Iran's 'Proxy Warfare' Strategy in the New Regional Order



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Abstract:

This study examines the evolution of Iran's proxy warfare strategy following the 2023 Gaza War, focusing on how the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps has recalibrated its regional posture and operational methods. It analyzes the reasons behind Iran's reliance on proxy groups as instruments of regional influence and strategic deterrence, particularly in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. The study also highlights the shifting balance between ideological commitment and strategic pragmatism in Iran's relations with its proxies after Israeli military campaigns. It further questions whether Iran's decentralized proxy-based strategy remains viable amid growing geopolitical pressures and rapid regional change.

***key words**: Proxy warfare; Gaza War 2023; regional balance; the Houthis; Hamas; Hezbollah.*

***JEL classification:** F51; F52; F59; N40; N45.*

ملخص

تسعى الدراسة الى البحث في تطور استراتيجية إيران للحرب بالوكالة في أعقاب حرب غزة عام 2023، مع التركيز على كيفية إعادة ضبط فيلق القدس التابع للحرس الثوري الإسلامي لوضعه الإقليمي وأساليبه العملياتية. وتحليل اسباب الاعتماد الإيراني على الجماعات الوكيلة كأدوات للتأثير الإقليمي والردع الاستراتيجي، لا سيما في لبنان والعراق وسوريا واليمن. وايلاء الأهمية للتوازن المتغير بين الالتزام الأيديولوجي والبراغماتية الاستراتيجية في علاقة إيران بوكلائها في أعقاب الحملات العسكرية الإسرائيلية العدوانية. وهنا نتساءل ما إذا كانت استراتيجية إيران اللامركزية القائمة على الوكلاء لا تزال قابلة للاستمرار في ظل الضغوط الجيوسياسية المتزايدة والتغيرات الإقليمية المتسارعة،

***الكلمات المفتاحية:** الحرب بالوكالة؛ حرب غزة 2023؛ التوازن الإقليمي؛ الحوثيون؛ حماس؛ حزب الله.*

***تصنيف جال:** F51، F52، F59، N40، N45.*

Introduction:

Iran's defense doctrine serves as the fundamental military strategy which experienced major changes after the United States entered Iraq during 2003. The devastating war led to the formation of Tehran's defensive approach which became more organized after 2010 to demonstrate their preparedness for facing threats which reach outside their domestic territory. The long-term defense strategy of Iran received its current form because Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei declared in 2019 that Iran needs to detect and fight against threats which extend past its national boundaries.

The international sanctions that followed the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988) compelled Tehran to develop new approaches to protect itself from both domestic and external threats, relying increasingly on asymmetric and proxy warfare tactics. Over time, several states including Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, China, and Russia have developed extensive asymmetric warfare capabilities in order to safeguard their regional interests and achieve strategic objectives within their foreign policy frameworks (Ahmadzadeh, 2024, pp. 27-42). Among these states, Iran has established numerous proxy organizations operating across the volatile Middle East under the authority and guidance of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Over the past three decades, Tehran has devoted substantial resources to the development and support of armed proxy groups, particularly in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. Iran's international isolation and sustained global pressure have encouraged the use of these armed groups as strategic instruments for expanding its regional influence while simultaneously protecting the ruling regime from direct foreign confrontation.

The majority of Iran's proxy groups operate from Shiʿa-majority areas which include Iraq and Lebanon and Yemen but they also operate through Sunni Arab organizations including the Palestinian-based Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas). Within this context, Hezbollah, based in Lebanon, has maintained its position as Iran's most prominent proxy in the Middle East, extending Tehran's influence to other regional states and threatening the Israeli adversary (Ross, 2023, pp. 9-180). The strategy includes Hezbollah as a vital element which defends and strengthens Iran's Syrian position throughout the violent civil war by supporting Bashar al-Assad's government. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps controls Hezbollah together with other proxy groups through its Quds Force which serves as their main organizational authority.

The Quds Force operates as the main non-governmental organization which executes Iran's overseas missions and intelligence operations across borders and cyber battles and missile development and drone operations and naval force expansion. The Quds Force has worked to establish control over all Iranian-backed military organizations which operate across the Middle East since its start as an organization (Regional Studies: The Geopolitics of the Middle East, Society and State, Volume I). The "Axis of Resistance" movement brought Tehran to expand its control over neighboring territories which allowed the city to boost its power while it started concentrating on its Arabian Gulf objectives.

The axis serves as a tool which Iran can activate to maintain its power base through ideological growth and deterrence and influence display according to McInnis in his research. The Hamas attacks which the IRGC Quds Force supported during their October 7 2023 assault on Israel caused major changes throughout Middle East geopolitics which led to the most dangerous military conflict since many years.

Israel continues its all-out military campaign against Hamas in Gaza while it fights Hezbollah in southern Lebanon and conducts operations in Syria and northern Yemen which forces Iran to face a strategic crisis that makes it question its traditional approach of supporting American opponents through regional allies especially with Israel. The research investigates how Iran developed its proxy warfare methods after the 2023 Gaza conflict while it studies the Quds Force of the IRGC which modified its operational methods after the Israel-Hamas war. The research studies how Iranian proxy operations in Iraq and Syria and Yemen and Lebanon evolved because of Israel's successful military operations which targeted the main leaders of these well-known armed groups. A complete evaluation of these factors will show how Iran uses ideological beliefs and strategic planning to direct its proxy organizations.

The central question is: how has Iran's strategic use of proxy warfare evolved in response to the changing geopolitical environment following the Gaza war of 2023? How does Iran balance ideological alignment and strategic pragmatism in its relationships with its proxies after 2023?

Iran's Strategy in Proxy Warfare in the Middle East: The past twenty years have seen proxy warfare become the main approach for modern military clashes even though many people remain unclear about its full scope. The Middle Eastern region experiences continuous modifications in its geopolitical structure which mainly affect the domestic political systems of its member states.

The military operations that Iran conducts through its non-state actor partners become clear when we study proxy warfare methods which demonstrate how these activities shape the security environment throughout the region. The three main elements which drive Iran to use proxy warfare operations together with its hybrid tactics include social and economic factors as well as military-technological aspects. The limited conventional military strength of Iran compared to Israel and other regional powers led Tehran to focus on developing asymmetric tactics which produced their unique security framework. The main security goal which drives Iran to support proxy warfare operations exists to protect the ruling system and defend national borders through Shiʿi Islamic beliefs which Ayatollah Khomeini developed through his own interpretation. The Islamic regime according to Ayatollah Khomeini requires violation of Islamic principles when such violations become essential to defend the regime's vital interests.

The strategy allows Iran to adjust its Islamic doctrines while it serves as the base for its proxy operation model. Through its proxy strategy Iran prefers to build defensive deterrence systems instead of creating an extensive defensive network to strengthen its security. Iran chooses to face future threats directly instead of waiting for them to appear at its national borders (Samad & Naz, 2025, pp. 1-8). The document reveals why Iran uses its well-known non-state groups to operate across Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Lebanon through its "Axis of Resistance" network. The proxy groups function as security measures which Iran uses to defend its territory while they enable the nation to expand its strategic reach and achieve better power in its surrounding region. The focus on proxy strategy exists because Iran wants to maintain this approach as a permanent method for building powerful deterrent systems. The Islamic regime which rules Iran has worked to spread the Iranian Revolution because it represents a revolutionary system.

Since 1979, Iran has adopted principles that transcend national boundaries with the aim of "assisting the Islamic world in combating Western imperialism." Tehran sets particular rules which its regional proxy groups must follow to maintain their unique operational methods in their relationships with the Iranian government. The Iranian government requires its proxy groups to follow three main rules which include their acceptance of Shiʿi Islam based on Iran's version of interpretation and their acceptance of Iran as their only source of material and military backing and their alignment with Tehran's strategic goals. Regional proxy groups receive complete support from Iran when they meet these requirements which makes them vital to Iran's deep warfare strategy.

Muqtada al-Sadr who leads the Iraqi Sadrist Movement demonstrates the difficulties which Iran faces when it tries to manage its relationships with all its regional Shi'i affiliated groups. The Iraqi Shi'i cleric Al-Sadr who holds major influence in Iraq emerges as a well-known opponent of Iranian views yet he does not function as an effective proxy agent. The Sadrist Movement maintains its influence in Iran through Iran's substantial efforts to keep its power base active. The Sadrist supporters who back Tehran should form their own groups when all previous attempts to create unity between the two factions prove unsuccessful. The smaller affiliated groups become defenseless while they must rely on Tehran's help which forces them to follow Iran's regional strategic goals.

Iran took control of Iraq through two main proxy groups which included Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and Kata'ib Hezbollah and other affiliated groups after Muqtada al-Sadr pulled out of Iraqi politics and stopped his movement in 2022 because of the deep political split in Iraq (Imam, 2021, p. 155).

The two groups functioned as the primary forces which directed Iraqi political affairs throughout the period from 2022 to 2024 thus confirming the theory that smaller proxy organizations prove more manageable. Iran has chosen to back every Middle Eastern proxy group regardless of their size because it allows them to create a worldwide military network which defends their strategic interests while expanding their territorial influence.

Tehran has shown particular interest in merging its military forces with the Lebanese national armies ever since it adopted its proxy strategy. The practice of proxy warfare has led to battles between Iran and its Arab neighbors which resulted in worsening ties between Iran and most Arab countries in the region. The Arab states then started to use proxy warfare against Tehran while they focused their attacks on three unstable areas which included Balochistan and Sistan and Iranian Kurdistan—this serves as a clear example of the backlash phenomenon (Parchizadeh, 2021).

The long-term proxy strategy of Iran has established a major impact on regional conflicts although Iran continues to deny its involvement while harsh economic sanctions have made diplomacy between nations nearly impossible.

The Quds Force developed its proxy warfare operations during 2020 as the Axis of Resistance disintegrated after General Qassem Soleimani received his fatal shot in Baghdad. The Quds Force commander Soleimani developed direct relationships with Hezbollah and Kataib Hezbollah and Popular Mobilization

Forces and Houthi groups. The assassination of this individual caused a severe crisis which destroyed all the existing bonds between Iran's main proxy organizations and their regional leaders so Tehran needed to develop fresh approaches for directing its Middle Eastern operations. The new commander General Esmail Qaani adopted formal management systems for proxy group operations which he used to expand operational independence for Hezbollah and Houthi forces in Yemen.

General Qaani lacks the personal charisma which his predecessor Qassem Soleimani used to possess so this situation has created new difficulties for the relationship between Quds Force leadership and their proxy organizations. In Iraq the post-Soleimani period saw the emergence of Jamaʿat al-Kahf and ʿUsbat al-Thaʾirin who operated without strong leadership but followed the same beliefs. The Quds Force under Qaani faced major challenges to control their proxy organizations because the Middle East experienced major geopolitical shifts before Hamas launched its October 7 2023 attack against Israel. Qaani failed to establish personal connections with proxy group leaders after Soleimani's death which reduced the Quds Force's ability to manage its local militias thus creating a decentralized "Axis of Resistance (Rajabi, 2024, p. 96). "

The weight of this responsibility became more apparent when Israel started its major military operation against Hamas during its Gaza operations and against Hezbollah in southern Lebanon. The Shiʿa Crescent of Iran faced increased instability because Turkish-backed anti-Assad forces in Syria launched a new campaign to remove the Baʿath government during 2024.

The opposition forces reached major Syrian cities during their successful advance yet the Iranian-backed Hezbollah together with Qaani's Quds Force failed to develop counter-operations which would have stopped the opposition forces from making progress. The IRGC Quds Force operating in Syria helped Iran establish control over vital strategic zones through which it blocked Israeli forces and their Western allies from advancing. Multiple scholars have predicted that Syria's territorial loss would cause the Axis of Resistance to collapse but Ayatollah Ali Khamenei responded to these predictions with a swift denial. The regional geopolitical system experienced a major transformation through Bashar al-Assad's removal but Syria continues to serve as the fundamental base for the Shiʿa Crescent which allows Iran to support Hezbollah and its other proxy organizations directly.

The removal of the Syrian regime would create conditions which help Iran maintain its domestic order thus making Tehran's regional power claims less credible.

The new regional order demands Iran to continue its external operations because it employs a decentralized proxy system which supports its foreign policy approach. The Iranian government will probably direct its attention toward building regular military power to establish deterrence because asymmetric warfare and proxy warfare methods have proven ineffective under current circumstances. The current conflict in Gaza together with Syria's downfall and Hezbollah's failure and the Israeli killing of Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah have revealed weaknesses in Iran and its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps which suggest their proxy forces might lose their importance in their warfare approach. Iran will develop its ballistic missile and unmanned aerial vehicle systems while it expands its naval operations because its current proxy group operations in Syria and Iraq have faced setbacks. Iran understands that its conventional proxy warfare approach will not stop Israel from launching more destructive attacks because Israel conducts military operations in Lebanon and Syria and Yemen but Tehran had already made significant changes to its regional security system before the Gaza conflict began (Crown Center for Middle East Studies Brandeis University, 2024).

Since 2020 Tehran has established new strategic priorities which focus on the Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman and northern Indian Ocean to solve economic problems and protect national security and avoid sanctions and boost its international influence. The new Iranian president Masoud Pezeshkian shows no interest in funding proxy groups because he wants to focus on Western diplomatic talks and strategic partnerships with neighboring countries and domestic socio-economic growth and enhanced coastal defense and maritime operations to protect southern coastline importance (Rajabi, 2024). The Middle East continues to face geopolitical instability which forces Iran to sustain its use of proxy forces while it might need to create additional ones.

Alliances with new tactics against Israel: The military decline of Hezbollah and Hamas following the 2023 operations together with Iran's use of ballistic missiles and conventional troops will probably lead to increased violence which could result in a direct military encounter between Iranian and Israeli forces. Israel has reached permanent success through its strategic approach which fights against Iranian influence and their proxy networks that operate in the

countries that surround Israel. The Assad regime in Syria has collapsed which resulted in the disappearance of the "Axis of Resistance" as a political entity. The collapse has caused Iran to become more isolated while it has lost its ability to control Mediterranean affairs.

The negative expectations have triggered strong debates among Iran's conservative political leaders who question whether Iran can regain its geopolitical influence in the upcoming years. The Israel Defense Forces established a military operation against Iran through targeted airstrikes which took place from June 13 to June 24 2025 because of ongoing discussions about these issues in Israeli society and political circles. The Israel Defense Forces conducted their primary operations against Iran through their nuclear and missile program targets while they also targeted Major General Hossein Salami who leads the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Major General Mohammad Bagheri who serves as Chief of the General Staff and Major General Ali Hajizadeh who commands the IRGC Aerospace Force and leads Iranian ballistic missile and drone production.

The twelve-day war established a testing ground for Israel to assess its military advancements which spanned many years while showing their advanced technological edge and creating new combat scenarios to fight against Iranian nuclear and ballistic threats. The war exposed the Islamic Republic's operational abilities in traditional military conflicts. The Israeli surprise attack together with Mossad's extensive infiltration operation showed that Israel's counterintelligence system lacked strength which will reduce Tehran's ability to control its autonomous proxy organizations. Western academic scholars have found evidence which demonstrates Iran continues to direct its remaining proxy forces in Yemen and Iraq for lethal operations.

Iran uses a decentralized proxy system to operate in the new regional order because its proxy organizations operate from distant locations which prevent them from taking over Hezbollah's position as Iran's main operational base against Israel (Crown Center for Middle East Studies Brandeis University, 2024).

The Southern Front of Iran has become the new operational base for the Houthis who serve as the leading force. The start of large military operations in Gaza together with southern Lebanon and Syria forced Iran to modify its usual proxy operations to match the current combat situation. The region's most powerful Iranian proxy force Hezbollah fails to resist Israeli air and ground attacks although it maintains a strong force of fighters and Iranian-made missiles

and numerous unmanned drones. The drone attacks which Hezbollah conducted against Israeli cities have shown better targeting skills and drone system improvements but Israeli forces still maintain their defensive capabilities (Lederer & Krauss, 2024, p. 22). Hezbollah suffered a complete loss of its top leadership which included all major military leaders during the span of one year.

The rising number of Hezbollah casualties has prompted Iran to direct its core military efforts toward its southern front which operates in Yemen. The Ansar Allah movement which leads the Houthis took control of Yemen in 2015 to establish a new government which serves as a fundamental base for Iran's influence across the Gulf region. The Yemeni Houthis have obtained major military backing from Iran throughout the past ten years through Iranian military instructors who worked to enhance Yemeni ballistic missile and naval defense systems. The Houthis began methodical missile attacks against Israeli cities together with their ongoing Red Sea commercial vessel attacks after Israel conducted its Gaza operation in 2023 which disrupted worldwide shipping operations.

The Houthi military operations against Israel help Iran achieve its strategic goal of creating naval disruptions through unconventional means which allow Tehran to strengthen its position against modern naval forces. The ongoing missile attacks which start in Yemen have forced Israel to alter its security approach during this new period (Samad & Naz, 2025). (Sudani, 2025, p. 114) The Houthis operate with broad independence which makes their situation different from Lebanese and Iraqi proxies so Iran maintains substantial influence over their missile attacks against Israel. The alliance pattern delivers Iranian advantages through hidden operations which force Israel and its Western partners to pay expensive political and economic consequences.

The research shows that Houthi forces rose to power through Iran's proxy system which now operates with decentralized operations under Esmail Qaani's command. The Houthis along with other independent groups emerged as ideological defenders who work to achieve their domestic and regional goals since Soleimani's death (Isaac, 2025). The military situation changed because Hamas suffered heavy losses in Gaza while Hezbollah faced defeat in Lebanon so Israel responded with targeted military operations against Houthi forces. Israel conducted precision strikes against Houthi military facilities to demonstrate they had lost their protection which used to come from distance and their status as rebels so now they face the same treatment as regular military enemies.

The Israeli government views the Houthi presence in Yemen as a core part of Iran's strategic operations which endanger the country's national security instead of considering Yemen a secondary aspect of Iranian proxy activities. The Houthi missile attacks on Israeli cities will trigger Israel to launch more powerful military responses which will force the already unstable situation in the area to become even more intense. The military operations of Israel would increase which would force Iran to show its support for Yemen more clearly which might trigger a direct military clash that would make Iran lose its ability to hide its involvement which forms the core of its asymmetric strategy.

During the previous forty years Iran has dedicated substantial resources to develop proxy military forces which operate close to its borders in order to stop threats that mainly come from Israel. The Iranian economy faces severe damage because of extended sanctions and poor management practices which restrict its ability to develop conventional military power so Iran must depend on its proxy warfare approach which unites Shiʿi ideology with Israeli opposition. The ability of certain proxy groups to fight limited battles against Israeli forces and American troops stationed in the area has become the main factor which drives Tehran to support proxy warfare activities.

Iran continues to face failure in its pursuit of deterrence through proxy forces after 2023 although the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Quds Force have controlled well-known transnational organizations for many years. The time brought a complete transformation to Iran's approach toward the region because new international power structures emerged.

Conclusion:

The new realities on the ground will make Iran shift its priorities toward developing its ballistic missile (Robinson, 2025) systems and boosting its production of unmanned aerial vehicles and naval capabilities and its nuclear weapons program. The West together with Israel have started to worry about these emerging developments. The Islamic Republic has shown practical decision-making throughout history yet its domestic situation remains unstable so Tehran might focus on rebuilding its proxy network which includes Hamas and Houthi forces. The way proxy networks undergo structural changes will help Iran spread its power while blocking enemy operations and directing what happens in the region without fighting enemies directly.

The method will probably stay a main factor in Iran's strategic approach for the next few years because the United States together with Israel and some Arab nations have started to show more aggressive behavior which includes building naval partnerships that could threaten Iran while making it more isolated from the world. In conclusion, Iran is likely to confront genuine security challenges amid the widening security gap in the increasingly fragmented Middle East after 2023. The decrease in militia authority forces Tehran to decrease its revolutionary activities because the government needs to manage rising domestic and foreign challenges.

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