Iran's Security Strategy: Balancing Defensive Deterrents and Offensive Proxy Warfare*

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Abstract

The objective of this study is to ascertain how proxy warfare is integrated into Iran's security strategy. The argument is based on an analysis of Iran's security approach, which rests on three main pillars: its ballistic missile arsenal, nuclear program, and reliance on proxy warfare. While the first two is predominantly defensive in nature, the use of proxy warfare includes offensive or forward defense elements. Iran has actively engaged in various conflicts in the Middle East through the use of proxies. The deployment of proxy groups allows Iran to exert influence over conflicts while maintaining distance and pursuing its own objectives. Consequently, proxy warfare reinforces the other two pillars. Moreover, historically the three pillars of Iran's security strategy can be traced back to the era of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. This reveals that there is a continuity in Iran's security policies despite the alteration and transformation caused by the 1979 Islamic Revolution. This contiunity contributes to the formation of long term political patterns that increase the effectiveness of the the three pillars of the security strategy mentioned in the study.

Keywords
Security strategy, Proxy war, Iran, Ballistic missile arsenal, Nuclear program

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İran'ın Güvenlik Stratejisi: Savunmacı Caydırıcılar ve Saldırgan Vekâlet Savaşının Dengelenmesi

Öz

Bu çalışmanın amacı, İran'ın güvenlik stratejisine vekalet savaşının nasıl entegre edildiğini tespit etmektir. Çalışmanın temel argümanı, İran'ın güvenlik stratejisinin üç temel sacayağına sahip olduğudur: Balistik füze cephaneliği, nükleer program ve vekâlet savaşı kullanımı. İlk iki unsur doğası gereği daha çok savunmacı özellik taşırken, vekâlet savaşı saldırgan ve/ya ileri savunma bileşenlerini içermektedir. İran, vekil grupları aracılığıyla Ortadoğu'daki birçok çatışma noktasına aktif bir şekilde müdahale etmektedir. Vekil grupların konuşlandırılması, İran'ın mesafeyi koruyarak ve kendi hedeflerini takip ederek çatışmalar üzerinde nüfuz sahibi olmasını sağlamaktadır. Sonuç olarak, vekâlet savaşı bu üçlü stratejinin diğer iki unsurunu da güçlendirmektedir. Ayrıca tarihsel açıdan bakıldığında, İran'ın güvenlik stratejisindeki bu üç unsurun kökleri Şah Muhammed Rıza Pehlevi dönemine kadar uzanmaktadır. Bu durum İran'ın güvenlik politikalarında 1979 İslam Devrimi'nin neden olduğu değişim ve dönüşüme rağmen bir sürekliliğin olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Bu süreklilik, çalışmada bahsedilen güvenlik stratejisindeki üç sütunun etkinliğini arttıran uzun süreli politik kalıpların oluşmasına katkıda bulunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Güvenlik stratejisi, Vekâlet savaşı, İran, Balistik füze cephaneliği, Nükleer program.

Introduction

The security strategy of Iran has long been a focal point of geopolitical studies due to the intricate and multifaceted nature of its approach. Given its limited conventional military capabilities in comparison to its adversaries, Iran has developed a security framework that prioritises asymmetry and adaptability. The strategy is based on three interrelated pillars: a robust ballistic missile arsenal, an ambitious nuclear programme, and a strategic reliance on proxy warfare. While the first two components serve primarily defensive and deterrent functions, the use of proxy forces introduces offensive or "forward defence" elements. This approach enables Iran to assert its influence, engage in regional conflicts, and counterbalance rival powers, while maintaining plausible deniability.

Proxy warfare, in this context, becomes not only a tool of military engagement but also a means of shaping regional dynamics to suit Iran's broader strategic objectives. By supporting and deploying proxy groups in neighboring states, Iran mitigates the risks associated with direct intervention, while still advancing its goals. This approach is not merely a recent development but is rooted in historical precedent. As scholars like Ariane Tabatabai have observed, the foundations of Iran's contemporary security strategy can be traced back to the era of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, signaling a continuity in its strategic thinking that has spanned both the pre and post-revolutionary periods. This study seeks to explore the integration of proxy warfare into Iran's broader security framework, examining how this tactic complements and reinforces the country's missile and nuclear capabilities. By analyzing the historical and contemporary applications of proxy warfare within Iran's security doctrine, this research aims to provide a deeper understanding of the enduring patterns that shape its regional behavior and long-term security objectives.

This study seeks to delve into the integration of proxy warfare within Iran's security framework, exploring how it complements and enhances the country's ballistic missile and nuclear programs. The rest of the article consists of four parts. The first section describes the Iran's security strategy and aims to understand its roots. The second and third sections examine Iran's ballistic missile arsenal and nuclear programme, respectively. The fourth section discusses Iran's proxy war strategy. The article ultimately posits that Iran's reliance on proxy warfare is not an isolated phenomenon, but rather a deliberate and integral component of its overarching security strategy. Collectively,

these three pillars provide a unified structure that enables Iran to deter adversaries, project power, and navigate the complexities of a volatile region. In the absence of proxy warfare, Iran would be considerably less able to implement offensive deterrence and achieve its regional ambitions. This research synthesises historical and contemporary perspectives with the aim of providing a comprehensive understanding of how proxy warfare has become an indispensable element of Iran's pursuit of strategic resilience and influence in the Middle East.

Iran's Understanding of Security
Iran's primary security objectives are to ensure state survival and territorial integrity like any other state. However, after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the preservation of the revolutionary regime (nezam) became a central focus (Tira & Guzansky, 2016: 7). The revolution brought about significant changes in Iran's security and foreign policy. During the Shah's reign, Iran was one of the most important allies of the United States in the region, but after the revolution, it gradually shifted to a position of hostility. As a result, the most influential factor shaping Iran's security policies since then has been the harsh measures imposed by the U.S. In addition, Iran's post-revolutionary policy of 'exporting the revolution' has alarmed other Middle Eastern states, particularly Israel and the Gulf states, drastically affecting its regional relations. For these reasons, the United States and its allies have remained at the core of the Islamic Republic of Iran's major security challenges since its establishment (Ostovar, 2019: 168).

Kamran Taremi (2014), emphasizes that Iranian political and strategic culture has been deeply influenced by Shiite Islam and its interpretation by Ayatollah Khomeini. Iran has integrated pragmatism and a realist regional strategy into its religious identity, a concept first articulated by Khomeini. According to Khomeini, the regime's interests may sometimes necessitate actions that contradict the five pillars of Islam, as revolutionary Islam cannot survive without Iran. Therefore, protecting the Islamic Republic becomes the highest religious duty, and violating Islamic principles in the interest of the regime is acceptable (Eisenstadt, 2011: 3, 2015: 5). This blend of pragmatism and ideology provides Iran with greater flexibility in its actions, while also making its behavior more complex and unpredictable. By carefully assessing regional conditions and adjusting its tactics accordingly, Tehran is able to clarify its policy objectives and reshape them in alignment with its immediate strategic needs (Cohen & Shamci, 2022: 4).

Iran's geopolitical environment changed significantly after the Islamic Revolution. The collapse of the Soviet Union, the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and the growing American military presence in the region have shifted Iran's strategic perspective, leading the regime to prioritize a security-first approach. Sharing borders with unstable neighbors has been costly for Iran

over the years. This insecure environment carries the potential for persistent regional rivalries, military conflicts, crises, and the presence of foreign powers. A substantial portion of Iran's political and economic resources are devoted to countering these broader regional threats. The constant need for a strong military to protect its borders is a critical aspect of Iran's national security strategy. For these reasons, Iran has adopted a security policy focused on "deterrent defense", as noted by the head of the National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani (Barzegar, 2010: 179–180; Byman et al., 2001: 10–11; Czulda, 2016: 93).

Iran's security strategy incorporates elements of forward defense and is primarily focused on deterrence. Tehran aims to maximize its security rather than its power by building a defense network beyond its borders and increasing its influence in neighboring countries (Akbarzadeh et al., 2023: 684). Instead of adopting a wait-and-see approach, Tehran seeks to counter threats before they reach its territory by maintaining an active and comprehensive presence in key conflict areas in the Middle East. A key element of this strategy is the use of non-state armed actors in conflict zones, particularly in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon. Operating under the umbrella of the "axis of resistance" umbrella, these actors enable Iran to establish a security perimeter beyond its borders, thereby expanding its strategic depth and strengthening its regional influence (Azizi & Vazirian, 2023: 541).

According to Tabatabai (2020: 146), which lies at the core of Iran's defense and security strategy, is a practice that dates back to the Shah's era. During his reign, the Shah established relations with non-state actors as part of this strategy, and after the revolution, these actors played a fundamental role in Tehran's deterrence efforts. The Shah's proxy war strategy, particularly through the Iraqi Kurds, was expanded by the revolutionary regime to operate on a broader Middle Eastern scale. However, the Shah's proxy war strategy was short-term and functional, aimed at achieving specific objectives, rather than creating long-term strategic partnerships with foreign non-state actors (Ostovar, 2018: 1239). Additionally, Iran's nuclear activities and missile programs are also legacies of the Shah's era. Although initially regarded unfavorably, the revolutionary regime later embraced and made significant advancements in these two areas (Tabatabai, 2020: 146).

Ballistic Missile Capacity

In the West, the debate surrounding Iran's ballistic missile development is centered on United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2231 and the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) benchmarks. UNSCR 2231 calls on Iran to refrain from activities related to ballistic missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads (United Nations, 2015). Since all ballistic missile tests conducted by Iran since the adoption of this resolution have been viewed by Western powers as violations, it holds significant importance in

this context. According to the MTCR, missiles with a range of over 300 km and a payload of 500 kg are considered capable of carrying nuclear warheads. By this standard, any system that exceeds the 300 km/500 kg threshold is assumed to be designed with the potential to carry nuclear weapons (Elleman & Fitzpatrick, 2017: 93).

Iran's first attempt to acquire ballistic missiles dates back to the final years of the Shah's reign. In the early 1970s, the Shah requested the *Lance* short-range surface-to-surface missile from the United States, but this request was rejected by the U.S. administration at the time. In the mid-1970s, Tehran began developing the *Arash*, a long-range rocket system based on the Russian BM-11. In 1977, shortly before his overthrow, the Shah signed a secret agreement with Israel to develop ballistic missiles capable of carrying both conventional and nuclear warheads.[1] Although Iran paid its share of the funds, the program was abandoned when the Shah's regime collapsed (Bahgat, 2019: 33; Taremi, 2005: 95).

The decisive event in Iran's ballistic missile development was the Iran-Iraq War. During the Shah's reign, Iran possessed the largest air force in the Gulf, with over 400 fighter jets. However, following the 1979 revolution, Iran's air power significantly declined due to difficulties in obtaining spare parts, pilot training, and access to advanced technology, all caused by the severing of relations with the West, particularly the U.S. At the onset of the Iran-Iraq War, Iraqi planes attacked Iranian cities, later escalating to a "war of the cities" with ballistic missiles. Tehran's inability to respond to these attacks led the regime to acquire Scud-B missiles from Libya. Iran first used its limited number of Scud-Bs in March 1985 to retaliate against Iraq. For the Iranians, ballistic missiles played a crucial role in responding to Iraqi air and missile attacks on cities and economic infrastructure. Iran's success in retaliating against Iraq prompted Tehran to increase its missile usage during the war and to pursue the necessary steps to develop this technology domestically (Elleman & Fitzpatrick, 2017: 99–100).

According to the MTCR's definition, all of Iran's liquid-fuel rockets can be considered capable of carrying nuclear warheads. However, the design specifications for the *Shahab-1* and *Shahab-2* indicate that these missiles were built to carry conventional, not nuclear, warheads (Elleman & Fitzpatrick, 2017: 120). In contrast, there is strong evidence that Iran's medium-range Shahab-3 system was designed for nuclear warheads. Designs obtained in 2004 from a senior Iranian informant, along with documents leaked to the media by Israeli intelligence in May 2018, revealed that Iran was attempting to place nuclear

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[1]　This treaty, codenamed "Project Flower", is one of the six arms-for-oil agreements signed in Tehran in April 1977. This project, which is very important for both countries, started in 1978 when Iran sent $260 million worth of oil to Israel. The missiles were planned to have a range of more than 400 km and a carrying capacity of 750 kg (Bahgat, 2019: 33).

explosives in the *Shahab-3*'s reentry compartment. Given its connection to North Korea's *Nodong* missile, which was developed to carry nuclear warheads, any Iranian missile equipped with a Shahab-3 reentry compartment could be considered as having been designed with nuclear capability (Elleman & Fitzpatrick, 2017: 126–127).

According to Eisenstadt (2011: 6–7), these weapons should be viewed more as a conventional deterrent and a form of combat power. The wide range of missiles produced by Iran is intended to be capable of striking enemy cities in the event of an attack. As mentioned earlier, this concept is a legacy of Saddam's initiation of the 'war of the cities' during the conflict with Iraq, which involved the use of ballistic missiles to strike numerous Iranian cities, including Tehran (Ajili & Rouhi, 2019: 141). Iran has heavily invested in its ballistic missile program, both as a result of having been a victim of such attacks during the war with Iraq and in response to one of its main regional adversaries, Israel, which possesses a more advanced missile program. For Iran—surrounded by American bases, with numerous hostile neighbors, and facing an adversary like Israel—the development of its missile program is essential for defense. Tehran sees these ballistic missiles as a deterrent against Israel and as an indispensable means to strike its enemies on their own soil (or, in the case of the United States, its military bases). The central role of Iran's ballistic missile program has been further reinforced by events such as the 2006 Israel-Lebanon War (Eslami & Vieira, 2021: 316; International Crisis Group, 2018: 4).

During the 2006 Hezbollah-Israeli War and the US invasion of Iraq (2003-2011), Iranian proxies reached a new level in the conduct of asymmetric warfare. Hezbollah employed these strategies, including unconventional warfare strategies, against Israel and was successful. This success afforded the organization acces to more advanced weaponary. Indeed, Hezbollah's success has paved the way for Iran to transfer such weapons to other proxies in the region. This know-how, along with Iranian ballistic missiles and other advanced technological weapons, was transferred to the Houhis (Clarke & Smyth, 2017: 16). Therefore, Iran shares its ballistic missiles with its proxy groups, notably Hezbollah and the Houthis. With Iranian help, Hezbollah has more than 130.000 rockets and missiles including the Fatah 110/M-600, Shahab-1 and Shahab-2 short range ballistic missiles. Furthermore, as part of the "Precision Project"[2] Iran sought to enhance the lethality and precision of the over 100.000 rockets and missiles in the Hezbollah's possession (Williams & Shaikh, 2020: 2).

Iran has provided the Houthis with ballistic missiles that could potentially be used to threaten shipping traffic in the Bab al-Mandab Strait and to attack

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2   The objective of this Project is to install a precision guidance system on 14.000 Zelzal-2 missiles, which are currently in the hands of Hezbollah. These missiles have a range of 210 km and a target deviation of up to 50 metres (Bicom, 2019).

Saudi and United Arab Emirates (UAE) targets in the region. The principal objective of Iran in Yemen is to weaken Saudi Arabia and extend its influence to the Red Sea. The intensification of the war in Yemen since 2016 has led to an increase in Iranian support to the Houthis. Tehran has provided the Houthis with a diverse array of weponary, including ballistic missiles and Katyusha rockets. Furthermore, Iran's advancement in missile development technology serves to exacerbate the threat posed by the Houthis. For instance, the Houthis have previously utilized the Borkan 2H short-range missile in attacks on Saudi Arabia (Jones, 2019: 7–8). After examining the wreckage of the missile, the UN panel of experts concluded that the missile was a lighter version of the Iranian-made Qiam-1 missile (United Nations, 2018: 28–29). Furthermore, the Houthis' arsenal includes ballistic missiles, namely the *Hatem*, *Falaq* and *Karar*, which bear a striking resemblance to Iranian missiles (Zeevi, 2022).

Nuclear Programme

Iran's nuclear activities date back to the Shah's initiation of a nuclear program in the 1950s, aimed at reducing the country's dependence on oil. In 1957, Tehran signed a treaty with the United States as part of President Eisenhower's Atoms for Peace Initiative. In 1958, the Shah established the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran and appointed Akbar Etemad, who was trained in Sweden, as its head. About a decade later, the U.S. delivered Iran's first nuclear reactor and also provided highly enriched uranium (Tabatabai, 2020: 125–126). Thus, Iran's nuclear program has a history spanning more than 60 years. Moreover, despite being subjected to numerous economic and political sanctions—primarily through United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions—Tehran has continued its nuclear program. The UNSC adopted Resolution 1969 in July 2006, Resolution 1737 in December 2006, Resolution 1747 in March 2007, and Resolution 1803 in March 2008. Resolution 1929, passed in June 2010, imposed the broadest economic sanctions up to that point (Gleason, 2012: 320). Despite the severity of these sanctions, Iran's refusal to abandon its nuclear program highlights the significance Iranian decision-makers place on this issue.

While the West has attempted to dissuade Iran through sanctions, it has also sought to reach agreements with the country. In this context, the first nuclear deal between Iran and the West was signed in November 2003 between Iran and the EU3 (the UK, France, and Germany), where Iran agreed to temporarily suspend uranium enrichment and sign an additional protocol allowing International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspections. However, this agreement became ineffective due to Iran's refusal to fulfill its obligations in mid-2005 and early 2006. It was not until 2013 that a new agreement between Iran and the West was reached (Kazemzadeh, 2017: 209).

Iran has achieved sufficient nuclear capacity for peaceful purposes and possesses the expertise, technology, infrastructure, and uranium enrichment

necessary for nuclear energy. According to available information, Iran has never crossed the threshold to produce nuclear weapons. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), signed on July 14, 2015, with the P5+1, allowed for strict monitoring of Iran's nuclear program by the IAEA. However, Iran has been permitted to retain its nuclear technology and conduct limited uranium enrichment, enabling it to maintain its status as a "semi-threshold state" (Saikal, 2019: 151–152). As a result, with this agreement, Iran is now recognized by Western countries as a state on the nuclear threshold, and its nuclear projects have gained a degree of legitimacy.

Iran's potential development of a nuclear weapon would allow it to exert greater pressure on its regional rivals, particularly the Gulf States. Given the close relationship between these countries and the United States, it would not be surprising if Tehran sought to limit the U.S. presence and influence in the region by applying pressure on them. If these countries resist, Tehran, bolstered by the confidence that comes with possessing nuclear weapons, could more easily and effectively engage in subversive activities through its proxies. Additionally, while attention is focused on Iran's nuclear activities, Tehran has been continuously practicing and enhancing its asymmetric capabilities (Bahgat & Ehteshami, 2021: 13).

Iran's Proxy War Strategy

Iran's relationship with non-state actors and the implementation of its proxy war strategy, in parallel with this relationship, date back to the Pahlavi era. Reza Shah established ties with Shiites in Lebanon and Kurds in Iraq from the late 1950s onward, and these relations continued until the end of his reign (Reisinezhad, 2019). In the late 1950s, the Shah instructed General Teymur Bakhtiar, head of SAVAK (Sazeman-e Ettelaat ve Amniyet-e Keshvar), to counter the threat of Nasserism. In response, Mujteba Pashai, head of SAVAK's Middle East department, implemented the "Green Plan." In a meeting with Bakhtiar, Pashai remarked, "We must fight and stop the danger (Nasserism) on the Mediterranean coast so that we do not have to shed blood on Iranian soil", highlighting Lebanon's strategic importance. At the time, Lebanon was a critical neutral port and financial center. Following this plan, Tehran began providing financial aid to Shiites in Lebanon. By the mid-1960s, Iran's relationship with non-state actors in Lebanon had reached its peak, expanding its network to include journalists, politicians, elites, and Shiite communities (Samii, 1997: 69–70).

In Iraq, SAVAK sought to restore the monarchy after the 1958 coup and began collaborating with the Kurds. Similar to its strategy in Lebanon, Iran aimed to exploit Iraq's ethnic and sectarian divisions for its own benefit, focusing on improving its relations with and influence over Iraqi Shiites throughout the 1960s. SAVAK achieved significant success in building relations with the Kurds, leading Mullah Mustafa Barzani and his followers to wage war against

the Iraqi government, which had to allocate 80% of its army to suppress the Kurdish insurgency. From the summer of 1963 onwards, this insurgency became a focal point of Iran's regional policy. During this period, Iran received support from Israel and, with SAVAK and Mossad, began assisting the Kurds. The Shah's proxy war strategy aimed to weaken the pro-Soviet Baghdad regime while forcing the Baathist government to make concessions on the Shatt al-Arab waterway issue. Senior SAVAK officials frequently met with Iraqi exiles in Lebanon to further these objectives. By the 1970s, Iran and Israel were joined by the United States, with the CIA providing financial and military support to the Iraqi Kurds for the first time. However, in 1975, after reaching an agreement with Baghdad and securing the desired concessions on the Shatt al-Arab issue, the Shah ended his support for the Iraqi Kurds, bringing Iran's proxy war strategy to a close (Reisinezhad, 2019: 61,91-92,228-229; Samii, 1997: 68).

Since its inception, the Islamic Republic has been developing its asymmetric capabilities to compensate for its conventional military weaknesses compared to its regional rivals, particularly its archenemies, the United States and Israel. After the revolution, Iran lost significant elements of its military power. Before 1979, Iran had cultivated a strong relationship with its main supporter, the United States, which enabled it to bolster its military power and counter threats. However, following the revolution, the regime's adoption of anti-American rhetoric and the subsequent hostage crisis led to hostile relations between the two countries. As a result, the Iranian military was cut off from American training, support, and equipment. Over time, the weapons and systems acquired under the Shah became obsolete, and Iranian leaders were unable to replace them or obtain the necessary spare parts. Additionally, the transformation of the military and the growing prominence of the Revolutionary Guards created challenges for Tehran from a conventional military standpoint (Hanna & Kaye, 2015: 178).

In addition to these changes, the revolutionary regime's founding assumptions facilitated its adoption of this strategy. These assumptions included the belief that Iran and the broader Islamic world were engaged in a struggle for survival against Western imperialism, with the United States and its regional allies posing a threat to the revolution. Furthermore, Iran adopted an anti-status quo stance both internationally and regionally after the revolution, which led to its isolation from the international system and its perception as a threat by status quo states in the region. The lack of allies and friendly nations following the revolution, along with Iran's policy of exporting the revolution, prompted Tehran to establish relationships with non-state actors in the region, particularly in Lebanon, Iraq, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia. Over time, Tehran developed principal-agent and even alliance relationships with these actors (Ostovar, 2019: 180; Tabatabai et al., 2021: 4).

Iran's relations with its proxies are most robust when three conditions are met: firstly, the proxy must espouse an identical or similar interpretation of Shia Islam to that of Iran; secondly, Iran must be the sole external actor providing political and material support to the proxy; and thirdly, the proxy and Iran must share common domestic goals and objectives in the region. When all of these factors are present, Iran is most succesful in esthablishing strong ties with its proxy (Ostovar, 2018: 1239). In the context of these factors, one of Tehran's proxies with which Tehran has strong relations is Hezbollah. Hezbollah serves as a model for Tehran's burgeoning proxy forces, the creation of which was oversssen by Iran's ambassador to Damascus, Ali Akbar Mohtashamipur (Seliktar & Rezaei, 2020: 17). Hezbollah plays a pivotal role in the Iranian conceptualisation of deep war, paricularyl in terms of its forward defense strategy. The group, which Iranian officials regard as a strategic deterrent, is of great importance to Israel as it provides the country with the option of a devastating retaliation in the event of an attack on Iran by a Western power (Filkins, 2013). Hezbollah's potrayal of itself as the defender of Lebanon and the ally of the Palestinians serves to obfuscate the Persian-Arab and Shia-Sunni divisions, thereby enabling Iran to instigate conflict between Muslims and Israel ehen is expedient to do so. The group provides Iran with the potential for engaging in a secondary conflict with Israel and for gaining unilateral access to Israel. Iran has the ability to project power wowards Iraesl's border, potentially reaching even its capital, whereas Israel would have to cross 1.000 km and two countiers to reach Iran. Accordingly, Hezbollah serves as an forward outpost for Iran in its conflict with Israel. The Hezbollah-Israel conflict also offers an opportunity to assess the efficacy of insurgent strategies and the "ressistance model." Moreover Hezbollah provides plausible deniability. Hence Israel is compelled to retaliate against Hezbollah for attacks launched by the group, rather than against Iran itself (Chubin, 2014: 75; Tira & Guzansky, 2016: 10).

Iran's ties with non-state proxy actors afford Tehran a pivotal role in major decision-making processes. Consequently, Tehran cultivates relationships with a multitude of disparate groups when selecting proxies and provides varying degrees of support to each. To this end, Tehran builds relationships with multiple, distinct groups, providing tailored support to each. By supporting smaller groups alongside larger ones, Tehran sustains their belief in a more influential future role. This strategy is particularly effective in countries where multiple militia groups exist. If a group distances itself from Iran, Tehran encourages those within the group who align with its views to break away and form their own organizations. These new, smaller groups, being more dependent on external assistance, tend to act more in line with Iran's interests. In this way, Iran minimizes risk and buys time to select the most suitable proxy. For instance, when relations with Muqtada al-Sadr soured, Tehran created two new groups, Asaib Ahl al-Haq and Kataib Hezbollah, from

the Mahdi Army. Both organizations played significant roles in shaping Iraqi domestic politics in alignment with Iran's goals. Unlike the Sadrist movement, these groups are smaller, more controllable, and more dependent on Tehran (Johnston et al., 2020: 19; Juneau, 2016: 649–650).

With the rise of its proxies in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen, Tehran's proxy network is evolving into a supranational military alliance that protects and expands its interests across the region (Ostovar, 2019:183). Since 2018, Iranian-backed militias, especially in Syria and Iraq, have begun integrating into the armed forces of their respective countries. Iran's support for recognizing the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) as a state apparatus in Iraq, and its desire for the same recognition of the National Defense Forces (NDF) and Local Defense Forces (LDF) in Syria, aims to create semi-autonomous military and security structures parallel to the Iraqi and Syrian armies. The integration of these armed proxy forces into national militaries enables Tehran to secure long-term, multi-layered, and less costly influence in these countries. Additionally, the ideological and intellectual alignment between Iran and these armed groups ensures that Tehran can continue to influence their strategic decisions even after they formally join the military. These new structures, though officially part of the governments and funded by them, will remain loyal to Tehran. By transferring its experience with the IRGC to Iraq and Syria, Iran seeks to establish independent military structures with strong ideological orientations, their own budgets, operating parallel to the conventional armies (Azizi, 2022: 500-501,512).

Afshon Ostovar (2019: 181) stated "In the 21st century, there is no other country as successful as the Islamic Republic of Iran in using militia proxies beyond its borders" highlighting Tehran's prowess in this regard. Among the countries in the region, the Islamic Republic has benefited the most from the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East. Tehran has viewed these conflicts as an opportunity to assert itself as a regional hegemon and has acted accordingly. In the conflicts in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, Iran has effectively used its proxies, successfully advancing its interests. Through its proxy war strategy, Tehran has strengthened its presence in these regions (Cohen & Shamci, 2022: 3). These proxy actors embrace Tehran's core objectives in the Middle East. Iran's cooperation with Shiite communities and its projection of proxy power beyond its borders lie at the heart of the ongoing conflict between Iran and its Arab neighbors, who fear Iran's influence over Shiites in the region. This concern even led King Abdullah II of Jordan to warn of a "Shiite Crescent" in 2004. Since then, King Abdullah's concerns have been echoed by other regional leaders, who view Iran as the dominant power in Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria, and as an influential actor in Yemen and Bahrain. As a result, Shia minorities in Sunni-majority states are increasingly seen as a potential fifth column for Iran, leading to heightened political repression and social alienation against them (Ostovar, 2018: 1237).

In some instances, the utilization of proxy warfare has resulted in form of retaliation. Despite Iran's proficiency in implementing this strategy, it has nevertheless been subject to blowback on occasion. The Jundullah armed group, active in the southeastern Iranian provinces of Sistan and Baluchestan, and Arab and Kurdish armed groups active in the western regions, are perceived as potential proxies by Iran's rivals (Bahgat & Ehteshami, 2021: 198). Tehran's effective conduct of proxy warfare in the Middle East, from Iraq to Yemen, has promted its rivals to adopt a similar strategy in response. In this regard, the utilization of Tehran's efficacious proxy warfare strategy by its adversaries against it represents a significant illustration of blowback.

Iran's strategy of proxy warfare is confronted with a number of long-term challenges, including those pertaining to diplomacy and economics. First, its deep involvement in regional conflicts legitimizes U.S. pressure on the regime. Iran's growing presence in regional conflicts gives the US a pretext to exert pressure against it. Second, its external operations harden attitudes toward Iran, especially among Sunni states, which accuse Tehran of pursuing a destabilizing sectarian agenda. The Sunni states, believing that Iran is pursuing a sectarian strategy, are responding in the same way. This means more discrimination and oppression for the Shia in the region. Third, despite plausible deniability, actions by its proxies can escalate tensions with hostile countries. For example, the Houthis' attacks on U.S. and Saudi ships led to further sanctions on Iran, while Kataib Hezbollah's attack on American forces in Iraq was blamed on Tehran, fueling tensions. Additionally, Iran risks becoming trapped in a cycle of instability. Whether its proxies succeed or fail, Tehran's influence depends on prolonging conflicts rather than seeking peace, leaving it allied with weak or failed states, which are costly due to Iran's economic and diplomatic vulnerabilities. Finally, Tehran's deep involvement in foreign wars has fueled internal unrest. Protests in 2017 and 2018, even in conservative areas, reflected growing discontent over economic issues, foreign policy, and Iran's role in proxy wars, threatening the regime's internal security (Gaston & Ollivant, 2020: 34–35; Ostovar, 2019: 184–186). Despite the eventual suppression of the protests, which resulted in the deaths of twenty-five, tens of thousands of Iranian citizens took the streets. They chanted slogans such as "Let Syria be, think about our plight" and "Neither Gaza, nor Lebanon, let my life be sacrificed for Iran" (Alfoneh, 2018).

Conclusion

As with any other country, the Islamic Republic of Iran is driven by the fundamental need to ensure survival and pursue its interests. Protecting the revolutionary regime after the 1979 Islamic Revolution a key objective significantly influencing Iran's subsequent security policies. Positioned in a region prone to external intervention and persistent instability, Iran has adopted security-oriented policies similar to those of other regional actors. With a

scarcity of reliable allies in the Middle East, Iran has built strong relationships with non-state actors, leveraging its internal institutions, such as the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, the Quds Force, and the Basij, to engage with these groups. These revolutionary military institutions, along with their ideological and quasi-guerrilla nature, have facilitated relations with Shiite groups based on sectarian ties, while alliances with non-Shiite groups have been forged around shared anti-status quo interests, primarily against the U.S. and its regional allies.

Iran's security strategy is rooted in deterrence, shaped by its historical experiences, post-revolution enmity with the U.S., and its isolation in the Middle East. The Iran-Iraq War underscored the necessity of self-reliance, with Iran left largely unsupported, save for Syria. This led Tehran to adopt a deterrence-based approach encompassing three pillars: its ballistic missile arsenal, nuclear program, and proxy warfare. These strategies, which trace their origins to the Shah's era, highlight the pragmatism of the revolutionary regime and the continuity of Iran's security approach. This consistency has enhanced both the effectiveness and the habitual nature of its strategy.

Although Iran's ballistic missile arsenal and nuclear program are defensive deterrents, its use of proxy warfare serves as an offensive deterrent. The possession of ballistic missiles with extended range and carrying capacity, along with advances in the nuclear program, enhances Iran's defensive capabilities rather than its offensive potential. These two security components bolster Tehran's defensive deterrence capacity. In contrast, proxy warfare is an offensive deterrent, employed at any stage of regional conflict. Iran has effectively used this strategy in conflict zones, particularly in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, to further its interests. Consequently, Iran's proxy war strategy contributes to its deterrence from an offensive standpoint. Tehran's aims to neutralize threats before they reach its borders by establishing a "forward defense" line. In this sense, proxy warfare complements Iran's other security components. While the missile and nuclear programs are crucial for defense and deterrence, proxy warfare enhances Iran's regional effectiveness. Iran's influence in key conflict areas is largely due to the success of its proxy war strategy. Without its close relationships with proxies, Iran would struggle to achieve the same level of success in these areas. In conclusion, Iran's close relationship with its proxies enables it to effectively use them in the event of an attack, thereby strengthening its deterrence capacity. Tehran views its proxies, particularly Hezbollah, as indispensable to its broader security strategy, allowing it to exert influence across the Middle East while maintaining its deterrent capabilities.

Finally, In the short term, Iran's strategy of expanding its influence in the region serves to enhance Tehran's capacity to deter existing security threats. However, in the long term it gives rise to a number of challahnges. The

consequences of this strategic choice are manifold. They include internation-al isolation, conomic sanctions that have a detrimental impact on the Iranian economy, a lag in military development relative to other countries, suspicion of Iranian policies by other countries, damage to relations with neighbouring countries and a constantly tense relationship with the United States, Israel and Saudi Arabia.

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