



Iran's Surrogate Warfare Strategy Against Israel: Geopolitical Maneuvering and the Transition to Direct Confrontation (October 2023 – June 2025)

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Abstract

Hamas's Al-Aqsa Flood Operation ruptured the existing deterrence architecture between Iran and Israel. The resulting fallout immediately activated the Axis of Resistance. This study interrogates Tehran's surrogate warfare model between October 2023 and June 2025, tracing how the Iranian security establishment offloaded conventional combat risks onto regional militias and advanced technological assets. Drawing on a qualitative single-case methodology, the analysis synthesizes primary rhetoric from Iranian and proxy leadership, think-tank assessments, and open-source intelligence. The study identifies a distinct operational anatomy underlying Iran's proxy doctrine: explicit tactical delegation to non-state actors, plausible deniability for maximum political efficiency, and simultaneous contestation across military, diplomatic, and cyber domains. Yet, this proxy architecture ultimately fractured. The 12-day war in June 2025 marked a definitive operational rupture. Tehran abandoned strictly indirect subversion, instead pivoting to heavily constrained, direct kinetic engagement with Israel. Initially, surrogate warfare allowed Tehran to project regional dominance while insulating itself from state-level retaliation. It worked until cascading command-and-control friction and unintended strategic blowback forced the state's hand. This reluctant transition toward direct military confrontation exposes a critical limitation in proxy theory. Surrogate forces cannot neutralize existential security threats. Such a paradigm failure fundamentally reorders the Middle Eastern security calculus, calling into question the future viability of indirect warfare as a standalone defense strategy.

INTRODUCTION

State-on-state conventional war is increasingly anachronistic. The prohibitive costs of direct invasion and the looming threat of nuclear deterrence have forced military strategy into the shadows (Krieg & Rickli, 2018). States now face offshore violence. Surrogate warfare is a matrix encompassing proxy engagements, compound tactics, and remote technological operations that allows actors to externalize the acute, visceral risks of armed conflict (Foley & Kaunert, 2022). This is far more than a tactical pivot. For states operating under severe economic pressure or diplomatic isolation, surrogacy serves as the primary means of projecting influence well beyond conventional military limits (Karagiannis, 2021; Krieg & Rickli, 2018).

The escalating Iran-Israel confrontation provides a volatile testing ground for this theory. When Hamas launched the Al-Aqsa Flood Operation on October 7, 2023, it provoked massive Israeli military reprisals in Gaza. It also instantly activated Iran's regional Axis of Resistance (Asmar, 2024; Barnea, 2024). Tehran actively weaponizes this proxy architecture (Şimşek, 2025). By arming and directing nonstate actors like Hezbollah and Iraqi Shia militias, Iran projects an aura of relentless regional resilience. It establishes highly favorable "facts on the ground." Crucially, it achieves this without formally entering the battlefield (Akbarzadeh et al., 2023; Berti & Guzansky, 2014; Hansen & Henningsen, 2022).

Historically, the Iranian security apparatus avoided direct friction. Supplying allied militias with munitions, capital, and strategic directives maximizes asymmetric damage while retaining plausible deniability, which is the absolute core of surrogate warfare, according to Krieg & Rickli (2018). Tehran operates as a decentralized network state. But networks are inherently unstable. When a patron state cannot fully control its autonomous proxies, a command friction exposed heavily during the 2006 Hezbollah–Israel War and again on October 7, surrogate warfare fails to insulate the patron from risk. Instead, it invites direct retaliation. Throughout 2024, indirect friction escalated unstoppably. By June 2025, the surrogate architecture had fractured entirely, sparking a limited but direct Iran-Israel war. Such an operational rupture exposes the structural limits of proxy deterrence.

Existing scholarship on hybrid conflict documents in detail the historical shadow war between these powers. However, it cannot account for the rapid paradigm collapse between October 2023 and June 2025. Major analyses predate the critical shift from proxy skirmishes to direct kinetic warfare (Raine et al., 2024). This study isolates that exact transitional window. By tracing the tactical limits of Iran's indirect engagements, the study provides a concrete assessment of how and why surrogate frameworks can ultimately draw patron states into conventional conflict. The guiding research question for this investigation is: How does Iran deploy its surrogate warfare strategy against Israel between October 2023 and June 2025?

The Evolution of Warfare in International Relations

International relations theory inherently orbits the study of organized violence. Clausewitz's framing of war as an extension of political utility stripped conflict of its irrational veneer, embedding it as a deliberate instrument of statecraft (Levy, 2017). This classical paradigm, defined by uniformed militaries, formal declarations, and measurable territorial conquest, culminated in the industrialized slaughter of the World Wars (Vasquez & Valeriano, 2010).

Then, the architecture of global violence changed. Post-1945, and accelerating during the Cold War, conventional state-on-state conflicts sharply declined, replaced by a massive proliferation of intrastate and internationally organized civil conflicts (Rauta, 2021). Three structural constraints forced this pivot: the exorbitant economic drain of industrial warfare, the paralyzing logic of mutually assured nuclear destruction, and a calcifying international legal regime, notably Article 39 of the UN Charter (Gleditsch & Pickering, 2014; United Nations, 1945), which States adapted. They drove violence underground. Overt invasions gave way to indirect, heavily mediated proxy engagements. For Cold War superpowers, this offered a vital strategic loophole. They could contest global hegemony through local surrogates across the Third World without triggering nuclear annihilation (Pektaş, 2024; Rauta, 2021). The battlefields of Vietnam, Korea, and Afghanistan perfectly illustrate this outsourcing of combat, where geopolitical patrons armed local factions to bleed their rivals while carefully preserving their own operational distance.

From Proxy War to Surrogate Warfare

Contemporary security environments further blur these lines. The post-Cold War lexicon rapidly expanded to accommodate "gray zone" and "hybrid" doctrines (Hughes, 2020; Morris et al., 2019). Operating stubbornly below the threshold of conventional retaliation, gray zone conflicts fuse economic coercion, cyber disruption, and weaponized narratives. Hybrid warfare similarly collapses the distinction between conventional and irregular tactics (Foley & Kaunert, 2022). It exploits adversarial blind spots. It demands plausible deniability. Such indirect friction is hardly novel; the deep historical reliance on the U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF) to cultivate and steer indigenous militias demonstrates the enduring utility of this operational model (Peltier, 2005).

Yet traditional proxy frameworks fail to capture the sheer technological scale of modern externalized violence. This theoretical deficit caused the concept of surrogate warfare. Krieg & Rickli (2018) conceptualize surrogacy as a macro category encompassing proxy friction, compound tactics, and remote-strike capabilities. Classical proxy warfare focuses solely on the state sponsorship of foreign militias. Surrogate theory goes much further. It captures any deliberate offloading of combat burdens to a third party, whether a regional insurgency, autonomous drone swarm, or contracted cyber-offensive payload.

It functions simultaneously as kinetic action and political theater. Waldman (2019) notes that in the current era of boundless interventions, surrogacy functions largely as a

strategic narrative, insulating domestic populations from the visceral realities of combat. The paradigm has evolved from a rigidly dichotomous patron-client model into a highly adaptive, multidimensional ecosystem reliant on cross-actor partnerships (Waldman, 2019). Surrogacy is no longer just battlefield tactics. It is a comprehensive political theory that dictates how power and violence are delegated under globalization, dragging deep moral and social implications in its wake (Rauta, 2021). Ultimately, it serves as a sociopolitical survival mechanism. Insecure regimes constantly recalibrate their surrogate networks, hunting for the precise operational balance that inflicts maximum strategic damage while minimizing institutional exposure (Krieg, 2016; Krieg & Rickli, 2018).

Iran's Regional Strategy and the Axis of Resistance

Tehran does not conquer territory; it constructs strategic depth. Rather than pursue conventional military expansion, the Iranian security apparatus engineered the Axis of Resistance. This sprawling, informal coalition binds state entities (Syria, the Houthi administration) with deeply entrenched nonstate factions (Hezbollah, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and diverse Iraqi Shi'a militias). A singular ideological thread unites them: the systematic erosion of Israeli and American regional hegemony (Soltaninejad, 2019; Wastnidge & Mabon, 2023).

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), its Quds Force, serves as the logistical and strategic nervous system for this network. By continuously funneling munitions, tactical training, and operational capital, Tehran positioned itself as the indispensable patron of Middle Eastern armed movements (Naar, 2020). The arrangement pays massive dividends. Iran dictates regional security dynamics while hiding behind a veil of official deniability.

Scholarship heavily documents this architecture. Soltaninejad (2019) frames the Axis as both a mechanism for aggressive coalition-building and a distinct normative challenge to the prevailing geopolitical order. Tracing the "everything short of war" paradigm, Raine et al. (2024) detail how, until early 2024, mutual recognition of prohibitive costs kept the Iran-Israel shadow war carefully contained. Within the Palestinian theater, Iranian patronage is an absolute operational necessity. Hamas leadership openly acknowledges Tehran as the primary arterial supply line sustaining their kinetic capabilities (Naar, 2020).

Yet this proxy model harbors a fatal structural paradox. Delegating violence means delegating control. When nonstate actors operate autonomously within highly volatile theaters, they inevitably drag their patrons into unplanned escalations. The 2006 Hezbollah-Israel conflict bore this. The October 7 attacks proved it beyond a doubt. In both instances, unilateral proxy offensives exacted massive strategic tolls on Tehran, stripping away the very plausible deniability that surrogate frameworks are designed to protect.

Despite this robust body of work, three distinct analytical blind spots persist. First, the timeline is outdated. Existing literature rarely extends beyond the initial fallout of early 2024, completely missing the rapid deterioration between October 2023 and June 2025. Consequently, scholarship fails to capture the exact moment when Iran's shadow war

morphed into direct warfare, defined here as overt, kinetic, state-on-state military engagement. Second, the conceptual application remains heavily fragmented. Scholars frequently analyze proxy dynamics but rarely deploy the full surrogate warfare framework, which integrates human militias and technological assets, in the Middle Eastern theater. Third, failure mechanics remain dangerously undertheorized. We lack a rigorous account of exactly how and why surrogate strategies collapse. The precise triggers of strategic blowback and the control paradox require rigorous mapping.

This study addresses these gaps by systematically tracing the Iran–Israel escalation from October 2023 through June 2025, focusing on the transition from proxy confrontation to direct military engagement. Drawing on surrogate warfare theory, the analysis examines the structural dynamics that contributed to Tehran's shift from indirect competition to overt confrontation. A key contribution of this study is its treatment of the Iran–Israel conflict as a distinct analytical outcome, separate from the broader Palestinian theater and understood through the lens of evolving proxy deterrence dynamics. By taking the June 2025 escalation as an interpretive endpoint, the study provides a theoretically grounded framework for understanding a significant transformation in contemporary patterns of conflict in the Middle East.

METHODS

Analyzing state-sponsored surrogate warfare requires methodological agility. Because Iran's operational reliance on nonstate proxies is context-specific and highly volatile, this research adopts a qualitative single-case study design (Yin, 2018). The temporal parameters are strictly bounded. Specifically, the study isolates Iranian strategic policy from October 2023 through June 2025 as the primary unit of analysis. Applying Yin's (2018) criteria, the investigation tests a distinct theoretical proposition: Tehran deliberately operationalizes the Axis of Resistance factions to secure geopolitical leverage over Israel while insulating itself from direct, conventional retaliation. To capture the mechanics of this strategy, the study triangulates disparate empirical sources to map policy outputs against proxy actions.

This project examines Iranian surrogate warfare during the October 2023 – June 2025 escalation with Israel. The timeline captures a critical strategic shift. Initial indirect capacity-building for the Axis of Resistance, specifically weapons development and material backing for Hezbollah, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Yemen's Houthis, and Iraqi resistance groups, ultimately ruptured into direct state-on-state confrontation. To unpack this trajectory, Iranian strategic policy serves as the core unit of analysis. The study examines autonomous military operations and proxy deployments by synthesizing official state documentation, leadership discourse, and empirically verified kinetic actions.

Methodologically, the project relies on purposive sampling. The study triangulates across a highly fragmented evidentiary base. To construct a reliable narrative of the conflict timeline, sources had to meet strict criteria for institutional weight and historical accuracy. The analysis assumes baseline bias in all regional primary documentation; therefore,

partisan assertions required aggressive cross-verification against external, independent assessments. Secondary data explicitly drawn on include:

- Official Iranian state discourse, encompassing Supreme Leader decrees, IRGC communiqués, and Foreign Ministry transcripts.
- Media-captured directives from the Axis of Resistance network nodes (Hezbollah, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Houthis, and Iraqi proxy factions).
- Verified operational logs detailing localized military engagements.
- Strategic forecasting from major defense and diplomacy think tanks, notably RAND, CSIS, Chatham House, and the Carnegie Endowment.
- Frontline investigative reporting from major global syndicates (Al Jazeera, BBC, Reuters, The Times of Israel).
- Peer-reviewed historiography and political science literature focusing strictly on surrogate warfare mechanics and Iran – Israel bilateral friction.
- Institutional mandates and rulings originating from the United Nations alongside International Court of Justice filings.

Extracting actionable intelligence from this archive requires distinct analytical approaches. The study subjected state directives to systematic document analysis. For the media corpus, longitudinal content analysis isolated shifts in strategic posturing and operational signaling. Finally, an exhaustive synthesis of existing policy literature provided the necessary theoretical scaffolding for the project.

Data Analysis

This study adapted Yin (2018) qualitative content analysis protocol to process the textual data, advancing through three distinct procedural stages:

1. **Corpus Stratification:** Rather than treating the data as a monolith, this study disaggregated sources according to their mode of support (financial, diplomatic, or kinetic).
2. **Targeted Coding:** The study used a deductive analytical framework. This required high-granularity tagging. Explicit references to munitions routing, for example, were coded strictly under “Iranian logistical support to Hezbollah.” When political actors actively obscured state-level operational control, those text segments were categorized as “plausible deniability strategies.” Finally, distinct escalatory flashpoints were isolated as “triggers for direct involvement.”
3. **Theoretical Synthesis:** The study subsequently evaluated the empirical matrix against the core propositions of surrogate warfare theory. Specifically, the findings were anchored to four operational dynamics:
 - a. **Delegation mechanics:** How exactly a state offloads operational burdens to nonstate actors.

- b. Political economy of force: The optimization of strategic gains against domestic and international political costs.
- c. Multilevel contestation: How conventional military pressure is synchronized with nonkinetic domains, spanning cyber, diplomatic, and information warfare.
- d. Strategic ambiguity: The deliberate cultivation of plausible deniability to obscure culpability and avoid direct retaliation.

Data Validity and Reliability

Methodological rigor heavily depends on aggressive data triangulation. By actively pitting state media narratives against independent reporting, the analysis exposes inconsistencies and isolates verifiable facts. This friction between sources is essential. Internal validity requires strictly tethering all empirical observations to the established parameters of surrogate warfare theory to prevent conceptual drift. To preserve construct validity, key measures are operationalized using a diverse evidentiary base rather than relying on a single source.

Replication demands absolute transparency. Rather than relying on opaque interpretive methods, all data collection protocols and coding schematics are exhaustively documented. The resulting corpus is housed in a structured database indexed by origin, chronology, and thematic alignment. This architectural rigor ensures that the entire analytical pipeline remains visible, allowing future researchers to retrace and test the underlying logic.

Research timeline and limitations

Data collection spanned six months, mapping open-source intelligence and existing literature from October 2023 to the June 2025 conflict window. This approach carries inherent, unavoidable constraints. Relying exclusively on unclassified data means public strategic messaging inevitably overshadows the realities of closed-door intelligence. Source bias poses a secondary challenge; narratives from state-sponsored and independent media alike demand rigorous cross-validation. The timeline itself precludes finality. Because the geopolitical landscape remains dangerously fluid, definitive longitudinal assessments of strategic outcomes are impossible. A lack of primary Persian-language translation further limits direct engagement with Iranian domestic discourse. Given these parameters, the resulting analysis captures the conflict's external information war. It does not and cannot claim to document its classified tactical execution.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Iranian Surrogate Warfare Strategy: Operational Dimensions

Delegation and Outsourcing to the Axis of Resistance

Tehran avoids direct conventional combat by shifting the war's friction into neighboring states. By arming the Axis of Resistance, Iranian military planners constructed

a shadow military. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force manages the day-to-day operations of this massive undertaking. Raw numbers reveal the sheer scale of the project. Current intelligence estimates place the number of allied fighters operating under this umbrella between 140,000 and 185,000. They hold ground across Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. The resulting network allows Iran to dictate regional security dynamics. Domestic occupation risks drop to zero.

Hamas shattered the regional status quo on October 7, 2023. The broader proxy network was activated instantly. Israel suddenly had to fight in multiple directions at once. Hezbollah began hitting northern border outposts on October 8 (Al Jazeera, 2023). Down in the Arabian Peninsula, Houthi militants fired on Eilat a week later (The Times of Israel, 2023). The Yemeni faction soon paralyzed commercial shipping in the Red Sea. Concurrent strikes emerged in Iraq. Local militias battered U.S. logistics hubs starting on October 18 and eventually lobbed munitions straight into Israeli airspace by November (MEMRI, 2023).

Benjamin Netanyahu was not exaggerating when he called it a "war of seven fronts" (Mackinnon & Detsch, 2024). Looking at the geographical spread of the violence across Gaza, the West Bank, Lebanon, Yemen, Iraq, and Syria, the Iranian strategy becomes obvious. Client militias officially claim to act independently. However, the exact timing of their strikes shows that Tehran can reliably impose military pressure across entirely separate combat theaters.

Keeping an alliance of this size armed requires a colossal logistics pipeline. The Quds Force moves serious hardware. They smuggle everything from ballistic munitions and guided antitank missiles to complex air defense platforms. Weapons alone do not win battles. IRGC advisors actively pair these physical shipments with live battlefield intelligence and hands-on tactical training.

Funding glues the entire operation together. Exactly how much money changes hands remains heavily debated among intelligence analysts. Yet proxy reliance on Iranian bankrolling is a fact. Ismail Haniyeh, the former Hamas leader, publicly acknowledged direct cash transfers from Tehran (Naar, 2020). In Lebanon, prewar estimates placed Hezbollah's annual funding from Iran at roughly USD 700 million. Iranian diplomats fiercely protect these covert supply chains at the international level by offering overt political cover for the resistance bloc.

Political efficiency and plausible deniability

Surrogate warfare provides a crucial tactical shield. State sponsors can project regional power while legally washing their hands of the resulting violence. Tehran leans heavily on this exact legal fiction. Iranian officials aggressively market the Axis of Resistance as a voluntary coalition of independent actors. Ali Khamenei themselves insists that Iran merely supports autonomous allies rather than commanding subservient proxy armies (The New Arab Staff & Agencies, 2024). The logic behind this rhetoric is strictly calculated. Feigning distance shields Tehran from international legal blowback and keeps the physical destruction of war safely away from Iranian soil. It builds a wall of strategic ambiguity (Krieg

& Rickli, 2018). Diplomats can negotiate abroad while IRGC-funded rockets fall on foreign cities.

October 7 fundamentally altered the rules of engagement. Instead of treating Hamas as an autonomous actor executing a preemptive strategy against shifting regional dynamics, Israeli officials placed the blame squarely on the state sponsor. However, this reaction misinterprets the fundamental architecture of surrogate warfare. Operational independence is not a vulnerability; it is a calculated feature. By enabling nonstate actors with localized autonomy, Tehran ensures that its allies can respond decisively to immediate threats, whether by anticipating a military invasion or countering political developments that endanger their cause.

This structural mechanism ensures that a movement like Hamas does not require explicit state-level authorization to act. As Ali Khamenei has publicly stated, the Axis of Resistance operates with inherent self-determination. In theory, this arrangement perfectly insulates Tehran from direct attribution while still achieving the broader strategic objective of regional disruption. This theoretical shield has fractured in practice. Following the unprecedented scale of the October 7 operation by Hamas, international intelligence and media apparatuses now attribute proxy violence directly to Tehran by default. Consequently, the very plausible deniability that initially made the surrogate strategy very attractive has evaporated.

Multilevel Contestation: From Shadow War to Direct Engagement

For decades, Jerusalem and Tehran fought exclusively in the shadows. Israeli military doctrine formalized this as *ma'am*, literally translating to the "war between wars." Both states carefully calibrated their violence to avoid a formal declaration of war. Intelligence operatives assassinated nuclear scientists. State-sponsored hackers dismantled civilian infrastructure. Israeli covert units ravaged Iranian nuclear facilities from 2010 to 2012 before resuming the same sabotage campaign in 2020. Iran hit back symmetrically. They used their regional proxy network to attack Israeli interests globally while orchestrating their own localized intelligence operations (Raine et al., 2024).

Hezbollah served as the ultimate testing ground for this proxy model during the 2006 Lebanon War. Tehran then exported the methodology. Palestinian factions absorbed Iranian tactical lessons throughout successive Gaza campaigns from 2008 through 2021. The Houthis' mobilization in Yemen applied an already perfected blueprint. Yet infantry clashes eventually gave way to technological surrogacy. Wastnidge and Mabon (2023) note that both adversaries replaced direct troop engagements with deep cyber warfare, unmanned aerial reconnaissance, and long-range precision munitions.

The historic deterrence framework completely imploded. The period spanning late 2023 to the summer of 2025 transformed an indirect rivalry into a state of kinetic warfare. April 13, 2024, shattered the old paradigm. Israel bombed the Iranian consulate in Damascus. In response, Tehran bypassed its proxies entirely. They launched roughly 300

drones and missiles straight from Iranian soil into Israel (Banco et al., 2024). By October 1, the violence escalated further. Seeking retribution for the targeted killings of Hassan Nasrallah and Ismail Haniyeh, Iran saturated Israeli airspace with 180 ballistic missiles (Al Jazeera, 2024).

Within this analytical framework, June 2025 marks the definitive start of a limited bilateral war. The catalyst was Operation Rising Lion. Israel executed a massive aerial assault using more than 200 fighter jets to strike a hundred military installations deep inside Iran. The Natanz nuclear facility sustained heavy damage. Tehran answered with an overwhelming volume. They directed 22 separate waves of drone and missile strikes at Israeli military and civilian centers over 12 days. The shadow war was over. Open conflict had arrived.

Strategic Limitations and the Control Paradox

Arming proxies buys geographical distance. It also reduces operational control. Tehran cannot fully control allied militias operating in highly volatile environments. The 2006 Hezbollah conflict established this precedent, and October 7 cemented it. Hamas unleashed Operation Al-Aqsa Flood without Tehran's explicit prior consent. The assault caught Iranian military planners off guard. As a result, Tehran lost much of its strategic initiative and spent months responding to a regional escalation it had not directly authorized.

Physical battlefield losses accelerated this crisis of control. Throughout 2024, Israeli strikes significantly weakened Hezbollah's operational capacity. In Syria, the Assad regime suffered a marked decline in its ability to sustain regional influence. In Yemen, sustained U.S. and Israeli bombing campaigns severely degraded Houthi military infrastructure and munitions stockpiles. As these developments unfolded, Iran's regional buffer became increasingly fragile. A core principle of surrogate warfare is plausible deniability. By 2025, however, maintaining that distance had become increasingly difficult. Rather than shielding Tehran from confrontation, its network of allied militias increasingly exposed Iran to retaliation on its own territory.

These developments exposed a fundamental limitation in Iran's security doctrine. Proxies cannot deter existential threats. Tehran poured billions into a hybrid warfare model designed to keep adversaries away from its borders. The scale and persistence of the current conflict subjected that model to pressures it had not previously encountered.

However, these pressures did not immediately dismantle Iran's regional proxy network. Israeli strikes bought Tel Aviv time, but Iranian clients adapted. Midlevel officers seamlessly stepped up to replace assassinated commanders. Cell-based defense structures kept fighting. They fired ballistic missiles continuously despite facing total Israeli air supremacy. Survival, however, does not equal strategic victory. A resilient proxy network is useless if the patron state faces annihilation. The moment Israel trained its sights on the Iranian nuclear program. The surrogate model reached its absolute limit. Proxy warfare was over. Direct state conflict became unavoidable.

Evolution of the Surrogate War Concept in Studies

Surrogate warfare has long since outgrown its traditional asymmetric boundaries. Intermediary combatants are no longer just tactical cannon fodder. For middle powers like Iran and the United Arab Emirates, these networks serve as flexible instruments of statecraft, enabling them to project diplomatic and economic influence without deploying uniformed troops. Current scholarship views this through a neo-trinitarian lens. As Rauta (2021) and Waldman (2019) argue, modern proxy conflicts require massive perception management. States engage in "narrative delegation." They outsource the actual violence while manufacturing ethical justifications across global media platforms to maintain legitimacy.

Tehran perfected this model to hide its conventional military weaknesses. Iranian intelligence agencies stitched together disparate transnational militias using a potent ideological narrative centered on anti-Zionist resistance. Israel countered by blending conventional military supremacy with highly adaptive proxy targeting. The strategic objective was simple: break the Axis of Resistance before it matured into a fatal threat (Rouhi, 2025). This containment strategy is failing. Iranian deterrence has fractured. Consequently, Israel is fighting a sprawling, highly complex war stretching from Gaza into Lebanon, Syria, and the Red Sea. Yet this wider conflict also exposes the glaring limits of Iranian proxy coordination. By destroying militia assets deep inside Iraqi and Syrian territory, Israeli forces are actively dismantling Tehran's supposedly impenetrable deterrence architecture.

The fundamental nature of the Iran-Israel conflict is shifting. Covert shadow wars are giving way to overt, high-intensity combat. The battlefield now pits an Iranian "Network of Fighters and Ideologies" directly against an Israeli "Network of Sensors and Strikes." Examining the 2023 to 2025 escalation cycle reveals a stark reality. Proxy warfare is no longer just a tool for localized disruption. It is the dominant framework for survival. Researchers track this evolution through hard empirical metrics: the lethality of kinetic incidents, geographical proximity of munitions to critical infrastructure, and devastating economic shocks caused by proxy mobilization. Iran recognizes the shifting tides. Rouhi (2025) emphasizes that Tehran is highly pragmatic. Bleeding political capital and watching its allied networks crumble under Israeli firepower, the Iranian security establishment is gradually abandoning its reliance on fragile surrogates. They are pivoting toward direct, precision-guided military control.

Theoretical Implications: The Limits of Iran's Surrogate Warfare

Proxy conflicts have changed dramatically from their Cold War predecessors. The great powers' traditional habit of funding rebel groups to advance their geopolitical ends has become a far more complex issue. States nowadays are involved in proxy warfare that extends beyond traditional militias. Violence is increasingly attributed not just to armed groups, but also to algorithms, autonomous drones, and large digital networks. The surrogate does the actual duty, and the patron sets the strategic objective.

Looking at the current Iranian and Israeli battlefields, four harsh realities about this new era of warfare emerge:

1. Networks create massive asymmetric advantages for the sponsor. Yet that advantage evaporates the moment a target state stops playing the shadow game. Israel shattered the surrogate illusion by systematically bombing Hezbollah assets while explicitly holding Tehran responsible for every rocket fired. Plausible deniability died entirely.
2. Proxies are useless without operational independence. Give them too much autonomy, however, and the principal-agent problem takes over. Client militias will always prioritize their survival over their sponsor's geopolitical chessboard. When Hamas launched its October 7 massacres, it served immediate Palestinian territorial objectives. Simultaneously, that unilateral decision violently derailed Iranian timelines for a controlled, regionwide escalation.
3. Surrogate tactics only work in the gray zone. They collapse under the weight of existential threats. Tehran pushed its nuclear enrichment to dangerous levels just as Israeli intelligence realized that Hezbollah was too weak to launch a severe counterattack. Consequently, Jerusalem abandoned covert sabotage in favor of overt military strikes. Indirect deterrence fails when a state believes its absolute survival is at risk.
4. The June 2025 escalation proved that networks are terrifyingly resilient. Israeli forces executed devastating deep strikes. They achieved total tactical battlefield dominance. Yet they failed to shatter the Iranian proxy architecture. This resilience is baked into the system. Decentralized proxy webs absorb kinetic damage and reconfigure their surviving nodes. In long wars of attrition, these networks often outlast rigid, hierarchical conventional military.

Regional and global implications

Direct state confrontation bypasses the containment mechanisms that historically stabilized the Middle East. Geopolitical boundaries blur almost immediately. A regional kinetic exchange threatens to absorb Turkey and Gulf Arab states into a massive theater of operations, introducing severe macroeconomic contagion risks. An Iranian decision to strike petroleum infrastructure or to blockade the Strait of Hormuz would instantaneously convert localized border violence into a global supply chain collapse.

This threat environment completely rewrites Tehran's deterrence calculus. For decades, the regime outsourced its defense to intermediary militias. The 2025 escalation proved that a specific model is insufficient.

During the height of the conflict, the Axis of Resistance experienced a near-total operational paralysis, with various proxy groups largely abandoning the battlefield. This sudden decoupling, widely documented across media reports, exposed a stark geopolitical reality: Tehran was left to fight almost entirely isolated from its supposedly loyal regional

network. For Iranian security planners, this breakdown forces a catastrophic realization. Because non-state actors can no longer reliably deter Israeli or American military incursions, the pursuit of nuclear weaponization has shifted from a theoretical ambiguity into what now appears to be the only viable guarantee for regime preservation.

Jerusalem significantly accelerated this strategic shift. The June 2025 strikes on Iranian nuclear installations may have established a controversial precedent for preemptive military action against nuclear proliferation programs within sovereign states, a development that other countries, particularly Iran, are likely to examine closely. Rouhi (2025) points out that Iranian statecraft responds ruthlessly to systemic failure. Confronted by deep domestic unrest and a decaying proxy architecture, the regime's military leadership is shifting away from the doctrine of surrogate warfare. Instead, long-term survival now dictates a total reliance on precision-guided conventional capabilities under direct, centralized military oversight.

CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND LIMITATIONS

The deployment of the Axis of Resistance by Iran between late 2023 and mid-2025 reveals a fundamental fallacy in traditional proxy war theory; while Tehran initially sought to challenge Israel's regional hegemony without paying a direct military cost, the empirical trajectory of the conflict suggests that the Axis operates with a high degree of strategic independence rather than as a fully controlled network. Consequently, the three structural weaknesses experienced by Iran during this escalation, the uncontrollable strategic blowback from Hamas' October 2023 offensive, the loss of plausible deniability due to direct Israeli attribution, and the inherent friction of militias prioritizing local survival over Tehran's broader deterrence goals, should not be viewed as operational failures but rather as definitive evidence confirming the network's autonomy. These dynamics demonstrate that allied factions can dictate their own tactical timelines and act in pursuit of independent geopolitical interests without explicit state authorization. Ultimately, while cultivating this decentralized independence allowed Tehran to project power across multiple fronts simultaneously, its reluctant shift toward confrontation in June 2025 confirms a fundamental strategic limitation: highly autonomous surrogate alliances remain inherently incapable of effectively countering existential, state-level security threats.

These findings suggest that regional security architectures must be adjusted immediately for network-centric statecraft. Analysts can no longer view tactical proxy degradation as a strategic win; undermining local foot soldiers is meaningless if the sponsor's leadership and financial infrastructure remain untouched. Policymakers must, therefore, weaponize attribution. Expelling sponsors from the gray zone strips them of their operational deniability, enabling diplomatic channels to bypass proxies altogether and pressure the principal state sponsors fueling the security dilemma. To enable this, intelligence integration must combine cyber, financial, and kinetic tracking to map decentralized threats accurately.

However, the results of this study should be considered alongside some methodological limitations. There is an inherent limitation involved in real-time strategic analysis with limited access to classified primary intelligence; thus, this study relies heavily on open-source data. To overcome this methodological gap in future studies, targeted approaches can be used, such as practitioner focus groups, to triangulate unclassified findings. Furthermore, future studies must monitor how technological evolution, especially the integration of autonomous weapons, might recalibrate proxy warfare. The discipline also lacks a comparative assessment of network-state resilience once a sponsor's primary proxy assets are catastrophically degraded.

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