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Proxy Warfare and Regional Security Dynamics: Explaining the Strategic Rivalry between Iran and Israel in the Middle East

Asmuda Khatun

Department of International Relations, Jadavpur University, West Bengal, India

Abstract: This study explores the role of proxy warfare in shaping the strategic rivalry between Iran and Israel and its implications for regional security dynamics in the Middle East. In contrast to conventional interstate warfare, both states increasingly rely on indirect strategies involving non-state actors to advance their geopolitical objectives while avoiding the risks of direct military confrontation. Iran has developed an extensive network of proxy groups, most notably Hezbollah and Hamas, which function as key instruments of its regional strategy. In response, Israel employs a combination of military, intelligence, and deterrence-based approaches to counter Iranian influence. Drawing on theoretical perspectives from realism, proxy war theory, and the security dilemma, this paper argues that proxy warfare constitutes the primary mechanism through which both states conduct their strategic rivalry. While this indirect form of conflict enables both actors to manage escalation and reduce the costs of direct engagement, it simultaneously contributes to persistent instability and complex security challenges across the Middle East.

Keywords: Proxy Warfare, Iran–Israel Rivalry, Middle East Security, Regional Security Dynamics, Non-State Actors.

Introduction

The strategic rivalry between Iran and Israel represents one of the most enduring and complex security challenges in the contemporary Middle East. Although the two states once maintained cooperative relations, their relationship underwent a fundamental transformation following the Iranian Revolution. The establishment of the Islamic Republic in Iran marked a significant shift in its foreign policy, characterized by ideological opposition to Israel and support for anti-Israel movements across the region. Since then, the relationship has evolved into a sustained strategic rivalry shaped by geopolitical competition, ideological differences, and security concerns.



A central feature of this rivalry is the increasing reliance on proxy warfare as a primary instrument of state strategy. Rather than engaging in direct military confrontation, Iran has developed a network of non-state actors, including Hezbollah and Hamas, to project power and challenge Israeli influence. These groups operate in strategically significant areas such as Lebanon and Gaza, enabling Iran to exert pressure on Israel while minimizing the risks associated with direct conflict. In response, Israel has adopted a range of counter-strategies, including targeted military strikes, intelligence operations, and deterrence policies aimed at containing Iranian regional expansion. This pattern of indirect confrontation highlights the growing importance of proxy warfare in shaping modern conflict dynamics in the Middle East. Despite the increasing scholarly attention to proxy warfare and Middle Eastern security, there remains a need for a more integrated analysis of how proxy warfare functions within the context of the Iran–Israel rivalry. Existing studies often examine Iran’s proxy networks or Israel’s security strategies in isolation, without adequately addressing the interactive and relational dynamics between the two actors. This gap limits a comprehensive understanding of how proxy warfare influences broader regional security outcomes.

Accordingly, this study addresses the following research questions: Why do Iran and Israel rely on proxy warfare instead of direct military confrontation? How do proxy actors shape the nature of their strategic rivalry? And what are the implications of this indirect conflict for regional security dynamics in the Middle East?

This paper argues that proxy warfare has become the primary mechanism through which Iran and Israel conduct their strategic rivalry. By relying on proxy actors, both states are able to pursue geopolitical objectives, maintain strategic deterrence, and avoid the high costs of direct warfare. However, this indirect mode of conflict simultaneously contributes to persistent instability and complex security challenges across the Middle East.

Literature Review

Mumford (2013) provides a foundational understanding of proxy warfare, defining it as a form of indirect conflict in which states utilize non-state actors or third parties to pursue strategic objectives while avoiding direct military confrontation. He argues that proxy warfare allows states to reduce costs, maintain plausible deniability, and manage escalation, making it a preferred strategy in contemporary geopolitical rivalries. This theoretical framework is essential for understanding the indirect nature of the conflict between Iran and Israel. A number of scholars have focused specifically on the dynamics of power and alliances in the Middle East. Katz (2025), in *Dynamics of Power of Political Alliances and Proxy Conflicts in the Middle East*, highlights how regional alliances and proxy networks shape the balance of power. He argues that proxy conflicts are deeply embedded in the geopolitical structure of the region, where states rely on allied groups to extend influence and counter adversaries. In a related study, Katz’s *Rethinking the Iran-*



Israel-Palestine Triangle further explores the interconnected nature of regional conflicts, emphasizing how ideological, political, and strategic interests intersect in shaping the Iran–Israel rivalry.

Focusing more directly on the Iran–Israel conflict, Abbasi (2025) in *Proxy Wars and Regional Instability: Israel-Iran Conflict in the Middle East* argues that proxy warfare has become a central feature of their rivalry, contributing significantly to regional instability. Similarly, Tariq, Naz, and Khan (2025) in their study *Proxy Warfare and Strategic Divergence* compare the differing approaches of Iran and Israel, suggesting that while Iran relies heavily on proxy groups to expand influence, Israel adopts a strategy centered on deterrence and precision strikes. These contrasting strategies highlight the asymmetric nature of their rivalry.

Other scholars have examined the broader geopolitical and strategic context influencing the conflict. Gill, Ummara, and Hashmi (2025) explore how great power rivalry, particularly between global actors such as the United States and Russia, contributes to regional escalation and indirectly affects the Iran–Israel conflict. Their findings suggest that proxy warfare in the Middle East cannot be fully understood without considering the involvement of external powers.

In the context of the Syrian conflict, Malmvig (2026) analyzes the role of regional actors in shaping the battlefield. Her work demonstrates how Syria has become a key arena for proxy confrontation, where Iran and Israel pursue their strategic objectives indirectly. This aligns with the findings of Mahmoudian (2024), who argues in *Iran-Israel Conflict: A New Stage Emerges* that the rivalry has entered a new phase characterized by increased intensity and broader regional implications.

Furthermore, Khaled, Humaidi, and Roumi (2025) examine the changing geopolitical configuration of the Middle East in light of rising tensions between Iran and Israel. Their study highlights how shifting alliances and power structures are reshaping regional security dynamics. Complementing this perspective, Ogu Ejiofor (2025) provides a realist analysis of Iran's defensive strategy, arguing that Iran's reliance on proxy warfare is driven by security concerns and the need to counter perceived threats from Israel and its allies.

Despite the breadth of existing literature, a significant gap remains in integrating these perspectives into a comprehensive analysis of the Iran–Israel rivalry. While some studies focus on proxy warfare as a general concept and others examine specific national strategies or regional contexts, there is limited research that systematically connects these elements. In particular, the interactive dynamics between Iran's proxy strategy and Israel's countermeasures remain underexplored.

This study seeks to address this gap by synthesizing existing scholarship and providing an integrated analysis of how proxy warfare functions as a central mechanism in the Iran–Israel rivalry. By doing so, it aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the relationship between indirect conflict and regional security dynamics in the Middle East.



Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in three major theoretical approaches within International Relations: Realism, Proxy Warfare Theory, and the Security Dilemma. These frameworks provide a comprehensive analytical lens for understanding the strategic rivalry between Iran and Israel and the role of proxy warfare in shaping regional security dynamics.

First, Realism offers a foundational perspective for analyzing state behavior in an anarchic international system. Realist scholars argue that states prioritize survival, security, and power, often leading to competition and conflict. In the context of the Iran–Israel rivalry, both states perceive each other as significant threats to their national security and regional influence. Iran's efforts to expand its strategic depth through regional alliances and proxy actors can be understood as a rational response to perceived external threats. Similarly, Israel's emphasis on deterrence, preemptive strikes, and military superiority reflects its commitment to ensuring national survival in a hostile regional environment.

Second, Proxy Warfare Theory, as articulated by Andrew Mumford (2013), provides a direct framework for analyzing the indirect nature of the conflict. Proxy warfare refers to the use of third-party actors by states to achieve strategic objectives without engaging in direct confrontation. This approach allows states to minimize the costs of war, reduce the risks of escalation, and maintain plausible deniability. In this study, Iran's support for groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas is examined as a central component of its proxy warfare strategy. At the same time, Israel's countermeasures—including targeted airstrikes and covert operations—are analyzed as responses aimed at disrupting these proxy networks.

Third, the concept of the Security Dilemma helps explain the cyclical nature of tension and escalation between Iran and Israel. According to this theory, actions taken by one state to increase its security often lead to increased insecurity for other states, prompting retaliatory measures. For example, Iran's expansion of its proxy network may be viewed as a defensive strategy, but Israel interprets it as an offensive threat, leading to preemptive actions. These responses, in turn, reinforce Iran's perception of insecurity, creating a cycle of mutual suspicion and indirect confrontation.

By integrating these three theoretical perspectives, this study provides a multi-dimensional understanding of the Iran–Israel rivalry. Realism explains the underlying motivations of the states, proxy warfare theory clarifies the methods they employ, and the security dilemma highlights the dynamics of escalation. Together, these frameworks offer a comprehensive explanation of how proxy warfare functions as a central mechanism in shaping regional security dynamics in the Middle East.



Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to examine the role of proxy warfare in shaping the strategic rivalry between Iran and Israel and its implications for regional security dynamics in the Middle East. A qualitative method is appropriate for this research as it allows for an in-depth analysis of complex political and strategic interactions that cannot be easily quantified. The research is primarily based on secondary data analysis, drawing on a wide range of academic sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, policy reports, and credible online publications. Key sources include works on proxy warfare, regional geopolitics, and the foreign policy strategies of Iran and Israel. These materials are critically analyzed to identify patterns, themes, and relationships relevant to the research questions. In terms of research design, this study follows a case study approach, focusing specifically on the Iran–Israel rivalry as a representative example of proxy warfare in the contemporary Middle East. Within this case, particular attention is given to the role of non-state actors such as Hezbollah and Hamas, as well as key regional arenas such as Syria and Lebanon, where indirect conflict between the two states is most evident.

For data analysis, the study employs a thematic analysis method, identifying recurring themes such as strategic deterrence, regional influence, security threats, and indirect conflict mechanisms. These themes are analyzed in light of the theoretical frameworks of realism, proxy warfare theory, and the security dilemma to provide a structured interpretation of the findings.

While this study provides a comprehensive qualitative analysis, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations. The research relies on secondary sources, which may reflect the perspectives or biases of the original authors. Additionally, due to the evolving nature of the Iran–Israel conflict, some recent developments may not be fully captured in the available literature. Despite these limitations, the chosen methodology provides a robust framework for analyzing the complex dynamics of proxy warfare and its impact on regional security in the Middle East.

Analysis and Discussion

Iran's Proxy Warfare Strategy

A central component of Iran's regional strategy is its extensive use of proxy warfare to expand influence and ensure strategic depth. Rather than engaging in direct military confrontation with Israel, Iran relies on a network of non-state actors across the Middle East. This approach aligns with proxy warfare theory, which emphasizes cost-efficiency, plausible deniability, and reduced risk of escalation. Iran's support for groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza enables it to project power beyond its borders. These groups serve both strategic and ideological purposes: they act as deterrents against Israel while also promoting Iran's broader regional agenda. In Syria and Iraq, Iran has further expanded its influence by supporting allied militias, thereby creating a network of forces that can challenge Israeli interests indirectly.



From a realist perspective, this strategy reflects Iran's attempt to maximize security in a hostile regional environment. By establishing proxy networks, Iran enhances its ability to respond to threats without exposing itself to the risks of direct warfare.

Israel's Counter-Strategy and Security Doctrine

In response to Iran's expanding proxy network, Israel has developed a comprehensive security strategy centered on deterrence, preemption, and technological superiority. Israel perceives Iran's regional activities as an existential threat, particularly due to the growing military capabilities of proxy groups like Hezbollah. Israel's strategy includes targeted airstrikes on Iranian positions in Syria, cyber operations, and intelligence-driven missions aimed at disrupting supply chains and weakening proxy groups. These actions are designed to prevent Iran from establishing a permanent military presence near Israel's borders. This approach reflects a doctrine of "war between wars", where Israel engages in continuous low-intensity operations to contain threats before they escalate into full-scale conflict.

From the perspective of the security dilemma, Israel's defensive measures are interpreted by Iran as aggressive actions, thereby reinforcing mutual distrust and escalating indirect confrontation.

Proxy Conflict Arenas: Syria, Lebanon, and Gaza

The rivalry between Iran and Israel is most visible in key regional arenas, particularly Syria, Lebanon, and Gaza. These regions function as battlegrounds for indirect conflict, where both states pursue their strategic objectives through proxy actors.

In Syria, Iran has supported the government and allied militias, while Israel has conducted repeated airstrikes targeting Iranian military infrastructure. Lebanon remains a critical front due to the presence of Hezbollah, which possesses significant military capabilities and poses a direct threat to Israel. In Gaza, groups such as Hamas play a key role in maintaining pressure on Israel. These proxy arenas illustrate how the conflict extends beyond bilateral relations and becomes embedded in broader regional dynamics.

Impact on Regional Security Dynamics

The reliance on proxy warfare has significant implications for regional security in the Middle East. On one hand, it allows both Iran and Israel to avoid direct large-scale war, thereby reducing the immediate risk of catastrophic conflict. On the other hand, it contributes to prolonged instability, fragmentation, and recurring cycles of violence.

Proxy warfare increases the number of actors involved in conflicts, complicates diplomatic efforts, and makes conflict resolution more difficult. It also creates an environment of constant tension, where small incidents can escalate into larger confrontations. The involvement of external powers



further intensifies these dynamics, making the regional security environment more complex and unpredictable.

Conclusion

This study has examined the role of proxy warfare in shaping the strategic rivalry between Iran and Israel and its implications for regional security dynamics in the Middle East. The analysis demonstrates that both states have increasingly relied on indirect forms of conflict, utilizing non-state actors and covert strategies to pursue their geopolitical objectives while avoiding the costs and risks of direct military confrontation. The findings suggest that Iran's extensive network of proxy groups, including Hezbollah and Hamas, plays a central role in expanding its regional influence and maintaining strategic depth. In contrast, Israel's response is characterized by deterrence, preemptive action, and advanced military and intelligence operations aimed at countering Iranian expansion. This dynamic reflects a broader pattern of indirect confrontation that has become a defining feature of their rivalry.

Furthermore, the study highlights that proxy warfare has significant implications for regional security. Conflict arenas such as Lebanon, Syria, and Gaza illustrate how indirect confrontation contributes to prolonged instability, fragmentation, and recurring cycles of violence. While proxy warfare allows both states to manage escalation and avoid full-scale war, it simultaneously increases the complexity of conflicts and reduces the prospects for long-term peace.

In conclusion, this paper argues that proxy warfare is not merely a tactical choice but a strategic necessity for both Iran and Israel within the current regional context. However, this reliance on indirect conflict continues to undermine stability in the Middle East, suggesting that any sustainable resolution will require addressing not only state-level tensions but also the broader network of proxy actors that sustain the rivalry.

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