

IRANIAN FOREIGN POLICY DECISION-MAKING ACTORS: NAVIGATING THE COMPLEX ROLE OF IRANIAN PROXIES*

İRAN DIŞ POLİTİKASI KARAR ALMA AKTÖRLERİ: İRAN VEKİLLERİNİN KARMAŞIK ROLÜNÜ YÖNLENDİRME

Ihsan Hashm TAHER¹ 

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Abstract

The process of Iranian foreign policy decision-making is a complex process, as there are several actors who play a role in it. The use of proxies is a well-established practice in international relations, and the Iranian government has long been known to use such groups to extend its influence throughout the Middle East. These proxies have become a major foreign policy tool for Iran, and they play a crucial role in shaping the country's strategic outlook. Understanding the concept of Iran's proxy warfare is essential to understand the dynamics of this complex relationship between Iran and its proxies, in order to better navigate the region and international political landscape. In this research, we explore the historical background, reasons for employing proxies, advantages, and disadvantages of using proxies. To effectively navigate the subject, this research explores the nature and the key decision-makers of Iranian foreign policy and the role of Iranian military organisations in establishing the country's foreign policy. We also evaluate the anatomy of Iranian proxies and the impact of these proxies on Iranian foreign policy. The degree of the role of proxies in foreign policy-making confirms coordination amongst power centres that were often assumed to compete. It is expected that this study will provide more visibility and valuable insights into the strategies for managing Iranian proxies in foreign policy.

Keywords: Foreign policy, Proxy warfare, Iran, and the Middle East

Özet

İran dış politikası karar alma süreci, çeşitli aktörlerin rol oynadığı kompleks bir süreçtir. Uluslararası ilişkilerde vekil kullanımının iyi kurulmuş bir uygulaması vardır ve İran hükümeti, Orta Doğu'da etkisini genişletmek için böyle grupları uzun süredir kullanmaktadır. Bu vekiller, İran'ın dış politikasının ana aracı haline gelmiş ve ülkenin stratejik görünümünü şekillendirmede kritik bir rol oynamaktadır. İran'ın vekalet savaşı konseptini anlamak, İran ve vekilleri arasındaki kompleks ilişkinin dinamiklerini anlamak için zorunludur, böylece bölgeyi ve uluslararası siyasi manzarayı daha iyi yönlendirebiliriz. Bu araştırmada, vekil kullanımının tarihi arka planı, nedenleri, avantajları ve dezavantajları incelenmektedir. Konuyu etkili bir şekilde yönlendirmek için, İran dış politikasının doğası ve ana karar vericileri, İran askeri örgütlerinin ülkenin dış politikasını oluşturmadaki rolü incelenmektedir. Ayrıca, İran vekillerinin anatomisi ve İran dış politikasına olan etkileri değerlendirilmektedir. Dış politika yapımında vekillerin rolünün derecesi, genellikle rekabet ettiği varsayılan güç merkezleri arasında koordinasyonu doğrulamaktadır. Bu çalışmadan, İran'ın dış politikadaki vekillerini yönetme stratejilerine ilişkin daha fazla görünürlük ve değerli bilgiler sunması beklenmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Dış Politika, Vekil Savaş, İran ve Orta Doğu

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¹ Doktora Öğrencisi, Tokat Gaziosmanpaşa Üniversitesi, İktisat A.B.D.

Introduction

Behind the scenes of international diplomacy, a subtle yet potent force shapes the course of global politics. The use of proxies is a well-established practice in international relations. In a simple word, states or non-state entities will employ proxies in the condition when they seek ways to advance their strategic objectives without directly engaging in military conflict. The employment of proxy forces has a long history, dating back to the earliest conflicts, including ideological and civilizational clashes. The countries usually establish their proxies by developing, training, funding, equipping, and otherwise aiding allied entities outside their borders.

Speaking of Iran, there are many actors, including the president, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the SNSC, and parliament, as well as other players, such as the head of the judiciary, Friday prayer leaders, and top military commanders, who have frequently and openly raised their opinions in foreign policy debates. It is notable that in the last few decades, the role of military organisations, especially the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), in Iranian foreign policy has increased. Their role dates back to the beginning years after the victory of the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) put the strategy of exporting its revolution as one of its priority policies. For this purpose, the IRI has followed many strategies, including employing proxies outside its territories. Today, the country has a complex network of proxies, which includes groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, and various Shia militias in Iraq and Syria, and has become a hallmark of Iran's foreign policy strategy.

The network of IRI proxies plays a significant role in helping the country to become a pivotal player in the geopolitics of the Middle East by extending its influence far beyond its borders through a network of proxy forces and organizations. By leveraging these proxies, Iran is able to project power and exert influence in ways that might be difficult or impossible for it to achieve directly. However, the role of Iranian proxies in foreign policy is complex and multifaceted, involving a delicate balance of political, military, and ideological considerations.

Understanding the concept of Iranian proxies is crucial in navigating the intricate landscape of foreign policy. To do this, our research aims to answer the following research questions: Firstly, what is the concept, advantage, and disadvantage of proxy warfare? Secondly, what is the history and nature of Iranian proxies? Thirdly, how is Iranian foreign policy made? Lastly, how do the military organization and Iranian proxies affect the Iranian foreign policy.

To answer these questions, this article is structured into four sections. Following the introduction, Section 1 discusses the reasons behind employing proxies, the advantages and disadvantages of proxies. Section 2 explores the anatomy of Iranian proxies. Section 3 investigates the role of the Iranian military organization in the country's foreign policy decision-making process. Section 4 examines the effect of Iranian proxies on the Iranian foreign policy. Finally, some conclusions are drawn.

1. Shining a Light on the proxy wars

According to Mumford (2013) Proxy wars are defined as "the indirect engagement in a conflict by third parties wishing to influence its strategic outcome". The parties can be states or non-state actors, based on a perception of interest, ideology and risk (Mumford, 2013:1). In the other word states often seek ways to advance their strategic objectives without directly engaging in military conflict. One such option is through the use of proxy wars, which can help mitigate the risks of costly and bloody battles. This alternative approach allows for a more

calculated and controlled form of warfare (Mumford, 2013a: 40). The enhancement of a proxy's capabilities can be facilitated through a multifaceted approach, encompassing military training, logistical assistance, material provision, and institutional development. Furthermore, capacity building may have the additional benefit of fostering increased public approval for the agent, thereby simplifying the process of mitigating disturbances (Berman & Lake, 2019 :21).

The employment of proxy forces has a long history, dating back to the earliest conflicts, including ideological and civilizational clashes. Notable examples include the ancient Philistines' utilization of David and his warriors, the Persian Empire's recruitment of Xenophon and his Greek mercenaries, and the Roman Empire's alliance with Attila and his Hunnic forces. This tradition was continued by the United States during the Cold War, as American strategists leveraged proxy forces, such as the Vietnamese Montagnards, Afghan mujahidin, and Nicaraguan contras, to wage indirect warfare against the Soviet Union, perceived as an "evil empire" within the context of the ideological struggle (Innes, 2012:61).

There are several reasons of employing proxies by benefactors. Firstly, by employing the proxies the states will mitigate the likelihood of direct conflict between nations, states may employ indirect strategies. For example, Pakistan's utilization of proxy militant organizations enabled the country to project power while maintaining a degree of plausible deniability, thereby reducing the risk of escalation with more powerful opponents (Ostovar, 2019: 164). Secondly, comparing with direct war between states, the proxy war is cost lower. States will engage in proxy wars when they accept that if they intervene in a direct conflict, they will suffer great economic, political, or materially costs (Mumford, 2013: 30). Consequently, they will invest in employing proxies as the cost of these investments has been relatively modest when juxtaposed with the expenditures associated with conventional military procurement practices (Ostovar, 2019:164). Another advantage of employing proxies is that the opacity of the contractual arrangements between sponsoring entities and their proxy representatives serves to conceal the explicit or implicit terms of their agreements from public examination. This lack of transparency affords sponsors the opportunity to manipulate, violate, or redefine established norms without facing immediate consequences or reprisals from opposing parties (Rondeaux & Sterman, 2019:25)

With plenty of advantages, however, there are some disadvantages with proxy powers as well. A particularly alarming aspect of proxy wars is their propensity to amplify localized conflicts, thereby increasing the risk of their expansion into broader, more extensive conflicts (Mumford, 2013:18). An attack in January 2024, in which the Iraqi militia group Kata'ib Hezbollah, a key component of the Iran-led Axis of Resistance, launched an assault on a US military outpost (Tower 22) in northeastern Jordan, resulting in the fatalities of three American servicemen, has introduced a new dimension to the ongoing US-Iranian rivalry in the region, with ominous implications for the stability of Iraq (The Emirates Policy Centre, 2024).

The employing of proxies can increase the economic cost for the sponsor countries. For instance, the Iranian economy is experiencing significant distress, which can be attributed, in part, to the Islamic Republic's extensive proxy activities. According to a 2018 report by the U.S. State Department, the Iranian government has allocated a substantial number of resources to support its regional allies, with estimates suggesting that it has spent approximately \$16 billion since 2012 to prop up the Assad regime in Syria, as well as its other partners and proxies in Iraq and Yemen. Furthermore, the report indicates that Iran provides significant financial backing to various militant groups, including Hizballah, which receives an annual allocation of \$700 million, and Palestinian organizations such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad, which collectively receive \$100 million annually (Esfandiari, 2020).

Another obstacle associated with proxy forces is that once they establish criminal networks, they become even more resistant to control. These difficulties often persist for extended periods, spanning decades beyond the

initial conflict, thereby rendering the re-establishment of a stable legal framework in post-conflict environments exceedingly challenging. Furthermore, the sponsorship of proxy forces may also lead to unintended entanglement in conflicts that the sponsoring entity had initially sought to avoid, as the proxies may require direct intervention by the sponsor in order to achieve success (Benowitz & Ceccanese, 2020).

2. The Anatomy of Iranian Proxies

The idea of building proxies by Islamic Republic of Iran were already created more than a decade before the toppling of the monarchy in 1979. In 1965, while residing in the United States, physicist Chamran founded the Red Shiism organization, which aimed to train Shiite militants. During his travels to Egypt and Cuba, Chamran disseminated his ideologies, ultimately relocating to Lebanon in 1971. There, he established connections with Palestinian groups, which introduced him to a global terrorist network. In 1972, George Habash, the leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), convened a conference in Baddawi, a Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon. This summit led to the formation of the International Center for Resistance to Imperialism, Zionism, Racism, Reaction, and Fascism, a loose coalition of Middle Eastern terrorist organizations that Chamran joined. He subsequently developed close ties with Yasser Arafat, who offered training opportunities to Chamran and other Iranian militants, including the sons of Khomeini and Montazeri, with the elite Fatah Force unit (Seliktar & Rezaei, 2020: 12).

Soon after the victory of the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, the nascent regime in Iran taken Revolutionary Export Doctrine in its priority policies. In its efforts to export the Islamic revolution, the Iranian government utilized a range of Shia militant organizations. A key figure in this endeavor was Ali Akbar Mohtashamipour, a trusted associate of Ayatollah Khomeini and a prominent proponent of revolutionary exportation, who was responsible for coordinating logistical support. The Iranians made concerted efforts to consolidate various Lebanese militant groups under a unified umbrella. Quds commanders helped organize Hezbollah, bringing militant Lebanese Shiites together around Khomeinist ideology and violent opposition to Israel's 1982-1985 occupation of Lebanon (Seliktar, 2021: 155; Negahban, 2017).

This victory encouraged the Iranian authorities to further expand their network of proxy relationships. In particular, they sought to strengthen their ties with Palestinian groups. Notably, the foundation for these relations was laid prior to the Islamic Revolution's leader assuming power. Although a rift emerged between Iran and Arafat due to his support for Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq War, the IRGC-QF maintained amicable relations with more radical Palestinian factions. Specifically, Iran provided financial and logistical backing to both the political and military wings of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), and established links with the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC). (Seliktar, & Rezaei, 2020: 58).

After the Second Gulf War in 2003, Iraq was invaded and Saddam Hussein was removed from power by the US and its allies, which helped Iran strengthen its position in Iraq by mobilizing its proxies there. By 2004, Tehran had stationed units of its secretive paramilitary unit, the Qods Force, and elements of its intelligence service, VEVAK, within Iraq's borders (Mumford, 2013:52).

The anti Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) campaign [and the war in Syria] "have given Iran the opportunity to formalize and expand networks of Shiite foreign fighters. To support the Syrian government, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) leveraged its proxy network, initially deploying Lebanese Hezbollah fighters and subsequently, various Shia militias from Iraq. Furthermore, the IRGC proceeded to enlist Shia fighters from Pakistan and Afghanistan, respectively, into the Zaynabiyoun and Fatemiyoun brigades (Akbarzadeh et al.,

2023: 686). By the same way, Following the issuance of a fatwa by Ayatollah al-Sistani, calling for resistance against the (ISIS), a large influx of volunteers joined various militias to combat the extremist group. The resulting force, known as the Popular Mobilization Force (PMF) or Hashd al-Shaabi, comprised 63 distinct groups. Notably, a significant proportion of these groups, including Asaib Ahl al-Haq, Kataib Hezbollah, Saraya Khurasani, Abul Fadhl al-Abbas, and the Badr Organization led by Hadi al-Amiri, were aligned with Ayatollah Khamenei and adhered to the principle of velayat-e faqih, thereby forming the core of the PMF (Seliktar & Rezaei, 2020 :157)

As of 2022, the Iranian government has established alliances with over a dozen prominent militias, several of which possess their own political parties, thereby posing a challenge to local and neighboring governments. These militias are operational in various regions, including the Palestinian Occupied Territories (where Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad are active), Lebanon (where Hizballah is present), Iraq (with Kata'ib Hizballah, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Harakat al-Nujaba, and the Popular Mobilization Forces), Syria (where the Fatemiyun and Zainabiyun brigades are active), and Yemen (where the Huthi rebels are based). This network of alliances enables Iran to exert influence beyond its borders while maintaining a degree of plausible deniability regarding its involvement in regional conflicts (Lane, 2023; Sharifi, 2024).

3. Iranian foreign policy decision-making and the role of military organisation

Prior to examining the role of proxies in Iranian foreign policy, it is essential to elucidate the complexities of the decision-making process that underpins Iranian foreign policy formulation. Notably, this process deviates from the norm, as it involves a diverse array of individuals and organizations that contribute to shaping Iran's foreign policy agenda. Bazoobandi et al (2022) indicate that in addition to the President, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), and the Parliament, other influential actors have regularly and publicly articulated their opinions in foreign policy deliberations. While certain entities, such as the SNSC, possess a formal mandate to participate in policy formulation, others have primarily leveraged their prominent positions to exert pressure on the state bureaucracy, thereby preventing unilateral decisions that disregard the preferences of key stakeholders loyal to the Supreme Leader (Bazoobandi, 2023:4).

Although all of these actors affect the formation of Iran's foreign relations, the final decision is usually taken by another institution. Scholars often attribute a dominant role to Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, in shaping the country's foreign policy agenda. As the highest authority in the Islamic Republic, Khamenei holds a multifaceted position, encompassing the roles of head of state, commander-in-chief, and chief ideologue. Furthermore, the elected parliament and presidency are subordinate to his authority, operating within the framework of his supreme sovereignty (Negahban,2017).

The involvement of military organizations in the foreign affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran can be traced back to the inception of the Islamic Revolution in 1979. During this period, a military organization known as Sazman-e Enqelabi-e Todehay-e Jomhory-e Islami-e Iran (SATJA) emerged, which was later renamed the Office for Liberation Movement (OLM). In 1984, OLM was integrated into the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Notably, Ahmed Vahidi, who headed the intelligence department of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), co-directed the foreign operations group SATJA and OLM until 1989, when he was appointed to lead the newly established Quds Force (QF). Furthermore, the IRGC-QF collaborated closely with the Foreign Ministry to leverage Iranian embassies, an innovative approach to exporting the revolution. This strategy was conceived by Javad Mansouri, the first commander of the IRGC, who later assumed the position of Deputy Foreign Minister on March 20, 1981 (Seliktar & Rezaei, 2020: 13/16).

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) assumes responsibility for clandestine operations and military endeavors beyond Iran's borders, as well as the development, training, financing, and logistical support of affiliated armed groups operating outside of the country. Notably, during the Iraq War, the IRGC established the Quds Force, an elite extraterritorial branch tasked with providing financial, training, and coordinative assistance to proxy forces. Initially conceived to counter Israeli interests, the Quds Force has since expanded its scope to encompass a broad range of activities conducted beyond Iran's territorial boundaries (Cohen & Shamci, 2022:395; Negahban, 2017).

In a novel initiative aimed at promoting the Islamic Revolution beyond Iran's borders, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF) collaborated closely with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to leverage Iranian diplomatic missions. This strategy was conceived by Javad Mansouri, the inaugural commander of the IRGC, who subsequently assumed the role of Deputy Foreign Minister on March 20, 1981. Shortly thereafter, on November 1, Mansouri was tasked with overseeing the transformation of Iranian embassies worldwide into intelligence hubs and bases for exporting the revolution (Seliktar & Rezaei, 2020: 16-17).

This paved the way for the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps to become an important character in decision making process. However, the USA invasion in Iraq in 2003 and the war against ISIS in 2014 can be seen as the two factors which paved the way for Iran and IRGC to increase their sovereignty over the region. This led many people to believe that the IRGS has a greater role than the Iranian Ministry Foreign Affairs in designing foreign policy. A recently leaked audio recording provides a rare insight into the internal power dynamics among Iran's leadership. In the recording, Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif suggests that the Revolutionary Guards Corps wields significant influence, often overriding government decisions and disregarding counsel. This revelation emerged from a three-hour conversation, which was part of an oral history project chronicling the current administration's tenure. Notably, Zarif lamented that he has had to prioritize military interests over diplomatic objectives, stating, "I have sacrificed diplomacy for the military field rather than the field servicing diplomacy" (Fassihi, 2021). Evidence supporting this notion can be found in the clandestine meeting between Bashar al-Assad and Ayatollah Khamenei, which took place in Tehran on February 25, 2019. Notably, this encounter was facilitated by the Quds Force, and its informal nature diverged from the protocol typically associated with official state visits. Furthermore, it is worth highlighting that neither President Hassan Rouhani nor Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif was apprised of the meeting in advance. While Rouhani was eventually invited to participate briefly, Zarif initially tendered his resignation in response, only to later reconsider his decision (Seliktar & Rezaei, 2020 :194).

4. The Web of Influence: Uncovering the role Iranian Proxies

Sponsors typically establish alliances with proxy groups that they perceive as sharing both ethnic affinity and ideological congruence. In doing so, sponsors often seek to identify (and occasionally construct) commonalities in terms of values, cultural heritage, and historical connections (Ahram & Alaaldin, 2022 :376). A significant proportion of Iran's proxy forces operate extraterritorially, devoid of ethnic or tribal connections to the country. In contrast, religious identity and authority have emerged as crucial factors in shaping Iran's relationships with its client groups. Notably, its closest allies, including Hezbollah in Lebanon and Iraqi Shia militias, share a common denominator with Iran's leadership and majority population in their adherence to Twelver Shia Islam. Moreover, these groups have adopted Iran's theocratic system as their ideological framework, underscoring the salience of religious ties in these relationships. The recognition of Iran's supreme leader as the ultimate religio-political authority by these groups further highlights the significance of religious bonds in these alliances (Ostovar, 2019: 165-166).

Iranian proxies have been instrumental in shaping global affairs, often behind the scenes and away from the prying eyes of the international community. The Islamic Republic of Iran uses its proxies in its foreign relations in several ways. Firstly, A pivotal component of Iran's foreign policy strategy in the Middle East has been its reliance on allied militias to expand its regional influence. Consequently, Shi'i militias have been strategically deployed in geopolitically sensitive areas across the region, with the aim of advancing Iran's interests in these territories. The Islamic Republic's primary strategic objective is currently the establishment of a unified and powerful "Shi'i Crescent" spanning from Iran to Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. Any perceived challenge to its proxy forces is viewed by Tehran as a significant threat to the ideological underpinnings of the Islamic Republic (Cohen & Shamci, 2022:394).

Secondly, Tehran's strategic deployment of proxy groups across Iraq, Syria, and beyond constitutes a crucial component of its broader effort to augment its regional influence and counterbalance the presence of Washington and its allies. These groups, nurtured through years of Iranian support, self-identify as the "Axis of Resistance" against Israeli and U.S. hegemony in the Middle East. The symbiotic relationship between these groups and Tehran is deliberately calibrated to offset the influence of both the United States and its regional partners, including Israel and Saudi Arabia, thereby maintaining a delicate balance of power in the region (Harmouch & Jahanbani, 2024).

In January 2024, Iran and the United States engaged in clandestine, indirect negotiations in Oman. During these talks, the Washington delegation reportedly pressed Tehran to exert control over its proxy forces, with the aim of halting Houthi attacks on maritime vessels in the Red Sea and ceasing targeting of American military installations in Iraq and Syria. Conversely, the Iranian government allegedly sought assurances from the Biden administration that a cessation of hostilities would be implemented in the Gaza Strip (Fassihi & Schmitt, 2024).

Iran's reliance on proxy warfare can be attributed to the fact that this strategy has proven to be the most expedient means of realizing its goals. In contrast, engaging in a conventional war is not deemed a viable option by Tehran, as it is unlikely to yield favorable outcomes that align with its objectives (Cohen & Shamci, 2022:392).

Following the signing of the Declaration of Principles (DOP) by Yasser Arafat in September 1993, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF), in collaboration with Hezbollah, embarked on a concerted effort to undermine the Oslo peace process (Seliktar, 2021: 159). Similarly, it can be posited that Iran leveraged its close ties with Hamas, a Palestinian organization, to advance its political objectives. Notably, in October 2023, Hamas launched a high-profile assault against Israel. According to a regional source with insight into the strategic thinking of both Iran and Hezbollah, an Iranian-backed Lebanese Islamist group, this attack was intended to convey a message to Saudi Arabia, which is perceived as increasingly aligned with Israel, as well as to the United States, which is seen as supporting normalization efforts and backing Israel (Nakhoul et al., 2023). The Abraham Accords, comprising peace agreements between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Sudan, hold considerable significance. Furthermore, the notable shift in the rhetoric of Gulf monarchs (with the exception of the Al-Sabah ruling family in Kuwait) towards a more conciliatory stance vis-à-vis the State of Israel is also noteworthy. This diplomatic reorientation sends a clear signal that Arab states no longer perceive Israel as a threat, and instead, attribute this role exclusively to the Islamic Republic of Iran (Cohen & Shamci, 2022:387).

The incorporation of proxy militias has become a crucial component of the regime's strategy for consolidating its regional dominance. In the context of the conflicts in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, Iran's client forces have evolved into effective proxy entities, successfully promoting Iranian interests at the local level. The relationships forged between Iran and its clients have enabled the expansion of Iran's political influence within these countries, the

projection of its military power beyond its borders, and the attainment of a strategic advantage relative to its regional competitors. Consequently, Iran's reliance on its militant clients to augment its military capabilities and generate both deterrent and offensive capacities has increased, implying that these clients possess significant strategic value and potential for Iran (Ostovar, 2019:159).

5. Conclusion

Understanding the concept of proxy warfare is essential in grasping the complexities of many countries' foreign policies. The advantages of proxy warfare, including plausible deniability and cost-effectiveness, have made it an attractive strategy for some states or non-state actors. However, the disadvantages, such as the risk of escalation and loss of control, cannot be ignored.

The military organization and Iranian proxies have a profound impact on Iranian foreign policy. The IRGC, in particular, the Quds unit plays a critical role in implementing Iran's foreign policy, and its influence extends far beyond the military sphere. The role of the Qods force in managing Iranian proxies outside of Iran has increased its sovereignty in Iranian foreign affairs.

The history and nature of Iranian proxies reveal a sophisticated network of non-state actors that have been instrumental in advancing Iran's foreign policy objectives. From Hezbollah in Lebanon, Iraqi Shia groups, Afghan Shia groups in Syria, the Hamas group in Palestine, to the Houthis in Yemen, these proxies have been used to exert influence, project power, and counter regional rivals. The US invasion of Iraq, the Syrian civil war, and the fight against ISIS have paved the way for Iranian proxies to extend their influence in global affairs.

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