



RESEARCH PAPER

**Proxy Warfare and Strategic Divergence: Comparison between
Conflicting Approaches of Iran and Israel to Warring in the Shadows
in the Middle East**

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ABSTRACT

The contemporary Middle East portrays an amazing picture of the application of proxy warfare which, in fact, has emerged there as a key tool of reciprocal, indirect statecraft allowing hostile states to shuffle conflict zones, pursue strategic goals, and project influence without resorting to direct military discourse. The June 2025 Iran-Israel war revealed the conflicting views of both states regarding geostrategic application of non-state actors and was a reflection of their different geopolitical goals, strategic philosophies, and ideological underpinnings. Since decades, Iran's foreign policy lie in the export of revolutionary doctrine and the development of transnational Shiite militias, such as the Popular Mobilization Forces and Hezbollah, which act as outreach vehicles across the region whereas Israel, in contrast, follows a technologically advanced and security-oriented approach and prefers using intelligence networks, secret alliances, and precise operations to neutralize threats and preserve its strategic edge. In this background, the instant study comparatively examines the motivations, methods of operation, and long-term effects of proxy engagement by both states and highlights the disparities in their definitions of success, the legal ambiguities surrounding state-proxy relationships, and the moral conundrums raised by exposing civilians to indirect conflict. It concludes that the complex and dynamic nature of proxy warfare is causing threat not only to the regional peace at large but would have the potential to disrupt global political order as well if the main reasons of hostility and friction in the Middle East remained unattended and unresolved.

KEYWORDS Iran-Israel Proxy Warfare, Non State Actors, Middle East, Hezbollah

Introduction

In the Middle East, where direct military engagement is frequently limited by international scrutiny, shifting alliances and the complicated terrain of asymmetric battle, proxy warfare has been developed as a key tool of statecraft. To project influence, achieve strategic goals, and alter political landscapes without having to pay the full price of conventional combat, regional countries are depending more and more on non-state players in this context. By using this covert approach, states can exert pressure, destabilize enemies, and secure ideological or territorial advantages while remaining credible. Iran and Israel are two of the most well-known and ideologically opposed countries that use proxy warfare particularly against each other. Although both nations have created complex models for dealing with non-state entities, there are significant differences between their goals, methods of operation, and strategic results. Iran's strategy is based on the promotion of revolutionary doctrine and the development of

transnational Shiite militias, including the Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq and Hezbollah in Lebanon. In addition to being tools of resistance and deterrent, these organizations are extensions of Iran's regional strategy, providing it the ability to confront adversaries and sway internal politics in weaker nations.

Israel, on the other hand, employs a pragmatically balanced and security-focused approach. Its deterrence doctrine, technical dominance, and intelligence-driven operations all influence how it interacts with non-state entities. While avoiding protracted entanglements, Israel aims to eliminate dangers originating from adversarial proxies through strategic alliances, precision strikes, and clandestine partnerships. Israel's proxy operations are frequently transactional, transient, and strictly regulated, intended to further short-term security objectives rather than long-term regional change, in contrast to Iran's ideologically rooted networks. The strategic differences between Iran and Israel's use of non-state actors are compared in this paper, with particular attention paid to the goals, methods, and outcomes of each country's proxy wars. It also examines the moral and legal issues raised by these covert forms of conflict, especially as they pertain to international norms, civilian safety, and sovereignty. The paper seeks to shed light on the changing nature of proxy warfare and its repercussions over future security architectures, regional stability, and conflict resolution by placing both tactics within the larger Middle Eastern geopolitical framework.

Literature Review

Levitt elaborates a thorough examination of Hezbollah's development, showing how it changed from a regional resistance group to a worldwide proxy organization supporting Iranian strategic objectives. His research highlights how politically entrenched and operationally sophisticated Iran-backed militias are in various combat areas. He draws attention to Hezbollah's incorporation into state structures and its dual persona as a paramilitary organization and political player. Through asymmetric warfare and transnational networks, this duality allows it to further Iran's regional aspirations while exerting influence at home (Levitt, 2013).

Inbar describes that Israel frequently frames its interactions with non-state actors through the prism of operational pragmatism and security policy. Security issues faced by Israel after the Yom Kippur War, led it to focus on its transition to deterrence, technological dominance, and intelligence-led operations. He concludes that Israel prefers transactional, short-term interactions to remove threats without becoming involved in long-term issues (Inbar, 2016).

Material and Methods

The study adopts qualitative method of reasoning to understand the application of proxy warfare in the Middle East. Since it is difficult to access the official data regarding the working of such organizations therefore secondary data sources available in the form of books, research articles and newspapers reports have been analyzed to understand the phenomenon.

Results and Discussion

Iran's Strategic Objectives

Iran's revolutionary identity and its international dissemination of Shiite ideology are fundamental components of its proxy war strategy. Tehran has established itself as a

champion of Shiite populations throughout the Middle East since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, creating, what academics and security experts refer to as the "Shiite Crescent", a geopolitical arc that runs through Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon to Yemen. In addition to being Iran's strategic assets, organizations like Hezbollah and the Houthis serve as ideological tools, advancing a resistance narrative that opposes Israeli statehood and the dominance of United States (US). The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), whose Quds Force serves as Iran's main foreign force multiplier, provides these proxies with the majority of their training, weapons, and ideological indoctrination. Tehran cultivates allegiance and influence in divided cultures by fusing anti-imperialist message with shared religious discourse through education centers, clerical outreach, and concerted media campaigns (Rosen, 2022).

Iran's ideological reach extends beyond sectarian identification; it functions via a broader framework of regional resistance to what is seen as Western domination. Al-Mayadeen and Press TV are examples of proxy-affiliated media institutions that spread Iran's narrative outside of Shiite communities, encouraging a culture of resistance that combines nationalism, religious duty, and sociopolitical grievance. Hezbollah's portrayal as a liberation organization instead of a militia, for example, has been popular with non-Shiite audiences, especially because of its community activities and resistance to Israeli military actions in Lebanon. Tehran can negotiate with politically fractured and ethnically varied governments by using this ideological framework, which also helps it winning over those who have been harmed by foreign interference (Levitt, 2023).

Regional Power Projection: Confrontation with Israel

The foundation of Iran's regional power projection is its desire to subvert Israel's strategic hegemony. By using proxies in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen, Tehran is able to influence events on several fronts without resorting to direct combat. By using this deceptive strategy, Iran may increase its strategic reach without engaging in direct combat with more powerful enemies. For example, it has established a buffer zone that hinders Israeli military planning and discourages GCC-backed projects by supporting Shiite forces in Iraq and Hezbollah in Lebanon. With the potential to launch strikes, gather intelligence-based information, and topple opposing regimes, these proxies act as forward-operating assets that Tehran can deny (Al Midfa, 2025). Iran and Israel have a particularly heated conflict that is motivated by both strategic considerations and ideological animosity. Tehran has made significant investments in establishing deterrence through missile arsenals and asymmetric warfare capabilities because it sees Israel as a regional adversary and a stand-in for Western dominance. Iran demonstrated its ability to strike deep into enemy territory despite air defense systems during the 2025 battle by launching hundreds of ballistic missiles and drones against Israeli sites. Even if several of these attempts were stopped, their sheer number and tenacity demonstrated Iran's determination to challenge Israeli military dominance and project might. Iran's threats to block the Strait of Hormuz, a crucial maritime chokepoint, also demonstrate its capacity to exert economic pressure on Gulf governments and affect world oil markets. By combining economic pressure with military posture, this multifaceted approach strengthens Iran's position as a force that upsets the regional power structure (Soufan, 2025).

Political Leverage: Controlling Governments via Proxy Presence

Iran uses proxy warfare to influence politics in addition to the battlefield, especially in weaker nations like Iraq and Lebanon. An example of Iran's capacity to

insert a proxy within a sovereign state's political and military structures is Hezbollah in Lebanon. In addition to controlling important ministries and seats in parliament, the organization also has an autonomous armed branch that functions as a state inside a state. This two-pronged arrangement enables Iran to exert control over Lebanese foreign policy, block projects supported by the West, and keep a deterrent stance toward Israel without engaging in direct combat. Hezbollah's incorporation into Lebanon's political structure also protects Iran from criticism from abroad because its power is wielded through internal political channels rather than direct military occupation. Tehran may project authority using this proxy government paradigm while maintaining diplomatic flexibility and plausible deniability (Levitt, 2023).

Iran has more subtle but no less powerful influence in Iraq. Iran took advantage of the power vacuum left by the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime and the 2003 U.S. invasion by strengthening its connections with native Shiite political groups and militias. Now, organizations like Kata'ib Hezbollah, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, and the Badr Organization are part of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), a state-approved umbrella for paramilitary groups. These proxies have power over Iraq's cabinet nominations, election results, and security strategy; frequently, they match Baghdad's choices with Tehran's strategic objectives. By using these groups to influence internal politics of Iraq, Iran has been able to establish economic corridors, offset American influence, and keep a safe distance from Sunni Arab adversaries (Hadad, 2024).

Israel's Strategic Objectives

National Security and Preemptive Defense against Iranian-Backed Threats

Israel's national security ideology and the necessity of preemptive defense serve as the foundation for its proxy warfare strategy. History supports Israel's dependence on preemptive defense. Israel has continuously taken action to defuse threats before they become real, from the 1967 Six-Day War to the 2007 attack on Syria's nuclear site. This philosophy has changed recently in response to the asymmetric dangers that Iranian proxies offer. To avoid a change in the strategic balance, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), for instance, attacked Hezbollah's precision-guided missile program in Lebanon. These acts are not only tactical; they are part of a larger ideology that it is tactically unacceptable to wait for an assault to happen. Considering Iran's repeated threats to destroy the state of Israel and its active backing for cross-border assaults, legal experts and military analysts contend that Israel's preemptive strikes are justified self-defense under Article 51 of the UN Charter (Ostrovsky, 2025).

Strategic Counterbalance: Israel's Engagement with Kurdish Alliances

Iran's growing proxy network is strategically offset by Israel's unofficial partnership with Kurdish groups, especially in Iraq and Syria. With roots in the Periphery Doctrine, Israel has historically developed relationships with non-Arab communities in an effort to counteract antagonistic Arab governments. This philosophy has changed recently to include tacit collaboration with Kurdish organizations like the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in northeastern Syria and the Peshmerga in Iraqi Kurdistan. These partnerships give Israel access to information, supply lines, and a presence in areas where militias supported by Iran are active. Israeli assistance to Kurdish autonomy movements has included political backing, humanitarian supplies, and clandestine training, particularly during the 2017 Kurdistan Region independence referendum that Israel publicly supported. This alliance is pragmatic rather than

ideological; both sides look to decentralized, non-state collaboration to change regional dynamics and share enemies in Iran and Turkey (MamSani, 2025).

Strategic Deterrence through Covert Operations

Israel's strategic deterrence approach is based on its employment of covert operations, which are frequently carried out through or in conjunction with proxy networks. These activities cover everything from targeted killings of valuable Iranian agents to sabotage missions and cyberattacks. Israel's national intelligence organization, the Mossad, has been instrumental in preventing threats before they become more serious. Examples of this include defeating Quds Force commanders in Syria and Lebanon and stopping Iran's nuclear program. These missions are intended to not only weaken capabilities of the adversary but also to make it abundantly evident that Israel is still capable of striking at any moment and from any location without engaging in direct combat. Israel's "Campaign Between the Wars" strategy, which stresses ongoing, low-intensity operations to stop enemies from building strategic momentum, supports this deterrent stance. By applying proxies and clandestine means, Israel avoids the diplomatic consequences of open battle while preserving regional interests and stability (Katikar, 2024).

Key Comparative Insights

Iran's Ideological Vision vs. Israel's Pragmatic Security Strategy

Iran and Israel have radically different strategic perspectives when it comes to proxy warfare. Iran's approach is ideologically motivated and is based on the establishment of a global resistance axis and the spreading of revolutionary Shiism. Its proxies are both ideological representatives and military assets entrusted with upending Western-aligned governments and rewriting regional narratives. Tehran's ultimate objective is to establish loyalist networks inside weak regimes in order to create a parallel system of government that is consistent with its ideology. Israel, on the other hand, has a practical and security-focused policy. Through strategic partnerships and clandestine activities, it aims to neutralize dangers rather than export ideologies. Israeli proxies, such as intelligence-affiliated militias or Kurdish factions, are selected for their strategic value rather than their ideological affinities. This difference is indicative of a larger philosophical divide: Israel seeks containment, whereas Iran seeks reform (Ahmadzade, 2024).

Defining Success in Proxy Warfare

Each state has its own metrics. The tenacity and ideological allegiance of Iran's proxy networks are key to its success. Tehran views its power as unaffected by military constraints as long as its allies uphold its resistance philosophy and are able to influence local politics. This is demonstrated by the Houthis' tenacity in Yemen in the face of international pressure and Hezbollah's ongoing involvement in Lebanon. However, Israel uses operational tools to measure performance, such as preventing assaults, disrupting capabilities of adversary, and maintaining strategic deterrence. Even though the Israel doesn't destroy the proxy itself, its secret attacks on Iranian facilities and its capacity to stop Hezbollah's missile upgrades are regarded as successes. Israel's success is tactical and preventative, but Iran's is ideological and structural; this difference influences their relative risk appetites and long-term objectives. Iran uses ideological durability and the ability of its proxies to integrate into state systems as indicators of

success, whereas Israel prefers strategic deterrence and tactical disruption. Understanding this difference reveals two different logics: Israel's is containment-driven, focusing on stopping antagonistic momentum, while Iran's is transformation-focused, seeking to change political landscapes. These standards have an impact on each state's risk assessment, proxy autonomy management, and foreign scrutiny response (Spyer, 2025).

Proxy Tactics and Operational Approaches of Iran

Military and Intelligence Support: Arms Supply, Training, and Logistical Aid

As mentioned earlier, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its special Quds Force are principally responsible for the strong system of weaponry transfers, paramilitary training, and logistical coordination that supports Iran's proxy warfare infrastructure. Iran has been supplying proxy actors like Hezbollah, the Houthis, and Shiite militias in Iraq and Syria with small guns, rocket systems, drones, and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) through a transnational supply network that it has established since the 1980s. These transactions are frequently made via covert networks in Turkey, Iraq, and Lebanon, where cash movements are concealed via front firms and currency exchanges. Additionally, the Quds Force offers strategic direction and military training, integrating Iranian advisors into proxy forces to guarantee operational congruence along with Tehran's goals. Iran may project power asymmetrically using this technique, allowing its proxies to fight for an extended period of time without requiring any direct support or involvement of Iranian military troops (Wilson, 2023).

Iran has built its logistics infrastructure to be resilient and flexible, especially in the face of international scrutiny and sanctions. To lessen reliance on outside vendors, the IRGC has made investments in local military manufacture, producing small guns, drones, and missiles that, in turn, are supplied to proxy forces. Iran also uses media-driven and ideological means to manipulate politics. Tehran finances social media initiatives, satellite networks, and places of worship to spread ideas consistent with its foreign policy objectives. For instance, Iranian-supported media channels like Press TV and al-Mayadeen frequently present regional crises as being framed by opposition to Zionism and Western imperialism, which strengthens Tehran's ideological stance and shapes public opinion in Arab nations. By legitimizing its friends and influencing political discourse, this media approach enhances Iran's proxy presence. Iran's proxies may upend competitor alliances and spread Tehran's revolutionary ideas throughout its many spheres of influence. They are more than just military instruments; they are extensions of its geopolitical intent (Akbarzadeh S. &, 2024).

Digital and Psychological Operations

Iran's proxy strategy has progressively included cyber and psychological warfare, employing digital platforms to sway perceptions, interfere with infrastructure, and cause confusion among its enemies. Threat organizations with ties to Iran, including APT34 and CyberAv3ngers, undertook concerted misinformation attacks against Israeli and Western audiences during the Iran-Israel confrontation in 2025. These operations included staged breaches, fake data releases, and AI-generated propaganda meant to mimic nonexistent intrusions, such as the purported penetration into Israel's Dorada power plant, which was ultimately shown to be duplicated images from previous leaks. Two aspects of Iran's cyber strategy should be considered: psychological manipulation and technical sabotage. While "psychological operations" utilize AI-generated material,

false leaks, and misinformation to mislead people and undermine faith in institutions, "cyberattacks" target infrastructure, including military databases, energy grids, and financial institutions, with the goal of disrupting or paralyzing them. Iran increases its asymmetric reach in both digital and societal spheres by obfuscating these lines. The objective was psychological disruption rather than technical sabotage in order to incite fear and erode public confidence in Israeli institutions. This strategy is in keeping with Iran's larger cyber policy, which aims to weaponize perception and obfuscate the distinction between fact and fiction in the digital battlefield (Nextgov, 2025).

Artificial Intelligence is another tool used in Iran's cyber strategy to increase the scope and accuracy of its psychological operations. Iranian cyber troops have implemented AI-driven technologies to automate phishing attacks, assess social media sentiment, and customize misinformation for particular demographic groups. These strategies, which are coordinated across state media outlets and proxy networks, amp up Tehran's ideological discourse while upending hostile cultures. To portray Iran's proxies as genuine resistance organizations, for instance, Iranian-backed websites along with the Press TV and al-Mayadeen have disseminated AI-generated movies and edited news pieces. Without engaging in direct combat, Iran is able to shape regional narratives and weaken the unity of the adversary by combining cyber and psychological warfare (Byman, 2005).

Israel's Proxy Warfare Methods

Covert Military Operations: Strategic Strikes and Intelligence-Backed Militia Support

Israel uses highly focused military operations and strategic deniability as its main proxy strategies, which can be carried out by state troops or in cooperation with affiliated militias. The IDF frequently conduct preemptive attacks in Syria and Lebanon in an effort to thwart Iranian proxy consolidation and weapon shipments. An example of this is the June 2025 bombing on Damascus International Airport, which purportedly used Mossad-led reconnaissance and signal intercepts to damage several IRGC supply nodes meant for Hezbollah's missile arsenal. Even though they are not officially recognized, these operations are a part of the "Campaign Between Wars" policy, which seeks to weaken Iran's forward footprint without inciting conflict (Israel T. T., 2025).

Moreover, Israel secretly supports groups with proxy affiliations, especially in Syria's northeastern region. The IDF apparently has been able to keep an eye on Iranian-backed organizations operating in Deir ez-Zor and Abu Kamal, the two key crossing points close to the Iraqi border, thanks to intelligence contacts with Kurdish components of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). According to a leaked Shin Bet dossier that was made public by The Jerusalem Sentinel, Israeli agents helped SDF-aligned troops ambush IRGC soldiers by using drone networks and signal jammers, all the while preserving plausible deniability through third-party sourcing. These encounters are part of a larger Israeli pattern that involves using local actors to gain a tactical edge without becoming involved in direct ground combat (Sentinel, 2025).

Technological Dominance: Drone Warfare, Cyber Defense, and Targeted Operations

Israel's technological superiority in proxy warfare derives from its proficiency with cyber capabilities, drone systems, and precision-targeted operations. Swarms of tactical drones, many of which were already within Iranian territory, were used by Israel during the 2025 war to take out communications hubs and air defense radars before

conducting coordinated attacks on Iran. During the operation Rising Lion, Israel used unmanned aircraft systems (UAS) in conjunction with special operations to accomplish strategic disruption. Israeli troops were able to overload Iranian early-warning networks, interfere with command lines, and destroy high-value targets with little collateral damage by using low-observable drones. This combination of autonomous systems and airpower represents a move toward multi-domain warfare, in which Israel can outmaneuver enemies without resorting to traditional escalation thanks to technical advantages (Jensen, 2025).

Israel's drone warfare is enhanced by its cyber defense system, which eliminates online threats and launches preemptive cyberattacks. The Iranian cryptocurrency exchange Nobitex and Bank Sepah were attacked in June 2025 by the Israeli-affiliated hacker group Collective Predatory Sparrow, causing a statewide internet shutdown and stealing millions of dollars. The psychological damage and operational disarray were increased by these attacks, which were not only disruptive but also deliberately timed to coincide with physical strikes. Targeting Iranian broadcast networks, Israeli cyber teams inserted anti-regime propaganda to erode popular confidence in official media. Analysts claim that Israel's dual-domain approach, which combined kinetic and digital operations, changed the nature of contemporary proxy warfare and provided it a clear edge by accelerating the timetable to relative supremacy (Yucer, 2025).

Effectiveness of Proxy Engagements in Shaping Regional Military Conflicts:

Comparative Study of Hezbollah (Iran) and Kurdish Allies (Israel)

This comparative study focuses on two classical forms of proxy warfare: Kurdish groups, who are Israel's practical, intelligence-sharing allies, and Hezbollah, who is Iran's ideologically ingrained hybrid (state) militia. The strategic importance, structural distinctions, and ongoing relevance in Middle Eastern wars led to the selection of these cases. Each shows different ideological and tactical approaches to the development and use of proxies by their supporters. Hezbollah and Israel's Kurdish allies play opposing roles, which exemplify the military efficacy of proxy warfare. Hezbollah, originally a guerilla group and Iran's most established proxy, has developed into a hybrid military organization that can conduct conventional combat, fly drones, and unleash prolonged rocket strikes. Iran's estimated 150,000 missiles allowed it to remain a constant danger alongside Israel's northern border, especially during the 2024–2025 escalation when Hezbollah struck civilian infrastructure and key Israeli airbases. Hezbollah has suffered significant losses as a result of Israeli bombings and special operations, but its ability to respond with drones and missiles shows how resilient it is and how Iran can use non-state entities to project force (Institute, 2024).

On the other hand, Israel's Kurdish alliances, especially with the Peshmerga and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in Iraq, provide a more flexible and intelligence-based approach. Israel has been able to disrupt IRGC logistics, monitor Iranian supply routes, and carry out collaborative operations in disputed areas such as Deir ez-Zor and Sinjar because of these ties. Kurdish troops function with adaptability and local legitimacy, in contrast to Hezbollah's firmly established military stance, enabling Israel to exercise influence without actual occupation. According to the Jerusalem Sentinel, Israel-Kurdish cooperation has resulted in effective drone launch site disruptions and IRGC convoy ambushes, indicating the tactical accuracy of Israel's proxy operations (Sentinel, 2025).

Role in Reshaping Conflicts in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen

Iran's network of proxies has actively influenced the military discourse of major regional crises in Yemen, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. The Assad administration in Syria was strengthened by Iran-backed militias including Liwa Fatemiyoun, Harakat al-Nujaba, and Hezbollah, who secured key routes for cross-border influence and the passage of weaponry. However, as Assad's hold broke in late 2024, Iran's logistical network was broken, making it less able to support Hezbollah and organize multi-front operations (Arab, 2025). The Houthi movement in Yemen, armed with Iranian drones and missiles, started coordinated attacks against Saudi and Israeli facilities, leading to a significant escalation in the Red Sea caused by the retaliatory actions from both nations (Yaseen, et. al., 2023). According to MSN News, the Houthi strikes increased in tandem with Iran's overall strategy during the Israel-Iran conflict, disrupting international shipping lanes and putting pressure on Gulf economy (MSN, 2025).

Israel's counter-proxy strategies have drastically changed the military landscape in these areas. Israel's 2025 operation in Lebanon forced a strategic pullback from north of the Litani River after seriously impairing Hezbollah's top leadership. This disrupted Iranian command networks and limited Hezbollah's capacity to launch short-range missiles, marking a sea change in Israel's deterrent strategy. Iranian-aligned militias such as Kata'ib Hezbollah and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq were the targets of Israeli bombings in Iraq, which were frequently carried out in cooperation with Kurdish allies. These strikes damaged their operational capabilities and cut off their supply lines. In the meantime, Israeli airstrikes in Syria damaged precision missile stockpiles and IRGC drone production facilities, undermining Iran's technical edge and leading to the disintegration of the Syrian regime. These results demonstrate that, without resorting to full-scale conflict, Israel may employ surgical operations to destroy proxy infrastructure (Bawaba, 2025).

Will Iran's Expansive Proxy Model Endure Long-Term?

Although Iran's proxy model has given it regional influence and strategic depth, its long-term viability is coming under more and more scrutiny. The fall of the Assad government and the deterioration of Hezbollah's capabilities are two recent failures that have shown weaknesses in Iran's decentralized command structure, despite Tehran's effective embedding of proxies in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. Hezbollah's unilateral escalations and Hamas's October 7 attack demonstrate the difficulty to completely control proxy activity, which has resulted in diplomatic isolation and strategic backlash. Furthermore, Iran's ability to finance and run a vast proxy network permanently is restricted by its economic limitations and escalating domestic instability (Şimşek, 2025).

Can Israel Maintain Proxy Partnerships without Backlash?

Israel's diplomatic ties and precise coordination-based proxy operations provide durability via deniability and adaptability. However, both locally and internationally, its forceful stance has drawn political criticism. Hardliners in Netanyahu's coalition government rejected any compromise and demanded regime change in Tehran after the 2025 truce with Iran caused rifts. In addition, Israel's conduct of the war in Gaza has come under international censure, undermining its moral authority and hurting ties with longstanding allies. The use of clandestine operations and unofficial partnerships may

come under increasing scrutiny if civilian casualties and regional instability continue (ISSG, 2024).

The Future of Proxy War between Iran and Israel:

With proxy wars, intelligence operations, and military escalations characterizing their interaction throughout the previous two decades, the ongoing rivalry between Iran and Israel has drastically changed the Middle East's security dynamics. A more complex geopolitical environment has resulted from both countries' use of sophisticated technological capabilities, regional alliances, and clandestine tactics to preserve their dominance. Israel's long-term security strategy has been defined by cyberwarfare, intelligence sharing, and precision bombings with the goal of undermining Hezbollah's power and preventing Iran from expanding alongside the region. Israel has effectively restrained Iran's territorial aspirations by using proxy wars in Syria and Lebanon, but it is unclear if this approach will be viable in the long run. Iran, on the other hand, has continued to embark upon a multifaceted strategy, enhancing its ballistic missile capabilities and fortifying its military presence in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon. Despite mounting Israeli opposition, Tehran has been able to maintain military operations through partnerships with China and Russia (ISSG, 2024).

Conclusion

This comparison between the use of non-state actors by Israel and Iran demonstrates the complex and dynamic nature of proxy warfare, in which indirect engagement is both a strategic doctrine and a tactical necessity. Iran's desire to change the regional order through resistance narratives and deterrence by depth is reflected in its dependence on transnational networks and ideologically linked militias. On the other hand, Israel places a strong focus on preemptive defense, surgical precision, and maintaining the state-centric security architecture, as is demonstrated by its strategic use of clandestine alliances and intelligence-based operations. In addition to shedding light on the logic of asymmetric conflict, these disparate models call into question accepted notions of international relations pertaining to accountability, legitimacy, and sovereignty. The ethical, legal, and geopolitical ramifications of proxy engagement must be examined in future research as the Middle East is still shaped by hazy lines between state and non-state actors, especially in situations where influence is exercised covertly and war is being fought without official declaration.

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