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Iran's Asymmetric Interventionism: The Analysis of the Proxy Warfare Strategy Since 2011

Abstract: The aim of this article is to examine and evaluate Iran's indirect military intervention through the utilization of local non-state actors in the conflict zones of the Middle East. Particular attention was paid to the gray zone confrontation between Iran and the U.S.-led alliance after the outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2011. What are the characteristics of Iran's proxy warfare (PW) dynamics, and to what extent has this strategy been effective in attaining its objectives? In this regard, PW theory has been chosen as the main theoretical framework, with its most recent advances in the literature. The paper argues that Iran's adoption of PW strategy ultimately aims a) to reduce perceived threats originating from the U.S.-led alliance, b) deter potential military interventions on its soil, and c) render the U.S. presence in the Middle East burdensome with the ultimate aim of its withdrawal from the region over the long term. Moreover, it contends that although it comes at a cost and poses significant risks for Tehran, this strategy demonstrated effectiveness within the context of Iran's prioritized principles. A primary contributing factor to Iran's effective implementation of this strategy lies in its partnership style with its clients. Indeed, besides their strategic objectives, the main factor ensuring the resilience of the proxy alliance is the ideological affinity between the Iranian regime and the client forces.

Key words: Iran, proxy war, Middle East, Axis of Resistance, military strategy

Introduction

In today's complex geopolitical landscape, gray zone conflicts have emerged as major security issues, obscuring boundaries between traditional notions of war and peace. It corresponds to "intense political, economic, informational, and military competition more fervent in nature than normal steady-state diplomacy, yet short of conventional war" (Votel et al., 2016). Proxy war (PW) is a type of gray zone conflict characterized by a state's sponsoring a foreign actor within a dispute in order to accomplish its strategic goals (Groh, 2019, p. 3). It has become more prevalent in the strategic landscape following the Cold War era, attracting significant attention from policymakers who are keen on maintaining their competitive edge for influence in a less costly manner (Fox, 2023, p. 2). In this trend, Iran now appears as a leading figure, with leadership over a robust network of proxies spread across various parts of the Middle East. This network, which consists of non-state allies presents serious challenges to the United States and its partners, particularly Israel. Specifically, from the next round of conflicts following the Arap Spring, Iran has shifted towards a more offensive regional policy centered around external operations (Carl, 2023, p. 12).

The aim of this article is to examine and evaluate Iran's increasing utilization of local proxies in the conflict zones of the Middle East since 2011 with strategic lenses. A strate-

gic approach considers how a state is realizing its interests in the face of the constraints posed by available resources and the risks (Yarger, 2006). In this regard, PW theory has been chosen as the main theoretical framework, with its most recent developments in the literature. The article firstly examines Iran's military strategy, then proceeds to a review of Iran's history of conducting PW to evaluate its degree of effectiveness. Furthermore, as an essential part of strategic analysis, the costs and risks of the PW strategy are also investigated. The paper contends that, though it comes at a cost and poses serious risks for Tehran, this strategy demonstrated effectiveness within the context of Iran's prioritized principles.

Proxy wars: theoretical framework

Proxy wars are indirect military interventions carried out by a foreign state through supporting a politically motivated local warring party within a conflict to achieve its strategic goals (Watts et al., 2023, p. 3; Groh, 2019, p. 3). They are fought between at least two international actors on the soil of a third country. These conflicts cloak themselves as internal disputes within the host nation where foreign powers utilize its resources, manpower, and territory to coerce their opponents indirectly (Mumford, 2013b, p. 40). In this regard, states and non-state groups with asymmetrical capabilities are engaged in a security partnership where they exchange qualitatively different resources with each other (Borghard, 2014, p. 17). In simpler terms, State A (a sponsor or a benefactor) selects and supports a group (a proxy or a client) in State B to carry out operations on its behalf. Here, a state may provide a non-state group with funding, arms, training, political backing, and a territorial base in return for the group assisting the state in achieving its foreign policy objectives through combat or other means (Mumford, 2013b, p. 40).

Proxy partnership allows states to reduce domestic and international risks and mitigate the costs associated with direct military intervention (Borghard, 2014, pp. 17–18). Therefore, states opt for the path of indirect, sometimes covert, methods of intervening in conflicts. Delegation of duty of fighting to the non-state actors allows them to hide the extent of their engagement, evade potential backlash, and limit escalation, which draws attention to the crucial role of plausible deniability in managing risks effectively (Mumford, 2013a, pp. 42–43; Salehyan, 2010, pp. 10–11; Byman, 2018). Another aspect that makes proxy warfare attractive for the state is that it involves proxy forces assuming operational and tactical risks on their behalf; freeing the state from costly intelligence about terrain, infrastructure, and local population due to their being domestic actors with local ties; and offering greater potential for reconciliation with the local population, potentially establishing a preferred form of governance for the state (Byman, 2018; Salehyan, 2010, pp. 11–12).

From a broad strategic perspective, PW is typically resorted to for two types of goals: 1) to win: coerce the adversary and shift the conflict in one's favor. This scenario is associated with leadership perceiving that the unfavorable outcome of the dispute would pose a sufficient threat to the state's security interests (Rauta, 2020, p. 6; Groh, 2019, p. 35); 2) to cope: managing the complex situation and mitigating threats (Rauta, 2020, p. 6). Sometimes threats arising from a conflict are seen as less important for states solely

aiming for victory but are crucial enough to warrant the preservation of their interests in the area. This explains the core logic behind why PW is perceived as strategically advantageous, also known as "warfare on the cheap" in Mumford's terms, when they perceive direct military intervention as untenable in achieving their foreign policy goals (Mumford, 2013a, p. i).

Motives for initiating proxy wars among states primarily stem from geopolitical interests and ideological concerns (Watts et al., 2023, p. vi). In scholarly literature, desires such as weakening rivals and shifting the balance of power in one's favor, referred to as geopolitical objectives, are highlighted as the most prominent factors (Watts et al., 2023, p. 14; Groh, 2019, pp. 49–52; Yeisley, 2011). On the other hand, the desire to preserve or establish a new political system in another country based on the normative principles of state ideology can be exemplified as ideological intervention through proxies (Watts et al., 2023, pp. 23–24).

The strategic dynamics of PW are inherently linked to the nature, characteristics, and conditions for the continuation of sponsor-proxy relationships. In terms of the nature of sponsor-proxy relationships, they can be conceptualized as non-official alliances based on asymmetrically powerful parties agreeing to a pact aimed at achieving a common strategic objective (Borghard, 2014, p. 35). This pact implies that the client is an independent political entity with its own preexisting self-interests (Borghard, 2014, p. 27; Fox, 2023, p. 6). Therefore, the pact entails a dynamic trade-off interaction reflecting the obligations of the parties, how strategic objectives will be achieved, and how resources will be distributed (Borghard, 2014, p. 42; Rauta, 2020, p. 5). In this context, the terms of the pact depend on the power relationship between the sponsor-proxy dyad, or, in other words, the degree of influence each party holds over the other. The influence in the proxy dyad relies on a combination of threats and promises: rewarding good behavior and punishing bad behavior (Borghard, 2014, p. 43; Fox, 2023, p. 7). Here, a client, in order to successfully continue its political struggle, requires the necessary military, financial, and other support (Hoffman, Orner, 2021).

The sponsor-proxy relationship is strategically vulnerable, and many risks and problems can a) undermine the relationship over time (Fox, 2019, p. 33) and b) hinder the achievement of the alliance's goals. One such issue is the surrogate force not acting in harmony with the sponsor's interests as a self-interested autonomous entity. Therefore, it is necessary for the sponsor to build dynamic mechanisms for screening, monitoring, and incentivizing to ensure the strategic effectiveness of PW (Borghard, 2014, pp. 26–30).

The Islamic Republic's military strategy

Iran's alliance with non-state foreign clients is seen as a crucial component of its asymmetric military strategy, serving as a way of its struggle (Eisenstadt, 2015, p. 16; Ostovar, 2019). Guided by Shia fundamentalism since its establishment in 1979, the Islamic Republic has maintained opposition to the objectives of the U.S. and its regional allies, such as Israel and Saudi Arabia, until this day (Ostovar, 2019, pp. 168–169). It operates with a missionary persona, presenting itself as a proponent for the liberation of the Middle East from foreign dominance and as a supporter of political rights for

Muslims, such as Palestinians (Fiedler, 2018, p. 214; Katzman, 2021, p. 2). Moreover, Iran tries to spread the Islamic revolution to the region, of which realization would also provide pragmatic value for Iran as a tool for deepening its influence (IISS, 2019, p. 15; Fiedler, 2008, p. 182).

Relations between Iran and the U.S. have been troubled by a problematic historical background and have resulted in chronic gray zone confrontations with mutual distrust. According to Iranian leaders, in addition to the U.S. and its allies' threatening Iran through their military presence in the region, they are also engaging in hybrid warfare against it: fueling civil unrest through psychological operations; seeking to overthrow friendly forces from power; and conducting clandestine and cyber operations. These threats target Iran's 1) pragmatic goals, like preserving the regime's survival and geopolitical interests; and 2) ideological purposes (Ajili, Rouhi, 2019, p. 140; Carl, 2023, pp. 8–11; Eisenstadt, 2015, p. 8). Thus, Iran's military planning has been substantially influenced by the imperative to counter such hybrid threats. To address these challenges, Iranian counter-threat planning aims to: a) transform Iran into a regional power with extensive military and political influence in West Asia; b) prevent a recurrence of the failed deterrence against Saddam's invasion in 1980; and c) ensure military self-reliance by developing indigenous military technologies (Ajili, Rouhi, 2019, p. 140; Eisenstadt, 2015, p. 6).

In recent years, Iran has adopted a more offensive regional policy, focusing on external operations (Carl, 2023, p. 12; Tabatabai, Martini, Wasser, 2021). By recognizing power disparity with its foes, Iran has opted for an asymmetric strategy by which weak points of the adversaries can be exploited to cultivate credible deterrence capability against conventional assault (IISS, 2019, p. 39; Zorri, Sadri, Ellis, 2020, p. 100; Ajili, Rouhi, 2019, pp. 140–141). It has adopted the doctrines of "active deterrence" and "preventive war" to bolster its offensive posture and fight against hybrid threats (Carl, 2023, p. 2). In this regard, Iran seeks to proactively intervene to prevent the exacerbation of Western-origin hybrid threats through employing asymmetric methods. Guided by these doctrines, 1) Iran is enhancing its offensive arsenal, which contains coalition warfare, naval projection, cyber warfare, air and space operations, and intelligence operations. Iran's ballistic missile program, renowned for its rockets capable of reaching neighboring rivals and Israel, has provided the nation with a stand-off capability. 2) Iran is strengthening its proxy alliance system and integrating it with its own military forces. The IRGC-QF has empowered its proxies with more advanced military training and capabilities over time (Carl, 2023; Ajili, Rouhi, 2019; Ostovar, 2019, pp. 168–171).

Iran's use of proxy warfare: historical review

As the fourth decade of the Islamic Revolution concludes, Iran commands a resilient proxy network that is dispersed across diverse parts of the Middle East. This network, referred to as the' Axis of Resistance', comprising non-state allies in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, and Palestine, poses a formidable challenge to the U.S. and its allies, notably Israel. (Robinson, Merrow, 2024; Loft, 2023). It is the result of the architect of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Khomeini's idea that the Revolution should be exported throughout

the Muslim world (Osiewicz, 2021, p. 48; Seliktar, Rezaei, 2020, pp. 5–11). To fulfill this mission, immediately after the Revolution, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) was formed and designated with the specific mandate of safeguarding the regime internally and exporting the revolution. Subsequently, in line with its asymmetric warfare doctrine, the branch of the IRGC, the Quds Force (QF), had started to establish collaborative networks with Shiite and Sunni political factions in the region, providing them with weaponry, funding, and military training and advice (Moghadam, Rauta, Wyss, 2024, p. 341).

Lebanese Hezbollah (LH). Hezbollah, a Shia military and political group based in Lebanon, stands as one of Iran's most powerful and influential sponsored groups (Fiedler, 2008, p. 184; Jahanbani, 2020). Sponsored by Tehran, LH has engaged in guerrilla warfare against both Israel and the United States, notably during Lebanon's civil war and concurrent with Israel's intervention from 1982 until its withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000 (Norton, 2014, pp. 69–88). Utilizing suicide bombings, often rhetorically adorned as "martyrdom operations," LH inflicted significant casualties, including the 1983 bombings on the U.S. embassy and Marine barracks in Beirut that prompted President Reagan to withdraw U.S. forces in 1984. In addition to this, Hezbollah's sustained campaign of low-intensity asymmetric struggle was one of the main parameters that compelled Israeli armed forces to withdraw back to southern Lebanon in 1985 and eventually from the country entirely by 2000 (Fiedler, 2008, p. 185; Seliktar, Rezaei, 2020, pp. 26–41). LH's performance during the 34-day war with Israel in territories spanning Lebanon, northern Israel, and the Golan Heights in 2006 also merits attention. Its employment of guerilla tactics, including the use of tunnels, bunkers, and bunkers, resulted in military setbacks for Israelis, forcing them to withdraw from Lebanon (Norton, 2014, pp. 90–93; Seliktar, Rezaei, 2020, p. 46). Extensively trained and supplied by Iran, Hizballah had been effective in conducting defensive operations and counterattacks against Israel (Fiedler, 2008, p. 186).

Iraqi factions. Since the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s, Tehran has sought to shape Iraqi politics using surrogate clients. The Badr Corps, a Shia militia backed by Iran, collaborated with Tehran against the Ba'athist regime through its conduct of cross-border operations during the conflict (Ostovar, 2019, pp. 173–174).

The next round of Iran's proxy intervention was driven by its intention to capitalize on the power vacuum resulting from the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 (IISS, 2019, p. 121). Iran supported various proxies, such as the Badr Organization, Asaib Ahl al-Haq, Kataib Hezbollah, and others, with arms, funding, and fighters, bolstering their influence (Katzman, 2021). Following the decline of ISIS, Iranian-backed forces began targeting U.S. troops in 2017, occasionally provoking retaliatory responses from the U.S. This exchange of fire intensified notably after the onset of the Hamas-Israel conflict in October 2023, with reports indicating over 182 attacks on U.S. forces in Iraq and Syria between October 2023 and mid-February 2024, resulting in injuries or fatalities for 186 troops (Knights, al-Kaabi, Malik, 2024; Thomas, 2024, p. 5). At present, Iraqi non-state allies play a crucial role in Iran's assertive stance, serving as key components of the "Axis of Resistance."

Palestinian groups. Tehran's relationship with Palestinian groups, dating back to the 1980s, reflects both its adherence to the religious obligation to liberate the Holy Land

from Israelis and its pragmatic interests in the region (Fiedler, 2008, p. 187). Over the years, Iran has sponsored Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) with political, financial, military, and training assistance, despite their affiliation with Sunni Islam. Additionally, Iran has facilitated the transfer of rocket technology and expertise to Palestinian groups, enabling them to develop their own arsenal (Taleblu, 2021; Carl, 2023, p. 28). Financial aid to Hamas has at times exceeded $300 million annually (Katzman, 2021, p. 35). Consequently, Hamas has exerted significant influence in conflicts with the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) since taking control of Gaza in 2007 (Seliktar, Rezaei, 2020, p. 78; Thomas, 2024, p. 4). For Hamas and PIJ, having strong ties with Iran has yielded another strategic advantage: a partnership with LH. This cooperation primarily centers on LH providing financial support and military training to both Hamas and PIJ. However, despite Hamas' strong connection to Iran and Hezbollah, they have never completely assumed control over the Palestinian cause (IISS, 2019, pp. 72–73).

Syria. The Assad regime, being one of Iran's limited Arab allies, is strategically vital. The loss of Syria would reduce Iran's ability to aid Hezbollah and work with Palestinian militants (IISS, 2019, p. 21). Throughout the civil war since 2011, Iran has assisted Assad in keeping him in power by providing logistical, technical, and financial support, as well as training and fighters (Zorri, Sadri, Ellis, 2020, p. 60). It established semi-military units like the Fatemiyoun and Zaynabiyoun to address personnel shortages and, deployed them to the battlefield. Furthermore, Hezbollah, prompted by Iran, also joined the front lines alongside these units (Ostovar, 2019, p. 177). Iran's proxy intervention in Syria manifested itself in three dimensions: a) engaging in battles against opposition forces to ensure the survival of the Assad government in the internal conflict; b) combating ISIS; and c) launching strikes on U.S. bases in Iraq (Thomas, 2024, pp. 5–6; Tabatabai et al., 2021, p. 73; Akbarzadeh, Gourlay, Ehteshami, 2023, p. 27).

Since at least 2017, Syria has become a theater of 'shadow war' between the Islamic Republic and Israel (Sharp, 2024). Israeli officials have launched hundreds of strikes in Syria targeting Iranian-affiliated objectives such as missile and weapons manufacturing centers, as well as weapon shipment convoys to date (Al-Khalidi, 2021; Thomas, 2024, p. 9).

Houthis in Yemen. Iran's support for the Houthis in Yemen dates back to their capture of Sana'a in 2014 (Moghadam, Rauta, Wyss, 2023, p. 345; Zorri, Sadri, Ellis, 2020, p. 88). Since then, the IRGC-QF has provided various forms of military assistance, including ballistic missiles, drone components, and cruise missiles, as well as engineering and technical support (Carl, 2023, p. 27). This support has enabled the Houthis to target U.S. partners such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (Thomas, 2024, p. 6). Despite being less robust than alliances with other allies, Iran's partnership with the Houthis still offers strategic advantages, including leverage against Saudi Arabia and the ability to threaten U.S. and Saudi ships on the Yemeni coast (Ostovar, 2019, p. 179). Houthis have also expressed their readiness to provide military assistance to the Axis if necessary by launching dozens of drone and missile strikes on ships in the Red Sea during the Hamas-Israel conflict of 2023–2024 (Thomas, 2024, p. 6).

Israel-Hamas war and April escalation in 2024. The ongoing conflict sparked by Hamas's attacks on Israel in October 7, 2023, and Israel's subsequent declaration of war have brought increased global focus on Iran, given its long-standing support for Hamas.

However, in October, U.S. President Joe Biden stated that there is no solid evidence confirming Iran's involvement in orchestrating these attacks (Zanotti, Sharp, 2024). Supreme Leader Khamenei has also denied any Iranian complicity in this assault. Nevertheless, he praised Hamas' offensive with rhetorical support: "We kiss the hands of those who planned the attack on the Zionist regime" (Reuters, 2023). Throughout the war, members of the Axis of Resistance have been conducting violent attacks against Israel and U.S. forces to express solidarity with the paramilitaries in Gaza.

Amid escalating tensions, on April 1, 2024, Israel reportedly targeted a building in Damascus, Syria, resulting in the deaths of senior IRGC members. In response, on April 13, Iran initiated its first direct military action against Israel from its own territory, deploying drones, ballistic missiles, and cruise missiles. Around 350 projectiles were launched from Iran, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. With support from the U.S., Jordan, France, and the UK, Israel intercepted most of them. Subsequently, on April 19, Israel allegedly conducted an airstrike near an Iranian military base in Isfahan province. This marked the riskiest escalation to date in the dispute between Iran and Israel (Sharp, 2024).

Assessment of Iran's proxy warfare strategy

Reasons behind Iran's choice of PW. Iran's choice of indirect intervention through client allies can be attributed to a) its military shortcomings in the balance of power compared to the U.S.-led alliance (Lamrani, 2020); b) major domestic and international costs and risks associated with conventional warfare by Iran against them. In this regard, fighting through local militias serves the function of putting Iran closer to its policy goals in a cheaper manner.

Objectives of Iran's PW strategy. It can be argued that Iran pursues its grand objectives by adopting a posture of strategic patience. Instead of maximalist aims, Iran is pursuing discrete and conservative objectives. Therefore, by working with clients, Iran enforces an attritional impact on its foes, coercing them to comply with its demands in the long run. Historical observation shows that Iran pursues a range of objectives, as mentioned below:

– To manage the situation to produce more favorable outcomes. In Iraq, by empowering its paramilitary proxies like the Fatah Alliance, Iran aims to maintain a fragmented Iraqi government, thereby diminishing the leverage of domestic factions who are either non-aligned or opposed to it (Zorri, Sadri, Ellis, 2020, p. 45–48). With the U.S. military presence in Iraq, perhaps, this strategic move hinders the U.S. from gaining a military advantage through the potential reconciliation of these factions with Washington.
– To prevent the strengthening of the adversary in a specific conflict. For instance, one reason for Iran's making ties with Houthi rebels in Yemen is to contain the influence of the Saudis in the regional competition (Zorri, Sadri, Ellis, 2020, p. 93).
– By controlling proxies, using conflict areas as buffer zones. It is frequently referred to as the logic of forward defense, which is the adoption of "a proactive stance outside its borders to forestall threats to its territory" (Akbarzadeh, Gourlay, Ehteshami,

2023, p. 2). Here, Iran strives to empower its ability to defend itself by cultivating power projection capabilities beyond its borders.

– Signaling its resolve to the adversaries. Iran's proactive involvement in multiple conflicts in the Middle East since 2011, both through its armed forces and proxy instruments, conveys a deterrent signal, announcing a dedication to conserving its key interests.

– Draining the enemy's morale and resources. This can also be framed as Iran's policy of continuously bleeding its enemies as much as possible, as Vatanka highlighted (Vatanka, 2024). In this regard, Iran's pressure on Israel through Hezbollah's and Houthis's firing on Israeli territory during the Israel-Hamas war of 2023–2024, may serve as an example. Perhaps, Iran is trying to diversify and intensify the IDF's perceptions of existential threats, thereby keeping them in a state of constant alert and hindering their ability to make successful strategic decisions. Another case is the costly measures taken by American naval forces to avert the attacks of the Houthis on international shipping vessels in the Red Sea in December 2023. The U.S. naval forces incurred significant costs as a result of shooting down unsophisticated Houthi drones, which are only worth a few thousand dollars each, with expensive naval missiles that cost about 2.1 million dollars for each launch (Seligman, Berg, 2023).

Outcomes of PW for Iran in the post-Arab Spring period. To what extent has Iran's asymmetric warfare against the West through client forces been effective during the post-Arab Spring period? Here, effectiveness refers to the degree to which the commanding proxies have served Iran's overarching foreign policy vision and helped it cope with perceived dangers. Based on this, it can be argued that Iran's alliance with and utilization of its surrogates in the region between 2011 and 2024 have yielded considerable strategic benefits. Although it comes at a cost and poses significant risks for Tehran, this strategy proved to have a degree of success in reaching the desired outcomes.

– The Iranian regime independently maintains its existence and functions amidst Western opposition. The Axis of Resistance, under the Iranian leadership, a) plays a deterrent role against possible U.S. and Israeli attacks and b) influences their strategic calculations. A good example of this is the role of its activity during the Israeli-Hamas conflict that began in 2023 and the subsequent Iranian attack on Israel on April 13, 2024. The network demonstrated: a) its potential to inflict significant humanitarian and economic damage; and b) its willingness to fight collaboratively with Iran when it is threatened.

– Iran's area of power and ideology projection has broadened in the Middle East.
   a) its strong influence mechanisms over Iraq and Syria provide it with an uninterrupted land bridge from Tehran to the Mediterranean (Adesnik, Taleblu, 2019, p. 7);
   b) Iran's close relationship with Hezbollah in Lebanon gives it an advantage to inflict damage on Israel if needed;
   c) the Islamic Republic can now pose a threat to international trade routes in the Red Sea as well as Saudi Arabia due to its strengthened ties with Houthis in Yemen;
   d) Hamas and the PIJ can be used to harass Israel and disrupt reconciliation between Israel and other Arab states.

– By providing a degree of plausible deniability, clients enable Iran to effectively engage in overt and covert confrontations against its enemies. Iranian-affiliated militias, for example, have been attacking U.S. soldiers in Iraq more frequently since 2017, which has resulted in considerable American casualties. Even though it is no secret that these armed actors are backed by Iran, it appears that due to not being directly targeted by Iran's official troops, the U.S. has always seemed hesitant to decide on direct military operations against Iran.
– The Axis of Resistance mitigates the severity of Iran's regional loneliness stemming from the lack of state allies, apart from Syria – a weak, failed state with continued internal instability.
– Iran enjoys rigid, unbroken ties with its proxy militias. It can be argued that this is mostly because Iran and its proxies share similar or related political ideologies and identities. War, in addition to strategic and operational dimensions, also encompasses socio-psychological aspects (Fox, 2023, p. 13). In this sense, not only rational group interests but also emotional closeness, shared identities, and cultures play a decisive role in the course of the war. Here, ideological tendencies like fundamentalist Islam, anti-Americanism and anti-Zionism, and the missionary mentality are the primary factors that bind Iran and client militias in this environment.

Costs. Although PW is cheaper and less risky than direct intervention, it "is rarely a low-cost policy, and it is never risk-free" (Groh, 2019, p. 3). Indeed, it is a fact that the "Export of Revolution" through client forces produced significant costs for the Islamic Republic:
– extensive sanctions and embargoes that have seriously impaired its economy (Fiedler, 2023, p. 284);
– isolation and poor neighborliness resulting from the worries of regional nations with respect to Iran's revisionist adventurism (Akbarzadeh, Gourlay, Ehteshami, 2023, p. 8);
– deprivation of economic and cultural rewards that could have been obtained from relations with the European Union (Fiedler, 2023, pp. 292–293);
– being dragged into increasingly dangerous and unstable strategic circumstances as a result of heightened antagonism toward the West.

Risks. Due to the nature of the regional security environment, Iran's PW can lead to unintended consequences that may render it completely unsuccessful, diminish its impact, or even harm other interests of the Islamic Republic. For Tehran, the primary risk here is the rise of escalation due to deterrence failure, moving from indirect to direct dispute with the U.S. and its allies. One notable instance is the dilemma the Biden administration encountered when deciding how to react to Iranian-affiliated forces in Iraq that have inflicted dozens of injuries on U.S. service members since October 2023. Especially after three American soldiers were killed in Jordan, J. Biden faced public demand to target Iranian military bases and IRGC leaders to coerce Iran into refraining from taking such actions (Buccino, 2024). If Biden's subsequent bombing campaign had also struck Iranian assets, it could have transformed the conflict to the next operational level with Iran's possible reprisal.

Iran's PW strategy also runs the risk of backfiring, bringing the U.S. and its Arab allies closer together in their attempts to counter the Iranian threat.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to analyze the Islamic Republic of Iran's indirect military intervention strategy through sponsoring local non-state actors in the conflict zones of the Middle East as a means of the gray zone struggle against the U.S. and its partners in light of proxy war theory. Particular attention was paid to the period of conflict between Iran and the U.S.-led alliance after the outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2011. Historical observations and strategic analysis of Iran's military doctrine reveal that Iran's choice of indirect intervention through client allies can be attributed to a) its weakness in the balance of military capability compared to the U.S.-led alliance; b) major domestic and international costs and risks associated with conventional warfare by Iran against them. Iran is therefore pursuing more conservative aims with strategic patience rather than maximalist ones, making the conflict costly for the US and Israel over time with the eventual goal of removing their presence in the region.

In this regard, Iran is participating in regional conflicts with a limited set of objectives, such as managing the situation to produce more favorable outcomes; preventing the strengthening of the adversary in a specific conflict; by controlling proxies, using conflict areas as buffer zones; signaling its resolve to the adversaries; and draining the enemy's morale and resources. The paper demonstrated that although partnerships with client forces came at a cost and posed significant risks for Tehran, Iran's alliance with and utilization of its surrogates in the region between 2011 and 2024 have yielded considerable strategic benefits within the context of Iran's prioritized principles. The theocratic regime independently maintained its existence amid Western opposition, broadened its area of power and ideology projection in the Middle East, and, with the utility of plausible deniability, effectively intervened in local conflicts in both overt and covert ways. Another positive outcome is that Iran enjoys rigid, unbroken ties with its proxy militias due to not only shared geopolitical aims but also close cultural affinity. Furthermore, the Axis of Resistance mitigates the severity of Iran's regional loneliness stemming from its lack of state allies.

The paper demonstrated that although Iran's PW is cheaper and less risky than direct confrontation, it is not a low-cost or risk-free policy. Extensive sanctions and embargoes, regional isolation and poor neighborliness, deprivation of economic and cultural rewards that could have been obtained from relations with the European Union, and finding itself in an insecure environment are the costs that Iran pays for this strategy. With regards to risks, for Iran, the primary danger here is the rise of escalation due to deterrence failure, which can shift the conflict from an indirect to a direct one with the U.S.-led alliance.

Author Contributions

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Asymetryczny interwencjonizm Iranu: analiza dynamiki wojny proxy od 2011 roku

Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest zbadanie i ocena pośredniej interwencji wojskowej Iranu poprzez wykorzystanie lokalnych aktorów niepaństwowych w strefach konfliktu na Bliskim Wschodzie. Szczególną uwagę zwrócono na konfrontację w szarej strefie między Iranem a sojuszem pod przywództwem USA po wybuchu Arabskiej Wiosny w 2011 r. Jakie są cechy dynamiki irańskiej wojny zastępczej (WZ) i w jakim stopniu strategia ta była skuteczna w osiągnięciu swoich celów? W związku z tym jako główne ramy teoretyczne wybrano teorię WZ, wraz z jej najnowszymi osiągnięciami w literaturze. W artykule argumentuje się, że przyjęcie przez Iran strategii WZ ostatecznie ma na celu: a) ograniczenie dostrzeganych zagrożeń pochodzących ze strony sojuszu pod przywództwem USA; b) powstrzymanie potencjalnych interwencji wojskowych na jego terytorium oraz c) uczynienie obecności USA na Bliskim Wschodzie uciążliwą; c) uczynić obecność USA na Bliskim Wschodzie uciążliwą, mając na celu ostateczne wycofanie się z regionu w perspektywie długoterminowej.. Ponadto utrzymuje, że chociaż wiąże się to z kosztami i stwarza znaczne ryzyko dla Teheranu, strategia ta wykazała skuteczność w kontekście priorytetowych zasad Iranu. Głównym czynnikiem przyczyniającym się do skutecznej realizacji tej strategii przez Iran jest partnerski styl Iranu wobec klientów. W rzeczywistości oprócz celów strategicznych głównym czynnikiem zapewniającym odporność sojuszu zastępczego jest pokrewieństwo ideologiczne między reżimem irańskim a siłami klienta.

Słowa kluczowe: Iran, wojna zastępcza, Bliski Wschód, Oś Oporu, strategia militarna