

ADAPTING TO CONFLICT: IRAN'S PROXY WARFARE STRATEGY IN SYRIA AND YEMEN (2011–2020)¹¹



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Melih KAZDAL
Asst. Prof. Dr.
Mardin Artuklu University
Faculty of Economics and
Administrative Sciences
Mardin, Türkiye
melihkazdal@artuklu.edu.tr,
ORCID ID: 0000-0002-4729-4064

ABSTRACT | This research investigates how Iran employs proxy warfare in Syria and Yemen. Andrew Mumford's quadrilateral framework is employed to analyze Iran's use of proxy warfare in these cases, the focusing the provision of manpower, the provision military supplies, financial assistance, and non-military assistance. The study employed a method of multiple case analysis, enabling an examination of both the situations within and between cases. The objective of employing this approach was to identify the similarities, differences and underlying causes of these cases. The selection of these two cases for analysis was based on their distinctive environmental and socio-political factors, allowing for an evaluation of Iran's proxy war strategy in the region. The time span of the study covers the decade following the beginning of the Arab Spring and ends with the assassination of Qassem Soleimani. This study demonstrates that Iran utilises a flexible proxy war strategy, modifying its approach in accordance with evolving war dynamics and conflict points.

Keywords: Proxy war, Iran's security, civil war, Syria, Yemen

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¹ Compliance with ethical principles regarding the relevant study has been declared.

ÇATIŞMAYA UYUM SAĞLAMA: İRAN'IN SURİYE VE YEMEN'DEKİ VEKALET SAVAŞI STRATEJİSİ (2011- 2020)



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Melih KAZDAL
Dr. Öğr. Üyesi
Mardin Artuklu Üniversitesi
İktisadi ve İdari Bilimler Fakültesi
Mardin, Türkiye
melihkazdal@artuklu.edu.tr,
ORCID ID: 0000-0002-4729-4064

ÖZ | Bu çalışma İran'ın, Suriye ve Yemen'de vekalet savaşını nasıl kullandığını incelemektedir. Çalışmada vekalet savaşı kavramsal çerçevesi kullanılmış ve sahadaki uygulaması Andrew Mumford'un ortaya koyduğu dörtlü çerçeve olan, insan gücü temini, askeri malzeme temini, finansal yardım ve askeri olmayan yardım üzerinden incelenmiştir. Çalışmada, hem vakalar içindeki hem de vakalar arasındaki durumların incelenmesine olanak tanıyan çoklu vaka analizi yöntemi kullanılmıştır. Bu yaklaşımı kullanarak vakaların benzerliklerini, farklılıklarını ve altında yatan nedenleri ortaya koymak amaçlanmıştır. Suriye ve Yemen'in vaka analizi için seçilmesi, İran'ın bölgedeki vekalet savaşı stratejisinin değerlendirilmesine olanak tanıyan farklı çevresel ve sosyo-politik faktörlere dayanmaktadır. Çalışmanın zaman aralığı Arap Baharı sürecinin başlangıcından sonraki on yılı kapsamakta ve Kasım Süleymani'nin öldürülmesi ile sona ermektedir. Bu çalışma, İran'ın, esnek bir vekalet savaşı stratejisi kullandığını, değişen savaş dinamikleri ve çatışma noktalarına göre yaklaşımını değiştirdiğini göstermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Vekalet savaşı, İran'ın güvenlik stratejisi, Suriye, Yemen

JEL Kodları: F50, F52, N45

Alan: Siyaset bilimi ve uluslararası ilişkiler

Türü: Araştırma

1. INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of war has undergone a substantial transformation in the period following World War II. During this period, there has been a notable surge in the prevalence of intra-state conflicts, accompanied by a shift from wars involving all state parties to those with a greater involvement of non-state armed actors. This situation, which is also typically referred to as a civil war, can be attributed to several factors. The arming of ethnic, religious, sectarian, or political (separatist) groups or opposition within the state gives rise to a politically motivated internal armed conflict that subsequently evolves into war. In such instances, external actors, situated outside the conflicting groups, become involved in the conflict in a manner that aligns with their respective interests. Subsequent to this intervention, the extant civil wars have begun to exhibit the hallmarks of proxy wars, with the transformation of such wars into proxy wars being a common phenomenon in the Middle East.

A review of the literature reveals a substantial body of work on Iran's proxy warfare practices. Jonathan Spyer (2016) focuses on Iran's proxies in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon and Palestine and concludes that by supporting its proxies, Iran aims to reach the Mediterranean and compensate for the legitimacy gap caused by its Shiite-Persian identity. Afshon Ostovar, (2018) who also focuses on Iran's relationship with its proxies, analysed this relationship through religion. Ostovar focuses more on Iran's engagement with non-state actors and categorises Iran's success and failure in engaging with these actors. Omer Carmi (2017) categorised pro-Iranian groups, which he called the Iran Threat Network (ITN), into five categories and focused on the development of Iran's relations with these groups. Ariane M. Tabatabai, Jeffrey Martini and Becca Wasser, (2021) who use the same concept (ITN) as Carmi, use ITN to refer to a network of non-Iranian, non-state organisations. The authors analysed Iran's level of engagement with these actors and categorised these groups into four categories: Targeters, Deterriers, Stabilisers and Influencers. The first book on Iran's proxy war strategy was written by Ofira Seliktar and Farhad Rezai (2020). The book analysed Iran's relationship with its proxies in separate chapters. The authors conclude that Iran has implemented a successful proxy war strategy and argue that only a very heavy economic cost can dissuade Iran from this policy. Mohammad Topçu (2021) explained the role of proxy war in Iran's foreign policy through the actors Hashd al-Shaabi and Houthis, employing the theoretical framework of proxy wars coined by Tyrone L. Groh. The author concludes that Iran adopted a different strategy in both cases. Finally, Ronen A. Cohen and Gadi P. Shamci (2022) also examined the proxy war strategy in Iran's foreign policy. The authors argue that Iran aims to establish a Shiite Crescent in the geography stretching from Iraq to

Lebanon. The article focuses mostly on Syria and emphasises Iran's relations with the groups there and its strategic interests. The authors demonstrate that Tehran's success has been limited and that this strategy has isolated it and, on the contrary, curbed its sphere of influence.

This study delves into Iran's evolving strategy of proxy warfare in two key conflict zones, Syria and Yemen, with a focus on the period between 2011 and 2020. The cases of Syria and Yemen were selected based on their divergent geographies and conflict dynamics within the same period. Moreover, they were chosen for their compatibility with the conceptual framework of the study and Mumford's quadrilateral framework. Iran's engagement in these conflicts has become a defining element of its broader regional influence, particularly in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. By employing Andrew Mumford's (2013a, 2013b) quadrilateral framework this research aims to offer a comprehensive analysis of Iran's proxy warfare tactics. These four dimensions provide a structured lens through which Iran's involvement in Syria and Yemen can be examined, highlighting the multifaceted nature of its support to non-state actors and its ability to influence conflicts without direct military intervention. Therefore, this study is expected to contribute to the relevant literature. The rest of the study is as follows. The first section describes the conceptual framework of proxy war. In this section, it is emphasised what is the proxy war is and how it is employed. The second section discusses why Iran embraces a proxy war strategy. The final section, Tehran's implementation of proxy war in Syria and Yemen are analysed in the context of Mumford's quadrilateral framework.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: WHAT IS PROXY WARFARE AND HOW IT UTILISED?

The concept of proxy is employed in a multitude of categories within the existing literature. Accordingly, it is essential to provide a clear and precise definition of the concept. In the broadest sense, a proxy is an actor *A* acting on behalf of actor *B*. This necessitates the presence of at least two elements in all definitions of agency. The first of these is the existence of a relationship between at least two actors; the second is that the relationship is not equivalent. As a result, the nature of the relationship between two equivalent actors is typically understood through the concepts of partnership or alliance (Maurer, 2016, p. 387,399). The Proxy war is characterized by the involvement of three distinct actors. These are the *benefactor*, the *proxy* and the *target*, which is the common enemy. It can be reasonably deduced, therefore, that in each instance of a proxy war, the triadic relationship of patron-proxy-target must exist. As a matter of fact, Vladimir Rauta (2018, p. 457) posits that proxy wars are characterized by three

intertwined binary relationships: the patron-target dyad, the patron-proxy dyad, and the proxy-target dyad.

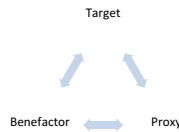


Figure 1: Actors and Relationship Diagram

Brendan Sozer (2016) defines proxy warfare as “an external actor(s) seeking to indirectly influence the outcome of a conflict in pursuit of their strategic policy objectives by providing direct and intentional assistance to an existing actor in the conflict.” In order to present a traditional understanding of proxy warfare, Sozer’s definition excludes other forms of support or intervention. Accordingly, the definition excludes the involvement of a state in a war on the side of a certain actor in a conflict from the concept of proxy war. For a proxy relationship to exist between actors, three criteria must be met. The first criterion is that the benefactor provides direct support to the proxy. Such assistance may encompass the provision of military equipment, training, logistical support and financial assistance. The second criterion is that the benefactor and the proxy must share a common objective. The third criterion is that the benefactor-proxy relationship should persist for a period.

For a proxy actor to receive external assistance, two elements must be present. These are the state or non-state armed actor willing to provide support to the proxy and the proxy willing to accept this support (Salehyan et al., 2011, p. 711). Once the relationship between these actors is established, the implementation of proxy warfare proceeds as follows: the provision of manpower, delivery of material (weapons, equipment, etc.), financial assistance, and non-military assistance (Byman et al., 2001, p. 84; Mumford, 2013b, p. 61). The provision of manpower typically originated during the Cold War era as a means of sending advisors and military training, and subsequently evolved to encompass the direct recruitment of foreign fighters. The provision of advisors offers two principal benefits. Firstly, they permit the patron to observe the behaviour of the proxy and to prevent undesirable behaviour. Secondly, advisors utilize their expertise to persuade proxies to act in a manner that aligns with the interests of their patrons, even when it may not be in the proxies’ immediate self-interest (Patten, 2013, p. 833).

The provision of military equipment, including weapons, armament, ammunition, and advanced technological devices, by the patron to the proxy

represents a fundamental element in the context of proxy warfare. Arms aid is typically furnished by states through illicit smuggling to bolster the capabilities of non-state proxies. This is due to the fact that states remain the primary actors in the production and distribution of weapons (Alaraby & Müller, 2020, p. 1). Furthermore, the provision of arms and military aid serves to enhance the fighting capacity of the proxy in the most expedient and straightforward manner. During the Cold War, this assistance manifested as arms exports from the United States and the Soviet Union to their proxies in areas of conflict. Subsequently, numerous actors, particularly middle or regional powers such as Iran and Saudi Arabia, furnished their proxies with arms in areas of conflict (Alaraby & Müller, 2020, p. 2).

If the motivations underlying financial assistance to parties in an existing conflict are based on strategic reasons related to the outcome of the war, rather than humanitarian or developmental ones, this support is regarded as a part of proxy war strategy. For example, between 1955 and 1980, the Soviet Union provided approximately \$51 billion in financial assistance to its proxies. In contrast, the United States allocated a comparatively modest sum of \$17.2 million to just six states in 1962 (Mumford, 2013b, p. 65). On the other hand non-state armed organizations utilize this support not only for military purposes but also for social activities such as housing, hospital construction and the treatment of the wounded. Such assistance serves to enhance the prestige and influence of the organization among the local population (Byman et al., 2001, p. 87; Malakoutikhah, 2020, p. 922).

Non-military assistance can be defined as comprising political, media, or propaganda support. For example, Iran has utilized media and propaganda to advance Hezbollah's anti-Israel stance, thereby enhancing the organization's popularity within Lebanon and across the broader Arab region. In this manner, Tehran deploys both its own international media outlets, such as Press TV, and endeavors to augment Hezbollah's media influence. Hezbollah has established media outlets, such as al-Manar, with the assistance of Iran. A further significant form of assistance provided by the patron to the proxy in this context is political support. For example, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States provided support to the Libyan rebels in the Libyan civil war at the United Nations and other international organizations. In another illustrative example, Iran permitted the Palestinian resistance groups Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad to establish official representative offices in Tehran. Furthermore, Iran furnished Hamas with a plethora of political support, which takeover of Gaza following the 2006 elections and was subsequently subjected to sanctions by the West and Israel (Byman, 2013, p. 986).

3. WHY EMBRACES PROXY WAR STRATEGY?

In the post-revolutionary 1980s, Iran began to cultivate relations with non-state actors in the Middle East, laying the foundations for its subsequent proxy war strategy. During this period, Tehran provided support to Palestinian and Lebanese groups, marking the first successful attempt at establishing a proxy group with the formation of Hezbollah in Lebanon in 1982. The war with Iraq and the existing difference of opinion within the revolutionary cadre brought this period to an end, with gains in Lebanon. In the 1990s, the end of the Cold War and the occurrence of Gulf War had a significant impact on Tehran's foreign policy. During this period, Iran sought to meddle in regional conflicts, including the Bosnian War and the Tajik Civil War, by providing support to the warring parties. However, Iran's experience during this period was documented as a series of ad hoc, conflict zone-based initiatives rather than a unified, comprehensive military and security strategy. In the 2000s, Iran's strategy of proxy warfare underwent a significant evolution. The US invasions of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003 respectively prompted a shift in Tehran's threat perception. From 2003 onward, relations with non-state actors and the related proxy war strategy became a pivotal aspect of Iran's security strategy. The success of the use of proxy groups against American and coalition forces in Iraq since 2003 led Iranian decision-makers to pursue an expansion of the proxy network (Divsallar & Azizi, 2023, pp. 4–8).

The constant state of instability in the Middle East, the frequency of wars and conflicts, and the interventions of global powers, especially the United States, necessitate a country like Iran, which has both the desire to become a regional hegemon and limited capacity, to develop a strategy accordingly. In a geography where there are two states with high defence expenditures such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and regional actors with strong military power such as Israel and Türkiye (NATO member), in addition to the constant interventions of the US, Iran must determine a security strategy according to the conditions it is in to protect its interests and survive. Therefore, for Iran, which is militarily weaker than its rivals and has problems finding allies in the region, engaging in conflicts through proxies rather than fighting directly is the most logical option. Moreover, for Iran, which has been subjected to economic sanctions for many years, the low-cost conflict management offered by proxy warfare is more advantageous than the costly consequences of direct war. Hence, it is not advantageous for Iran to directly start a conventional war or to be a part of it. For all these reasons, Tehran has developed relations with many different non-state armed actors throughout the Middle East, from Iraq to Yemen and used them as its proxies at conflict hotspots (Cohen & Shamci, 2022, pp. 393–964).

Since 1979, Iran has sought to enhance its strategic depth and develop asymmetric capabilities to compensate its conventional disadvantages vis-à-vis its rivals, particularly the USA, Israel, and Saudi Arabia. Following the revolution, Iran experienced a significant decline in its military capabilities. Iran significantly developed its military capacity with the assistance of Western weapons by establishing a close alliance with the United States during the pre-revolution period. The loss of a global hegemonic supporter such as the US following the revolution, coupled with the transformation of this former ally into an adversary, has had a detrimental impact on Iran's military capabilities. The army, which had previously relied on US weapons, equipment, and training, experienced difficulties in maintaining its military capabilities after the revolution. The aging inventory of military vehicles and weapons, which had been acquired with US assistance, presented a significant challenge in this regard. Moreover, there has been a significant transformation within the Iranian armed forces, with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) undergoing a period of growth and expansion at the expense of the Artesh, has experienced a decline in strength (Tabatabai et al., 2021, pp. 4–5).

In order to achieve strategic depth in the region, Iran has constructed a network of proxies and militias within the context of its “forward defense” policy. The primary objective of Tehran is to expand its influence in the Middle East, particularly fragile and failed states such as Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. Additionally, it seeks to utilize proxies to confront its rivals. The most tangible result of this policy is the formation of the “axis of resistance” which is designed to counter the influence of the United States and its allies in the region (International Crisis Group, 2018, p. 4). This network of relations with non-state actors has constituted a critical element of Iran's security policy since the revolution and an indispensable component of its defense doctrine. Tehran deploys this network of proxies as a means of deterring its rivals, fortifying its homeland defense, augmenting its strategic depth, expanding its regional influence, and projecting its power beyond its borders. Furthermore, the use of proxies allows Tehran to overestimate its role in the region. Because, through its proxies, Tehran is able to engage in the most significant conflicts and political issues in the region, including those pertaining to Israel-Palestine, Israel-Lebanon, the US occupation of Iraq, and the war in Syria. In this context, the proxy network serves as a complementary means of achieving national security objectives, particularly in relation to Iran's asymmetric capabilities, including its ballistic missile and nuclear programs. It provides a source of power that compensates for the country's lack of conventional capabilities (Cohen & Shamci, 2022, p. 386; Ostovar, 2018, p. 96; Tabatabai et al., 2021, pp. 4–5).

4. CASE STUDY: SYRIA AND YEMEN (2011-2020)

This section examines Iran's proxy warfare practices in Syria and Yemen through the lens of Mumford's quadrilateral framework.

4.1. The Provision of Manpower

From the outset of the crisis in Syria, Iran maintained a close watch on developments in the region and promptly dispatched advisors to the area. This mission, which was spearheaded by the Quds Force under the direction of Qassem Soleimani, also involved the participation of intelligence units. The involvement of the Quds Force in Syria was first revealed with the assassination of Brigadier General Hassan Shateri in February 2013 (Fulton et al., 2013, p. 10). In addition to dispatching advisors to Syria, Iran also established militia forces within the country and deployed fighters to the region by leveraging its network of proxies in the Middle East. It is therefore estimated that approximately 7,000 members of the IRGC and the Basij militia served in Syria from the outset of the conflict until 2015 (Azizi, 2022, p. 511).

As the conflict in Syria intensified and spread across the country, the Syrian army began to demonstrate clear signs of weakness. In consequence of the Syrian army's precipitous reduction in personnel and its incompetent performance against the opposition, Qassem Soleimani initiated the formation of a paramilitary force. To this end, Soleimani recruited men from local committees and *Shabbiha*³ members to form the National Defence Forces (NDF) in 2012, with the supervision of IRGC commanders. NDF fighters, including Sunnis, Druze, and Alawites, whose primary objective was to guarding their own communities. They underwent training conducted by Hezbollah fighters and Iranian personnel (Azizi, 2022, pp. 507–508; Seliktar & Rezaei, 2020, pp. 171–172). Another militia force formed by Iran in Syria is the Local Defence Forces (LDF). This organization was established in 2012 and was responsible for coordinating local militia groups in and around Aleppo. The LDF had close ties with Hezbollah and had been officially recognized as part of the Syrian army since 2017 (Azizi, 2022, p. 508; Seliktar & Rezaei, 2020, p. 172).

In addition to establishing paramilitary forces within Syria, Iran gathered numerous Shiite militia groups from across the Middle East. One of the most

³ Shabbiha is the name given to the Alawite smuggling gangs led by the Assad's extended family, operating in coastal cities such as Latakia and Tartous. In 2011, these gang members, along with other criminals, were released from prisons and transformed into a militia with Baathist volunteers. These militias were intended to undertake the regime's "dirty work" and have been the group that has demonstrated the greatest severity and brutality in its treatment of opposition and Sunni groups (Fulton et al., 2013, p. 20).

prominent Shiite militias operated in Syria was the Iraqi Shiite militia organization Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas (LAFA). The Damascus-based organization, which was established in 2012 with the support of the Quds Force, was constituted with the objective of safeguarding Shiite holy sites, particularly the Sayyida Zeinab Shrine. LAFA was a multinational and multiethnic Shiite organization comprising members from Damascus, Iraq, and other countries. At its peak, the organization had 10,000 fighters (Akbar & Isakhan, 2023, p. 546; Zorri et al., 2020, p. 63). A significant number of Iraqi groups, most notably Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) and Kataib Hezbollah (KH), two of Tehran's most reliable proxies in Iraq, have deployed fighters to engage in combat alongside the Assad regime in Syria since late 2011 (Leenders & Giustozzi, 2022, p. 618). The Iraqi Harakat of Hezbollah al-Nujaba was established in 2013 by fighters under the AEH and KH with the objective of providing support to the Assad regime. The group, which is among the largest Iraqi Shiite militias, is estimated to have reached 10,000 fighters at its peak (Hashem, 2015).

Hezbollah, Iran's most significant proxy in the region,⁴ is one of the most influential actors engaged in combat operations on the ground in Syria. However, the organization denied its intervention until it was acknowledged by Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah in an interview on May 25, 2013. Hezbollah has become a significant actor in the conflict, with its fighters and commanders engaged in combat, training numerous Shiite militia fighters within and beyond Syria, and defending the regime's strategic bases. The organization's experience in urban warfare and the fact that the native language of its fighters is Arabic have both enabled it to more effectively communicate with regime elements and increased cohesion among them. But, Hezbollah's involvement in the war in Syria, the largest military operation in the organization's history, has exacted a toll. Nevertheless, Nasrallah, who described Syria as the "backbone" of the axis of resistance, asserted that the loss of such an important ally would not be permitted (Al-Aloosy, 2022, pp. 133–134; Youssef, 2016, p. 30,33).

The inability of the aforementioned organizations to recruit fighters for the Syrian civil war prompted Tehran to seek fighters from other regions. Consequently, Tehran established the Fatemiyoun Brigade, comprising Afghans, and the Zaynabiyoun Brigade, comprising Pakistanis. The Fatemiyoun Brigade was established in 2013 by Ali Reza Tavassoli and initially deployed in Syria that same year to engage in combat against Daesh. The stated objective of the organization was to safeguard the Sayyida Zeinab Shrine and its environs. It was

⁴ Hezbollah embraces the doctrine of Velayet-e Faqih and recognize Ayetollah Ali Khamanei as the supreme religious authority (Ostovar, 2018, p. 1240). It is important to note that the group functions as a model for Iran's proxies throughout the Middle East and beyond.

asserted that Fatemiyoun had 14,000 combatants at the zenith of its involvement in the Syrian civil war (Jamal, 2019; Nadimi, 2016; Schwartz, 2022, pp. 96-97,98-99). In addition to Pakistani nationals residing in Iran, primarily from al-Mustafa University in Qom (Alfoneh, 2018), Shiites from various regions in Pakistan, including Parachinar, Kurram and Ketta, have traveled to Syria to engage in combat since early 2013 (Clarke & Smyth, 2017). The Zaynabiyoun Brigade is estimated to have comprised approximately 8,000–10,000 fighters at the peak of the conflict (Nadimi, 2016; Zahid, 2016).

The data obtained by Ali Alfoneh (2020) through open-source intelligence indicates that 573 Iranian, 925 Afghan, 118 Iraqi, 1,262 Lebanese, and 174 Pakistani foreign fighters have been killed in Syria since the beginning of 2012. These figures not only provide data on the network of foreign fighters utilized by Iran in Syria, but they also elucidate their role in the conflict. In this context, the considerable number of Lebanese casualties is significant in terms of illustrating the role played by Hezbollah in the conflict. It is also the case that the Fatemiyoun Brigade, which is composed of Afghans, is subject to the same analysis.

Michael Knights (2018, p. 21) has posited that Iran and Hezbollah have takeover a prominent advisory role in Yemen since 2014. The release of two Hezbollah and three IRGC suspects by the Houthis⁵, who had initially been accused of providing military training and logistical support to the Houthis (Ghobari, 2014), soon after taking the capital, both serves to reinforce Knights' claims and demonstrates the existing relationship between the two actors. Furthermore, the assertions that Iran has deployed advisors and trainers in Yemen are corroborated by the statements of officials. In May 2015, Ismael Kaani, then Deputy Commander of the Quds Force, stated that "the Islamic Republic was responsible for training Yemen's guards" (Kendall, 2017, p. 10). In November 2017, Ali Jafari, a former Revolutionary Guards Commander, acknowledged the deployment of Iranian advisers in Yemen at the request of Yemen's legitimate government and stated that Iran would make every effort to assist the Yemeni people (Sinkaya, 2022, p. 88).

Hezbollah plays a significant role in Iran's involvement in the Yemeni

⁵ The Houthis, unlike Iran and Hezbollah, do not embrace to Khomeini's concept of *velayat-e faqih* (Salmoni et al., 2010, pp. 67, 121). Nevertheless, the two events transformed the Houthis's relations with Iran and Hezbollah. The first was the post-2001 US invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq under the "war on terror" doctrine. The second was the Saudi-led coalition targeting the Houthis since 2015 (Juneau, 2021, p. 1). Furthermore, the fact that no other actors except Iran and Hezbollah, provided assistance to the Houthis in the Yemeni civil war, served to deepen the Houthis' relationship with them over time.

conflict. Tehran's advisory and training activities in Yemen are primarily conducted through Hezbollah. The group has deployed senior commanders to Yemen, including Abu Ali Tabatabai and Khalil Harb, a trusted advisor to Nasrallah. Similarly, to the situation in Syria, Hezbollah personnel has been engaged in training and advisory activities on the ground, thereby facilitating Iran's objective of increasing the Houthis' capabilities. In the initial stages of the intervention, Hezbollah and IRGC fighters conducted training and advisory activities, but did not engage in direct combat operations or strategic planning, in contrast to their involvement in Syria. However, this situation underwent a transformation with the advent of the Saudi-led coalition in 2015, resulting in a notable escalation in the number of casualties and captures of Iranian and Hezbollah advisors. The organisation's activities in Yemen became evident in 2019 when Nasrallah stated, "We are not ashamed that we have martyrs from Hezbollah in Yemen" (Juneau, 2021, p. 9; Levitt, 2021, pp. 12-13,14).

In both cases, Iran utilised the provision of manpower to boost its proxies' fighting power. Iran's initial deployment of manpower in Syria entailed the dispatch of military advisors. Subsequently, the Assad regime's significant decline in military personnel resulted in the Quds Force's establishment of militia forces within Syria. The inadequacy of these militia forces necessitated the recruitment of additional fighters from external countries. The Tehran administration, which declared a Shiite jihad by invoking the sanctity of holy shrines, notably Sayyida Zeinab Shrine in Syria, provided fighters to the Syrian conflict from Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon, and Pakistan. Consequently, the case of Syria featured in the provision of manpower. A distinct scenario has unfolded in Yemen. The Houthis, who had been engaged in conflict with government forces for an extended period, took control in 2014. The advisors dispatched to the Houthis, who had already demonstrated competency in military operations, concentrated on addressing their shortcomings. Furthermore, it is notable that Iran has typically conducted these advisory and military training operations through Hezbollah. This situation also demonstrates that Iran engages in some activities through its proxies as part of a strategy of proxy warfare.

4.2. The Delivery of Material

Iran has provided a substantial array of weaponry and equipment to Syria, encompassing a diverse range of items, including communications equipment and sophisticated technological weapons. These include rifles, machine guns, sniper rifles, explosives, mortars, surface-to-surface ballistic missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). Furthermore, Iranian tanks, multiple rocket launchers, ballistic missiles and military vehicles have been deployed in combat by the

Syrian army and Iranian proxy groups. In addition to supplying the Assad regime with weapons and missiles, Tehran has also provided technical expertise. In February 2015, Brigadier General Amir Ali Hajizadeh, commander of the IRGC Aerospace Force, confirmed that Iran exported technology to Syria to enable it to produce its own missiles and other equipment (Qaidaari, 2016; Youssef, 2016, pp. 92-93,95).

The first evidence of Iranian arms support to the Houthis emerged in June 2013, when the *USS Farragut* warship intercepted a ship, the *Jahan 1*, off the coast of Yemen. It was believed that the ship was carrying arms to the Houthis. A search of the ship revealed the presence of approximately 40 tons of weaponry, including Katyusha rockets, heat-seeking surface-to-air missiles, RPGs, Iranian-manufactured Misagh-2 man-portable air defense (MANPAD) ammunition and batteries, night vision goggles, and artillery systems. The Yemeni government asserted that these weapons were transferred to the Houthis, whereas Tehran refuted any involvement in the weapons discovered on the vessel (Bayoumy & Ghobari, 2014; Knights, 2018, pp. 17–18). However, the independent arms research organisation Conflict Armament Research (CAR), which subsequently examined the weapons seized from the Houthis both on the ship and in combat, found significant similarities between them (Conflict Armament Research, 2018).

Since the onset of hostilities in Yemen, Ansarullah forces have progressively employed sophisticated technological weaponry against their adversaries. Among these, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) are particularly noteworthy. With the assistance of Iran, the Houthis have made considerable advances in their drone capabilities since 2015. The Houthis' most frequently deployed attack drones are the *Kasef-1* and *Kasef-2*, which are replications of Iran's *Ebabil-T* drone. Indeed, an analysis of the available evidence suggests that these drones are not locally produced, but rather manufactured in Iran and supplied to the Houthis. Furthermore, the vertical gyroscope, among other components, is indicative of an Iranian origin, as it is not commonly found in other UAVs (Conflict Armament Research, 2020). In January 2019, General Saleh Tammah, the Chief of Intelligence of the Hadi Government, was killed by *Kasef-2* drone strike during a military parade at al-Anad military base. In August of the same year, Brigadier General Mohammad Ahmad al-Mashali, Commander of the UAE-backed Security Belt Forces, was killed after a drone and missile attack on a military ceremony in Aden. In the summer of 2018, the Houthis executed a successful *Samed-3* drone strike on Abu Dhabi airport, followed by drone strike on Saudi Aramco oil and gas facilities in the same month and on the Saudi east-west oil pipeline in May 2019 (Muhsin, 2019; Mutschler & Bales, 2023, pp. 14–16; Williams & Shaikh, 2020, pp. 7–8, 25).

In mid-2016, Houthi forces began utilising missiles that were not previously in the Yemeni army's arsenal. The Houthis initially deployed the *Borkan-1* in September 2016 and the *Borkan-2H* in 2017. In September 2016, the *Borkan-1* was first launched for the first time striking the Saudi air base in Taif. In January 2017, 80 coalition soldiers were killed by the same missiles in an attack on a Saudi-UAE military base on Zukar Island in the Red Sea. The examination of the remnants of these novel missiles has reinforced the hypothesis that Iran has provided ballistic missiles that were not previously present in the Houthi arsenal. In light of the aforementioned evidence, United Nations (UN) experts have reached the conclusion that the *Borkan-2H* missiles, which bear resemblance to the Iranian-made *Qiam-1* missile, were manufactured in Iran, smuggled into Yemen in parts and subsequently assembled. The missile was first utilized in the attack on the Saudi Aramco facility in Yanbu in July 2017. Furthermore, the remnants of the *Borkan-2H* missiles display the insignia of the Shahid Bagheri Industrial Company, the producer of the *Qiam* missiles. Furthermore, in addition to the *Borkan* missile series, Iranian design and production fingerprints have been identified on numerous missiles utilised by Houthi forces, including the *Quds-1*, *al-Mandeb-1* and *Sayyid-2C* (United Nations, 2018, pp. 28–29; Williams & Shaikh, 2020, pp. 4-5,43-45).

There is a marked difference between the two cases in the provision of arms, equipment and military support. Although Iran provided significant amount of arms in both cases, Yemen stands out in this regard. In Yemen, which is resource-poor and experiencing a civil war, even the smallest external arms support has been of great importance. Indeed, for the Houthis, who are fighting against both direct and indirect military intervention by countries such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE, weapons provided by Iran, especially drones and ballistic missiles, are of great importance. The Houthi forces, using the advanced technological weapons they obtained from Iran, have both made serious gains in the field and have the capacity to strike Saudi Arabia and the UAE on their own territory. In Syria, Iran's supply of weapons and military equipment has been overshadowed by the supply of manpower. The main reason for this is that the Syrian regime has its own arsenal of weapons and is rather shortage of manpower.

4.3. The Provision of Financial Support

To maintain the Assad regime's ability to withstand the civil war, Iran has implemented a series of financial support programmes, including tariff reductions and direct crude oil supplies. Indeed, in June 2015, Steffan de Mistura, who was UN Special Envoy for Syria, asserted that Iran spends approximately \$6 billion annually to sustain the Assad regime. Steven Heydemann, a prominent

scholar on the Syrian conflict, asserts that the aggregate cost of Iran's oil transfers, financial loans, military personnel expenses, and arms procurement for the Syrian regime is between \$3.5 and \$4 billion annually. When the financial support provided to Hezbollah and other Shiite militias in Syria is included in this figure, it can be estimated that Iran's financial support to the Assad regime reaches approximately \$20 billion annually (Al-Khalidi, 2013; Shaam, 2015). Conversely, Tehran was responsible for the payment of most fighters in proxy and other militia groups in Syria. To illustrate, members of the Fatemiyoun Brigade received a monthly salary of between \$450 and \$700, while other militias received between \$200 and \$300. Local militias such as the Nubl and Zahra Brigades received a salary of approximately \$100 (Nadimi, 2016).

In a recent statement, Hashmatullah Falahat Pisheh, the former head of the National Security Committee of the Iranian Parliament, revealed that his country had spent a considerable sum of money, estimated to be between \$20 and \$30 billion, in Syria between the years 2011 and 2019 (Radio Farda, 2020). This figure provides an explanation as to why Tehran has adopted a strategy of proxy warfare. It can be reasonably deduced that had Iran engaged in direct military action in Syria, the economic cost of the war would have been significantly higher. To understand the distinction between these two forms of intervention, a comparison between Iran's expenditure in Syria and Saudi Arabia's expenditure in Yemen is illustrative. In the first three-year period of its military intervention in Yemen, Riyadh spent approximately \$100 billion (Azizi & Vazirian, 2023, p. 13).

In comparison to the level of financial assistance provided to Syria, Iran has offered less support to the Houthis. As reported by Naame Shaam, (2015, p. 13) Houthi leaders have acknowledged receiving financial assistance from Iran as early as 2012, although the precise extent of this assistance has not been specified. In 2014, following the capture of the capital city of Sana'a by the Houthis, the organisation received financial and military support from Iran. In 2015, the Houthis admitted to receiving logistical and intelligence support as well as financial assistance from Iran. The financial support provided by Iran to Ansarullah is estimated to be between \$10-\$20 million annually, according to experts (Counterextremism, n.d.).

The financial support provided by the patron to the proxy is typically conducted through unofficial channels, as it is relatively easy to trace internationally and there is a high probability of it being blocked. Indeed, some Iranian economic organisations and businessmen have been subjected to sanctions as a result of such surveillance. Consequently, Iran's financial assistance in such instances has been constrained. Nevertheless, the majority of

Tehran's financial support has been concentrated in Syria. The primary rationale for this is that this particular conflict is more closely aligned with Tehran's strategic interests. Indeed, in contrast to the considerable financial outlay of billions of dollars by Iran in support of the Assad regime, the direct financial backing provided by Tehran to the Houthis has been comparatively limited and modest.

4.4. The Provision of Non-Military Support

The non-military dimension of Iran's proxy war in Syria is characterized by the utilization of soft power elements, encompassing social and educational services, reconstruction and economic projects. Iran has established educational institutions and expanded its cultural activities in strategic areas across Syria, particularly in the eastern regions and Damascus. Moreover, state backed Iranian cultural and political institutions⁶ have helped the organization of events in Syria to promote the image of the Iran, including the celebration of the anniversary of the Islamic Revolution (The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2020, p. 98). Indeed, these parastatal organization, prominently Islamic Culture and Relations Organization, have played a pivotal role in the facilitation of Shia jihad in Syria by mobilizing Shia foreign fighters (Wastnidge, 2020, p. 5).

Iran has sought to utilise its propaganda apparatus in a strategic manner in the context of the Syrian civil war. During the most intense phase of the Syrian civil war in 2015 and 2016, Iran engaged in a significant expansion of its recruitment of Afghan fighters and domestic propaganda operations. The fallen Fatemiyoun soldiers were laid to rest in sacred cemeteries across Iran as heroes. Senior clerics and high-ranking military officers paid visits to the fighters and their families, and these visits were recorded and published to the media for propaganda purposes. Additionally, programmes, documentaries and interviews with fighters have been extensively covered in the Iranian media, particularly on state television, with the objective of encouraging new recruits (Jamal, 2019, pp. 7–8).

Another instrument employed by Iran in its propaganda operations in Syria is the *maddahs*. Maddahs, who exert influence through the recital of poems, have been instrumental in motivating numerous Iranian combatants to engage in combat. In Syria, maddahs recited poems with the objective of boosting the morale of soldiers stationed at the frontlines. The maddahs, who perceive the

⁶ The most influential of these entities are: Islamic Culture and Relations Organization, The Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation, Al-Mustafa International University, Islamic Azad University, Astan Quds Razavi Foundation, Ahlul Bayt World Assembly and Al-Thaqin Charity Center (The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2020, p. 99).

conflict in Syria as a religious and national one in dedication to Sayyida Zeinab Shrine, address this situation in their poems alongside the Karbala incident, referring to the fighters as “the guardians of the shrine.” Maddahs, who are renowned throughout the country and closely aligned with Khamenei, have frequently travelled to Syria to recite poems with the objective of boosting the morale of the combatants on the front line. Some of them were even actively engaged in the combat operations (Yılmaz, 2023, p. 115,155,162,167).

Furthermore, prominent Iranian decision-makers have voiced their support for the Assad regime in both statements and interviews. The Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamanei, has stated that Syria constitutes the “golden ring” of the axis of resistance (Seliktar & Rezaei, 2020, p. 170). In another statement in 2017 regarding Iran’s involvement in the Syrian war, he said if Iran does not fight takfirism in Syri, it will have to do so on its own soil (Mansharof, 2013). Mehdi Taeb, an influential figure close to Khamanei, has stated that Syri is even more important than Khuzestan: “If we protect Syria, we can regain Khuzestan, but if we lose Syria, we cannot defend Tehran” (Mansharof, 2013).

Iran’s non-military support for Ansarullah can be divided into two distinct categories: political and media (propaganda) support. Tehran offers political support to the Houthis, and there is no other country in the international community that has recognised the Houthi regime, with the exception of Iran and (pre-revolutionary) Syria (Sinkaya, 2022, p. 85). While Iranian high-ranking officials have expressed support for the Houthis in statements, the parties have also met each other occasionally. For instance, in February 2018, Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif held a meeting with Houthi spokesman Mohammad Abdulsalam in Tehran (Reuters, 2019). Subsequent to these bilateral meetings, Ibrahim Mohammed al-Daylemi, who had been serving in Iran as Abdelmalik al-Houthi’s special envoy since 2015, was appointed as the new ambassador of Yemen in the same year. One year after al-Daylemi’s appointment, Iran designated Hasan Irlo as its ambassador to Sana’a (Sinkaya, 2022, pp. 87–88). This action on the part of Tehran is of considerable symbolic importance for the Houthi regime, which is perceived as lacking legitimacy on the international stage.

For non-state actors engaged in conflict with more powerful adversaries, visibility in the media and propaganda activities is of paramount importance. It is therefore evident that the Houthis endeavour to utilise the media as effectively as possible. The Houthi media platform commenced its activities in 2007 and, with the assistance of Hezbollah, established a Beirut-based television channel, al-Masirah, in 2012. The channel is headquartered in southern Beirut, where Hezbollah maintains a strong presence, and receives logistical support from al-

Menar, one of the organisation's leading media outlets. Indeed, both media organisations utilise the same premises and produce broadcasts of an identical standard and design (Orkaby, 2021, p. 170).

Senior Iranian officials have expressed their support for the Houthi movement in various statements. For instance, in February 2015, Ali Shirazi, the Supreme Leader's representative to the Quds Force, stated that the Houthis, in conjunction with Hezbollah in Lebanon and proxy groups in Iraq and Syria, constitute the pro-Iranian popular army in the region. Other prominent figure Ali Akbar Velayati, Khamenei's advisor, underlined the importance of Yemen and stated that "the freedom of Palesitne passes through Yemen (Mansharof & Kharrazi, 2015).

Iran's provision of non-military assistance to its proxies in Syria and Yemen has manifested itself in three principal ways: through political support, propaganda and media support. In particular, propaganda activities have been particularly prominent in Syria. Iran's protracted and costly involvement in the Syrian civil war, which resulted in significant military losses, underscored the necessity for Iran to leverage propaganda effectively to persuade both its domestic audience and Shiite communities in the region. Indeed, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and senior Iranian officials have lauded the fighters in Syria as the guardians of the shrine, and even Iranian intermediaries have been deployed for this purpose. Furthermore, Tehran has consistently provided political support for the Assad regime since the outset of the conflict. In Yemen, Iran has provided assistance to the Houthis in the realms of propaganda and media, as well as offering them political support. Iranian recognition of the Houthi-led Yemeni regime was accompanied by the appointment of an ambassador to reinforce this position. Furthermore, Iran has provided support to the Houthis' media activities, both through Hezbollah's media organisations and its own media outlets. Consequently, there is no significant difference between the two cases in terms of the non-military assistance provided by Iran.

5. CONCLUSION

The present study examines Iran's proxy war strategy in Syria and Yemen between 2011 and 2020 through the lens of Andrew Mumford's quadrilateral framework, which encompasses the provision of manpower, military and financial assistance and the non-military support. Through a comparative analysis of these two cases, the study has underscored the parallels and distinctions in Iran's approach to proxy warfare across diverse geopolitical and socio-political contexts.

The analysis demonstrates that, whilst Iran's overarching objective in

both Syria and Yemen is to expand its regional influence and counter its adversaries, particularly the US, Israel and Saudi Arabia, the operationalization of its proxy warfare strategy varies significantly. In Syria, Iran's primary goal was to ensure the survival of the Assad regime, a pivotal ally that provides Tehran with strategic depth and a conduit for its influence across the Levant. In pursuit of this objective, Iran has amassed a substantial deployment of personnel, comprising IRGC-Quds Force operatives, Hezbollah combatants and additional Shia militias. Additionally, considerable military and financial resources have been allocated to pro-Assad forces, further demonstrating Iran's commitment to maintaining its presence in Syria.

In contrast, Iran's involvement in Yemen has been more indirect but no less strategic. Instead of deploying personnel on the ground at the same scale in Syria, Iran has focused on providing the Houthis with advanced weaponry, particularly ballistic missiles and drones alongside financial and logistical support. This assistance has enabled the Houthis to sustain their resistance against the Saudi-led coalition, draining Saudi resources and increasing Iran's strategic influence in the Arabian Peninsula. Moreover, Iran's provision of non-material support, encompassing ideological and media support, has been instrumental in shaping the Houthis' political narrative and legitimizing their resistance against external intervention.

Notwithstanding the aforementioned differences, both cases demonstrate Iran's capacity to adopt its proxy warfare strategy to varying environments whilst sustaining its overarching strategic objectives. The employment of proxies enables Tehran to exercise influence without the necessity for direct military confrontation, thereby mitigating the risks of escalation while maintaining plausible deniability. The study also underscores the pivotal role of Qasem Soleimani, who was critical in shaping the effectiveness of Iran's regional interventions through his leadership in orchestrating the country's proxy network.

Ultimately, the Iranian regimes's involvement in Syria and Yemen demonstrates the broader implications of proxy warfare in contemporary conflicts. As the dynamics of regional and global power continue to evolve, it is highly likely that Iran will continue to rely on non-states actors as a fundamental element of its security and foreign policy strategy. Future research could further explore the long-term sustainability of Iran's proxy networks and the potential counterstrategies that regional and international actors may employ in response.

6. CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There is no conflict of interest between the authors.

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8. AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

This study is written by the single author.

9. ETHICS COMMITTEE STATEMENT

The methods and data used in the study do not require ethics committee approval.

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