitical maneuvering—a constraint particularly pronounced during the U.S. presidential election cycle (France 24, 2024).

The actions of the Iran-aligned militias come with elevated risks since miscalculation by either side could explode a much larger, more intense conflict across the Middle East. That danger is particularly acute in a regional environment where tensions are already high, and miscalculations could inadvertently create catastrophic results. Attempts to exploit the region's conditions will come at unacceptable costs and will undermine prospects for stability (United Nations Meetings Coverage and Press Releases, 2024).

5.3 The Regional Impact of Proxy Wars

Iran's proxy network grew organically from the transnational networks that funded the 1979 revolution. The Islamic Republic's leadership had expansionist ambitions from day one. The ideology that accompanied the revolution itself was global, and Ayatollah Khomeini claimed that the revolution would survive only by being exported, "if we stay in a closed

environment, the defeat of the revolution will undoubtedly happen" (Takeyh, 2009).

Iran's support of Assad in Syria both directly and by pressuring Shiite groups throughout the region to fight alongside Assad has, for a while, strained its relations with Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), but differences were quickly resolved (Çakmak, 2015). Iran's support for Hamas was an enabling factor for Hamas's attacks on Oct. 7, 2024, during which it used its enormous rocket stockpile.

The direct cause for the past 15 years of reconciliation between Iranian-backed Shiite militias in Iraq was, for all intents and purposes, the 2003 U.S.-led invasion that overthrew, at the time, the Baathist regime and set off the insurgencies of both sectarian Shia and Sunni extremists. An end result for which Iran has been preparing since at least the 1980s when it threw its resources behind Iraq-based Shiite groups opposed to the Saddam regime including the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, and its paramilitary arm the Badr Corps (Mansour, 2020).

The most recent beneficiary of Tehran's proxy strategy is Ansar Allah in Yemen, commonly known as the Houthi movement. This faction of Zaidi Shiites launched its insurgency against the Yemeni government roughly 20 years ago and later fought both domestic foes and regional adversaries. In 2015, Saudi Arabia, together with its Gulf partners and with American support, began a military intervention that did not yield a united Yemen or containment of the Houthis but instead doubled down on the humanitarian catastrophe and solidified the Iranian patronage of the rebels, including via ballistic missiles, drones and other advanced weapons systems (Al-Goidithe, 2024).

Hamas's attack on Israel and the Israeli military response that followed in Gaza also serve multiple Iranian aims, namely entrenching Tehran's regional force projection, grooming its network of proxy forces, and derailing Israeli–Saudi normalization efforts. The events have also been damaging to Israel, which was forced by the circumstances to launch a punishing military campaign that has left thousands of Gazans dead and harmed its image abroad (Eisenstadt, 2023).

Iran's proxy network has increased its direct attacks on Israel as well as U.S. forces in the region. The first to strike was Hezbollah, which fired rockets, shells, and drones from Lebanon into Israel, hitting military and civilian sites. Iraqi militias followed, carrying out rocket, missile and drone attacks on U.S. forces in Iraq, Syria and Jordan. The Houthis in Yemen have since tried to hit Israel with their ballistic missile and drones but, by late November 2023, have escalated to higher-tech attacks against commercial shipping traffic in the Red Sea, forcing hundreds of vessels to reroute at considerable cost and delay (Maloney, 2024).

The death of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi in May 2024 adds another layer of complexity to Iran's internal politics and international plots. Raisi's death, although succeeded by Masoud Pezeshkian, left a leadership void, which together with the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's advanced age and anticipated disputes over his succession are already denting Iran's internal politics. The political uncertainties and widespread social discontent and protests could provoke a more conservative and defensive response from the Iranian regime in the short term. However, Tehran's rigid regional policies are likely to stay the same.

On a regional level, the assassination of the Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in July 2024 and the killing of Hezbollah's Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah in September 2024 have weakened and destabilized Iran's net of proxies. Iran's retaliation in the form of ballistic missile strikes aimed at Israel on October 1, 2024, and Israel's airstrikes against Iranian targets on October 26, 2024, highlight the dangerous spiraling of the conflict.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has successfully answered its central question, tested its hypothesis, and fulfilled its objectives by examining Iran's use of proxy networks and its pursuit of regional hegemony. Iran has significant leverage from its vast network of proxy groups throughout the region, allowing it to spread its influence and seek its own strategic ends. This enables Iran to work beneath the threshold of traditional conflict, avoiding direct retaliation while sapping its opponents similarly. Their proxy roles in wars in Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine have fundamentally changed the balance of regional security by deepening conflicts, indefinitely prolonging them.

The study claims that Iran's quest for regional hegemony is driven by a multifaceted set of ideological, economic, and strategic factors. At the heart of the Iranian leadership's foreign policy is the belief that it is renewing its historic dominance to counter an imagined Western one. But this ambition has earned Iran brutal regional and international enemies, primarily the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Israel, and shaped an intensely polarized and volatile landscape.

Furthermore, the study highlighted the security dilemma inherent in Iran's actions. The expansion of its military capabilities and the support for non-state actors have elicited defensive responses from other regional states, exacerbating an arms race and heightening tensions.

The Middle East remains an explosive combination where misjudgments can spill into broader warfare. Proxy groups, with their often-high degree of autonomy, carry an always-present risk of unintended consequences and instability rippling across the region. As we continue to observe militaries engaging in violence against civilian communities, forced displacement, injury, and loss of life, we also weigh the human cost of military activities. The multi-dimensional nature of these challenges necessitates engaging local, regional, and international actors toward facilitating dialogue, de-escalation, and promoting sustainable peace.

In conclusion, proxies have become a profoundly damaging feature of Iran's power projection in the region, and they carry both immediate and long-term implications for security elsewhere. The Islamic Republic has strived to fully leverage its alliances to implement its vision for regional order, especially after the emergence of ISIS. The strategy it has pursued, however, seems to have contributed to increased destruction and fragmentation in the Middle East. The world still has much to do to contain Iran's influence and avoid a broader regional war. The violent cycle must be interrupted to build a more stable and peaceful Middle East based on diplomatic relations, conflict resolution, and socio-economic development. Iran undoubtedly plays a role in the future trajectory of the Middle East. What remains less clear, however, is where will Iran find a braking point assuming it does not seek to inflame further regional conflicts?

7. Results and Discussions

7.1 Findings

Iran's use of proxy groups has enabled it to extend its influence across the Middle East while avoiding direct conflict, but this strategy has come at a great cost. It has exacerbated regional instability, extended disputes and conflicts, and created a security dilemma, which has led to defensive reactions from surrounding nations and fueled an arms race. Iran's long-term objectives have been weakened and the region has become even more unstable as a result of the human cost of proxy war, which includes civilian deaths, displacement, and humanitarian crises. Iran's quest for regional hegemony has increased polarization, alienated important regional and international players, and contributed to the Middle East's fragmentation, increasing the likelihood of a wider confrontation, notwithstanding any short-term benefits and gains.

7.2 Recommendations

To address the challenges posed by Iran's proxy strategy, the international community should prioritize diplomatic engagement, conflict resolution, and regional cooperation. In order to address the underlying causes of instability, efforts should be directed at poverty alleviation, governance changes, and socioeconomic growth. Specific penalties and rewards might stop Iran's destabilizing actions while promoting constructive conduct. Monitoring and regulating proxy groups, providing humanitarian assistance, and protecting civilians are essential to mitigating the human cost of conflicts.

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