Decoding Iran's Proxy Strategy: Determent or Destabilization? A Review and Scientific Commentary

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Abstract

In Middle Eastern geopolitics, Iran's use of proxy forces has become an important strategy that shapes the region and challenges traditional ideas about deterrence and stability. By strategically placing armed groups across Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen, Iran exercises influence over these territories that often blur the boundary between state and non-state actors. This complex web of alliances raises critical questions: Is Tehran's approach a calculated attempt to deter enemies while projecting power? Or is it just a recipe for more destabilization in an already volatile area? In this review article we will examine Iran's proxy strategy closely looking at its historical background, motivations behind it as well as implications on both regional security and international relations; we will see whether this is a style in the Iranian political structure for security maintenance- like or unlike the styles in the American Politics[1][1]

Keywords— Regional Conflicts, Regional powers, Main Actors, Iran, Proxies, World Powers, Middle Powers

I. INTRODUCTION

As World War II came to an end, the issue of proxy groups became widely used in political literature, and proxy conflicts became a common event in international relations. Proxy conflict is the sharing of the costs of war in order to minimize its costs to taxpayers, politicians, and the domestic military. Proxy conflict can be considered a cooperative war in which a degree of strategic and operational cooperation is seen between ordered and disordered forces. In proxy conflicts, instead of going to war with each other directly, the involved powers try to weaken the faced government or put pressure on it by providing financial support, supplying weapons, along with propaganda, from other countries or armed groups that are at war with the opposite government or its allies. In fact, due to the high political, economic, and human costs of war, the parties try to attack the other side and pursue their interests through the support of third parties and governments. Andrew Mumford (2013) in his article called "Proxy Warfare and the Future of Conflicts", believes that in a bipolar world, the high costs of military conflict between two superpowers and avoiding a nuclear war that could lead to the complete destruction of both, lead them to the use of cheaper methods of confronting each other. In this regard, proxy forces were employed as a seemingly safer way of continuing hostilities. The Iraq war against Iran was the only war that Saddam imposed on Iran on behalf of both superpowers and with the aim of restraining the movement of the Islamic revolution.

Abolhasan Shirazi (2015) in an article titled "Measuring the Impact of the Competitive Element on the Proxy Wars of Iran and Saudi Arabia" writes that a proxy war takes place to expand influence in a common competitive environment. In other words, the warring parties try to advance their conflict in their external geopolitics, and according to an unwritten agreement, they avoid tension and conflict in their internal geopolitics and control it as much as possible. However, the difference between the soft and hard power of the two countries can also be one of the reasons for the tendency to proxy wars. From the point of view of Roozbeh

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Dehnavi and Safavipour

Journal of Humanities and Education Development (JHED)
J. Humanities Educ. Dev.- 6(5)-2024

Parsapour (2015) in the article "Regional Proxy Wars and Greater Middle East Plan", if it is assumed that country "A" is significantly more powerful than country "B", then country "B" considers the best option to confront with "A" in resorting to a proxy war.

Another reason for resorting to proxy forces is the need for public opinion to support wars at the international level and to worry about global reactions if a country directly enters a war with another country. Thus, the important role of the media in American politics has been one of the main reasons for the popularity of proxy wars. Most of the time, after the occurrence of important wars, the American media started publishing anti-war views, which caused pressure on the government; therefore, countries that cannot provide the necessary justifications for public opinion to directly enter the war prefer to resort to proxy wars.

In the post-Cold War era, proxy wars became more common and became an integral part of regional conflict in West Asia. In Moslinejad and Samadi's article (2018) entitled "Saudi Arabia's strategic policy in the geopolitical expansion process of the Middle East Crisis", it is pointed out that the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Israel have always accused Iran of conducting proxy wars as a tool for "issuing the Islamic Revolution", "supporting international terrorism" and "spreading Shia". Moreover, the discourse of the Shiite Crescent, which was used by King Abdullah of Jordan, refers to the concept of the necessity of confronting Iran's ideological and identity role in the Arab countries of the Middle East. From the point of view of Americans, Iran is a force that disturbs regional stability, supports terrorism, and violates human rights, which seeks to expand its influence among Shiites in different regions of the world.

These claims have caused the world-dominating powers to apply various pressure methods to reduce the power of Iran, including sanctions, taking advantage of reactionary Arab regimes, and utilizing proxy wars. In July 2006, the Zionist regime planned to take military action against Iran in order to change the balance of power in the region. However, the high cost of a direct war with Iran made the most important regional ally of Iran, Hezbollah, Lebanon, to be targeted. In this way, after the Cold War, the first proxy warfare in West Asia began with the aim of weakening the Islamic Republic of Iran, which is known as the 33-day military conflict. In addition, the Syrian war is the second largest war in the region, which has been analyzed from its emergence as a proxy warfare against Iran and the Axis of Resistance.

On the other hand, the motivational system of Islamic Republic rulers and the economic, military, and geopolitical capabilities of Iran, as well as the structure of the international system, have made foreign policy of Iran after the collapse of the bipolar international system, to employ a new strategy to secure national interests and defend its national security. In this regard, the mentioned issue includes the use of non-governmental allies active in the region, whose position in the decision-making process of the foreign policy of Iran has been increasing.

Therefore, this research aims to know and realize why the tendency of the Islamic Republic of Iran is toward proxy groups after the end of the bipolar system. However, this issue allows for a better comprehension of Iran's foreign policy in West Asia. The main question raised in this research is what was the reason for the favor and attention of the Islamic Republic of Iran to proxy groups in the Middle East after the collapse of the bipolar system and what effect did these groups have on the national security of Iran and the power equations of West Asia region? The hypothesis of the research is that: "Iran, with a security-oriented approach, following the aim of increasing strategic depth, and also with a benefit-oriented approach, trying to solve the paradox of de-escalation in international relations while maintaining ideals, seeks to support proxy groups in the region and the position of these groups in the Iranian foreign policy strategy is to institutionalize a kind of balance against the threats of enemies in the peripheral areas of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

In other words, after the collapse of the bipolar system, the extent and severity of the threats from the United States to the national security of other countries is such that one actor alone will not be able to deal with it effectively and directly. Therefore, the formation and support of aligned groups in the region is a kind of asymmetric battle to defend the security and existence of the Islamic Republic against America's enmities; the use of proxies can also benefit the Iranian government in various areas of political and geopolitical scenarios, this technique can indirectly affect the neighboring countries' foreign policy patterns[2] towards cooperation[3] or disintegration[4]; we should not forget the fact that the over use of proxies might affect the

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Dehnavi and Safavipour

Journal of Humanities and Education Development (JHED)
J. Humanities Educ. Dev.- 6(5)-2024

presence of foreign forces in a region filled with tensions and rivalries[5][5]

II. GENERAL IMAGE OF THE IRAN'S PROXY STRATEGIES

2.1) A strategy based on Deterrence

Iran's proxy strategy is a complex and multifaceted approach that has attracted significant attention and analysis from academics, policy-makers, and security experts. At its heart this strategy revolves around using non-state actors as well as militant groups to expand Iranian influence throughout the Middle East – often with geopolitical goals in mind. By nurturing ties with different factions such as Hezbollah in Lebanon or the Houthis in Yemen, Iran has created an effective network of proxies which can project power while maintaining plausible deniability.

It is important to understand why Iran engages in proxy warfare; this tactic acts as a deterrence against perceived threats especially those coming from rivals like US [6][6] and Saudi Arabia, but at the same time, also allows Iran to participate in asymmetric warfare. Rather than deploying conventional military forces, these proxy groups are used by Iran for various reasons including destabilizing rival states, supporting aligned regimes and challenging other powers' influences over regions nearby. Nevertheless, the consequences of this approach are not only limited to military clashes; The complex set of friendships and enmities created by Tehran raises serious concerns over what will happen in future as far as stability and safety in the Middle East are concerned and this can easily affect other aspects of the power equations in this region[7][7].

Before reviewing the main facets of such strategies, it is important to know the history behind the usages of the proxies; probing the history provide us with more options and shed light on our analysis.

2.2) Theoretical Framework and Operational Definitions

Deterrence vs. Destabilization: Defining the Terms

To understand Iran's complex proxy strategy, it is crucial to define the terms "deterrence" and "destabilization," as they underpin the motivations and implications of Iran's actions in the region; one should notice that notions like Deterrence and Destabilization are not fixed narrations and are subject to change and new readings[8] [8]

Normally, deterrence means scaring off an opponent from doing something by making them think about what could happen in return. With Iran, that means using proxy groups to build up a system of control and fear along various points where the country may be vulnerable to attacks on its national interests abroad. Tehran does this by backing militias or other organizations in places like Lebanon (Hezbollah) or Iraq (various Shiite factions), hoping they will deter U.S.-Israeli aggression — or any other kind of hostility. What's more is that not only does such an approach solidify the geopolitical limits of Iran but it also increases their ability to negotiate internationally because they know people need them for energy resources.

On the other hand, **Destabilization** is the term used to describe acts that disrupt a region's political or social order, often resulting in anarchy and violence. Moreover, what Iran does can be seen as another form of destabilization; through supporting groups acting as its proxies with the intention of weakening governments which it considers rivals and extending influence through creating power vacuums. In Syria for example, without Iran's support, Assad would not have managed to remain in power thus giving them a base from where they can pursue their interests across the Levant – this country being very important as a conduit for Iranian aspirations within that region. Intervention like this only serves to heighten sectarian divisions, ignite civil wars and cause humanitarian disasters thereby furthering instability at a wider scale.

The interplay of Iran's proxy strategy between dissuasion and destabilization is not just theoretical; it is practical. Policymakers and analysts need to understand this complex situation, where on the one hand, they serve as deterrents against outside dangers yet on the other hand act as disruptors to existing world order. If we break down these words, we will be able to see more clearly why Iran does what it does and what such behavior may mean for regional safety or global diplomacy.

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Dehnavi and Safavipour

Journal of Humanities and Education Development (JHED)
J. Humanities Educ. Dev.- 6(5)-2024

III. HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND IRAN'S USE OF PROXIES

To understand Iran's contemporary proxy strategy, it is essential to delve into the historical context that has shaped its approach. The roots of Iran's use of proxy forces can be traced back to the aftermath of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, which not only transformed the political landscape of the country but also redefined its foreign policy objectives. The revolution forged a new ideological framework grounded in the concept of *Wilayat al-Faqih* (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist), compelling Iran to support movements and groups that align with its revolutionary ethos across the Middle East.

During the 1980s, amidst the chaos of the Iran-Iraq War, Iran began to cultivate relationships with various non-state actors as a means of countering regional adversaries, particularly Iraq and its Western allies. This period marked the emergence of groups like Hezbollah in Lebanon, which Iran supported as a counterbalance to Israeli influence in the region. By empowering such proxies, Tehran was able to extend its reach, influence domestic and regional politics, and engage in asymmetric warfare without direct confrontation.

As the years progressed, Iran strategically leveraged these alliances to establish a network of proxies that spanned from the Levant to the Gulf. Groups like the Houthis in Yemen, various Shiite militias in Iraq, and the Palestinian factions in Gaza became instrumental in Iran's strategy of deterrence and retaliation against perceived threats from both regional rivals and global powers. This web of alliances has enabled Iran not only to project power but also to create a semblance of strategic depth, allowing for a multidimensional response to external pressures.

The historical context of Iran's proxy strategy reveals a calculated effort to utilize non-state actors as instruments of influence and deterrence, reinforcing its position in a volatile region. As we examine the complexities of this approach, it becomes evident that Iran's use of proxies is not merely a tactic of destabilization; rather, it is deeply rooted in a historical narrative of resistance, empowerment, and survival in a hostile geopolitical landscape. Understanding this historical backdrop is crucial to decoding the current dynamics of Iran's proxy strategy and its implications for regional stability.

3.1) Key Proxies: Who They Are and What They Do

Iran's proxy strategy is complex and multifaceted, involving a network of key players that serve its geopolitical interests across the Middle East and beyond. Understanding who these proxies are and what they do is crucial in deciphering Iran's broader strategy of deterrence and destabilization.

One of the most notable proxies is Hezbollah, the Lebanese militant group that has evolved into a powerful political and military force. Established in the early 1980s with Iranian support, Hezbollah operates under a dual mandate: to resist Israeli influence and to serve Iranian interests in the region. With a sophisticated military arsenal, including missiles capable of reaching deep into Israel, Hezbollah acts as Iran's frontline defense, deterring potential Israeli incursions while simultaneously projecting Iranian power within Lebanon and beyond.

In Syria, Iran has cultivated a diverse array of proxies, including various militias and groups that have fought alongside the Assad regime during the Syrian civil war. Groups such as the Fatemiyoun Brigade, composed mainly of Afghan fighters, and the Zainabiyoun Brigade, comprising Pakistani fighters, demonstrate Iran's commitment to utilizing foreign proxies to maintain its influence in Syria. These militias not only assist in bolstering the Assad regime but also serve as a means for Iran to extend its reach and establish a foothold near Israel's borders.

Further afield, in Iraq, Iran's influence is exerted through the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), a coalition of various militias formed to combat ISIS. While these groups played a crucial role in defeating the terrorist organization, they have also become vehicles for Iranian influence, with leaders often loyal to Tehran. The PMF's integration into the Iraqi state apparatus raises concerns about Iran's ability to sway Iraqi politics and military decisions in its favor.

In Yemen, the Houthi movement represents another significant proxy. Supported by Iran through weapons, training, and financial aid, the Houthis have engaged in a protracted conflict against a Saudi-led coalition. Their ability to launch strikes deep into Saudi territory underscores Iran's role in facilitating asymmetric warfare, allowing it to challenge Saudi Arabia without direct confrontation.

These proxies, each with their unique motivations and operational strategies, collectively form a critical component of Iran's broader geopolitical ambitions. By leveraging these groups, Iran not only deters adversaries but also sows instability in regions deemed vital to its strategic interests. As the dynamics in the Middle East continue to evolve, understanding the roles of these key proxies will be essential for comprehending Iran's ongoing quest for influence and the implications it holds for regional security.

Strategic Depth and Influence

Iranian-related proxies provide Tehran with strategic depth in several ways. They enable Iran to project power beyond its borders, influencing political and military developments in other countries. This is particularly evident in Lebanon,

Dehnavi and Safavipour

Journal of Humanities and Education Development (JHED)
J. Humanities Educ. Dev.- 6(5)-2024

where Hezbollah not only serves as a formidable military force but also plays a significant role in the country's politics. Through these proxies, Iran can exert pressure on regional adversaries, primarily Israel and Saudi Arabia, without engaging in direct confrontation. The strategic depth provided by these proxies is essential for Iran in maintaining its influence and deterring adversaries [9]

Asymmetric Warfare and Deterrence

The use of proxies is a key component of Iran's asymmetric warfare strategy. These groups can engage in guerrilla tactics, unconventional warfare, and acts of terrorism, which are cost-effective compared to traditional military engagements. They also complicate the security calculations of Iran's adversaries. For instance, Hezbollah's significant arsenal of rockets and missiles poses a continual threat to Israel, serving as a deterrent against potential Israeli aggression towards Iran. This approach allows Iran to extend its influence without the need for direct military intervention, thereby reducing the risks associated with conventional warfare [10]

Destabilizing Adversaries

Iranian proxies contribute to the destabilization of regional adversaries, which aligns with Iran's broader strategic objectives. In Yemen, the Houthis have been engaged in a prolonged conflict with the Saudi-led coalition, draining Saudi resources and attention. In Iraq, Shia militias have both fought against ISIS and exerted influence over the Iraqi government, often in ways that align with Iranian interests and counterbalance U.S. influence in the country. These actions serve to weaken Iran's adversaries while simultaneously strengthening its own position in the region [11]

Political Leverage and Governance

Beyond military capabilities, these proxies often engage in governance and provide social services, which helps them gain and maintain popular support. This dual role enhances their legitimacy and effectiveness as proxies. For example, Hezbollah operates extensive social services in Lebanon, including schools, hospitals, and welfare programs, which bolster its support base and political power. This integration into the social and political fabric makes it difficult for opposing forces to diminish their influence without causing significant disruption [12]

Regional Alliances and Counterbalances

Iran's use of proxies also plays into larger regional alliances and counterbalances. By supporting groups aligned with its interests, Iran can counterbalance the influence of other regional powers, especially Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. This creates a complex web of alliances and enmities, contributing to the broader instability in the Middle East but also ensuring that Iran remains a key player in regional politics. This strategy has been particularly evident in the context of the US-Iran proxy conflicts, where both nations have sought to expand their influence through indirect means [13]

Challenges and Risks

However, the reliance on proxies also comes with significant risks and challenges for Iran. These groups can have their own agendas and may not always act in ways that align with Iranian interests. Additionally, the activities of these proxies often invite international condemnation and can lead to sanctions and other punitive measures against Iran. Moreover, the proxy strategy can sometimes backfire, as seen with the backlash against Iranian influence in Iraq and Lebanon, where significant segments of the population have protested against perceived Iranian meddling [14] the radical activation of the proxies might also create bigger challenges and obstacles in the way of further negotiations between Iran and the United States [9][15]

IV.   CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Iranian-related proxies play a critical role in the security plans of the Middle East by extending Iran's influence, providing strategic depth, engaging in asymmetric warfare, destabilizing adversaries, and offering political leverage. While this strategy has proven effective in many respects, it also brings significant risks and challenges, both for Iran and the broader region. The use of proxies will likely continue to be a central element of Iran's regional strategy, given its benefits in terms of power projection and deterrence; the effects of this proxy mechanism is not only limited to the Middle East region; the matter of proxies have been and might be highlighted in the strategic plans of the U.S presidents [16][10]; however, we shall stay tuned for the future updates and changes; American election, emergence of AI in the military industries and so many other new phenomenon are crucial in conducting such studies[17] [11]

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