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ANALYZING THE IMPACT OF PROXY WARS ON THE MIDDLE EASTERN SECURITY STRUCTURE: THE US-IRANIAN CONFLICT AS A PATH OF STRENGTHENING THE ROLE OF NON-STATE ARMED ACTOR

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the impact of proxy wars on the Middle Eastern security structure through the lens of the U.S.-Iranian strategic rivalry, with a particular focus on the growing role of non-state armed actors between 2010 and 2025. It argues that the erosion of state authority following the Arab Uprisings of 2011 created permissive environments in which militias, hybrid armed groups, and transnational actors became central instruments of regional and international power projection. By analyzing key cases – Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Lebanon – the study demonstrates how both Iran and the United States have relied on proxy warfare to pursue strategic objectives while avoiding direct confrontation, reshaping patterns of sovereignty, governance, and security. Drawing on realism, constructivism, and Regional Security Complex Theory, the article situates proxy warfare within broader dynamics of power competition, ideology, sectarian identity, and regional interdependence. It highlights how Iranian-backed groups such as Hezbollah, the Popular Mobilization Forces, and the Houthis, alongside U.S.-supported actors like the Syrian Democratic Forces, have evolved into hybrid entities combining military, political, and governance functions. While these actors enhance deterrence and strategic depth for their patrons, they simultaneously entrench fragmentation, fuel sectarian polarization, and prolong conflict. The article further explores the humanitarian, economic, and social consequences of proxy wars, emphasizing displacement, institutional collapse, and the normalization of hybrid security structures across the region. It concludes that proxy warfare is no longer a peripheral tactic but a defining feature of Middle Eastern security, with non-state armed actors functioning as indispensable yet destabilizing components of regional order.

KEYWORDS: Proxy wars, Non-state armed actors, Middle East, Arab Uprisings 2011, Iran, United States, Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon, Sectarianism, Hybrid governance, Regional security.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Middle East has witnessed profound transformations over the past decade, driven by political upheavals, state fragility, and the rise of non-state armed actors. The Arab Uprisings of 2011 triggered widespread instability, exposing weak governance and creating opportunities for militias and transnational groups to gain influence. These actors often serve as proxies for regional and global powers, such as Iran and the United States, shaping conflicts indirectly while pursuing strategic objectives. Proxy wars in Syria, Yemen, Iraq, and Lebanon illustrate the complex interplay between local grievances, sectarian divisions, and foreign interventions. Understanding these dynamics requires integrating perspectives on power, ideology, regional interdependence, and hybrid governance, highlighting the multidimensional nature of modern Middle Eastern conflicts and the pivotal role of non-state armed actors in shaping regional security and humanitarian outcomes.

1. PROXY WARS AND NON-STATE ARMED ACTORS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The Arab Uprisings of 2011 marked a profound turning point in the Middle East, triggering widespread political, social, and territorial transformations. While initially peaceful demonstrations demanded political reforms and civil liberties, these uprisings quickly escalated into violent conflicts, highlighting the fragility of existing state structures (Lynch, 2016). The resulting instability, described by scholars as “political liquidity,” manifested in the proliferation of armed militias and non-state actors, who increasingly served as proxies for both regional and global powers (Byman, 2014). This shift fundamentally altered the Middle Eastern security landscape, where conventional state authority was challenged and, in many cases, diminished (Gause, 2014).

In the wake of the Arab Spring, reliance on non-state armed groups became central to conflict management. Iran, for instance, expanded its influence through militias such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in Iraq, and various groups in Syria and Yemen (Eisenstadt, 2017). These organizations allowed Iran to assert regional control while minimizing direct military involvement, consistent with hegemonic stability theory. Conversely, the United States also leveraged proxy groups to counterbalance Iranian influence, exemplifying a broader strategic rivalry that has dominated Middle Eastern geopolitics since

2010 (Phillips, 2016). Proxy wars, defined as conflicts in which external powers support third-party actors without direct engagement, provide multiple advantages for major powers, including reduced financial and human costs, plausible deniability, and the capacity to influence outcomes indirectly (Mumford, 2013). Historical precedents, from the Peloponnesian War to Cold War interventions, illustrate that the use of proxies is neither new nor unique to the Middle East. Modern proxy conflicts, however, are frequently asymmetric, involving training, funding, and equipment, while maintaining strategic ambiguity (Rauta, 2018).

The Syrian Civil War (2011–present) represents a paradigmatic example of the complexity and intensity of modern proxy conflicts. Anti-government protests rapidly evolved into a multifaceted civil war involving global powers. The Assad regime, backed by Iran and Russia, faced opposition supported by the United States, Turkey, and Gulf states. Local non-state actors, including Hezbollah, Kurdish militias, Jabhat al-Nusra, and ISIS, became central players, reflecting the interplay between local factions and external actors (Lister, 2015). Syria’s conflict fragmented the nation politically and geographically, exacerbated humanitarian crises, and enabled extremist organizations to flourish (Cockburn, 2016). Yemen presents similar dynamics, where the Saudi-led coalition supports the internationally recognized government against Iranian-backed Houthi rebels (Salisbury, 2017). Additional factions, including the Southern Transitional Council and extremist groups like AQAP and ISIS, further complicated the conflict (Juneau, 2020). Yemen’s prolonged war has produced famine, collapsed infrastructure, and severe humanitarian crises, illustrating the destructive consequences of proxy warfare (ICG, 2019).

Iraq’s post-2003 instability, compounded by the rise of ISIS, created conditions in which Iranian-backed Shiite militias, such as the PMF, became significant actors. While these groups contributed to countering ISIS, they also intensified sectarian divides, undermined state authority, and complicated stabilization efforts (Dodge, 2013). Similar patterns of proxy-driven instability are evident in Lebanon and Libya, where militias like Hezbollah and rival Libyan factions exert substantial political and military influence, often aligned with external powers pursuing regional agendas (Wehrey, 2018).

The human, economic, and social consequences of proxy wars are severe. Syria alone has displaced over

six million people, while Yemen faces famine, disease, and collapsing healthcare systems (UN OCHA, 2018). Economic infrastructure has been destroyed, including key oil sectors in Iraq and Syria, leaving millions impoverished (World Bank, 2019). Sectarianism and extremism have flourished under these conditions, with groups like ISIS exploiting divisions to recruit members and seize territory (Gerges, 2016). Non-state actors, defined as entities capable of influencing conflict independently of formal state authority, range from militias and insurgencies to transnational extremist networks (Mumford, 2013). Examples include Iran-backed Hezbollah Brigades, Harakat al-Nujaba, Asaib Ahl al-Haq, and the Badr Organization in Iraq, as well as Hezbollah in Lebanon, Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Gaza and the West Bank, and transnational jihadist networks such as ISIS and Al-Qaeda (Norton, 2018). Local Kurdish-led groups, such as the Syrian Democratic Forces, and opposition groups like the Syrian National Army and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, illustrate the multi-layered nature of these conflicts (Phillips, 2016).

The strategic contest between Iran and the United States has evolved since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, which reoriented Iran's foreign policy toward anti-Western objectives. Iran's support for Hezbollah, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and Shiite militias forms a core strategy to extend influence while countering U.S. interests (Eisenstadt, 2017). The United States, in response, has employed sanctions, military operations, alliances, and support for groups such as the SDF to limit Iranian expansion (Byman, 2014). Proxy wars are motivated by ideological, sectarian, geopolitical, economic, and political factors. Sectarian tensions, particularly Sunni-Shiite divisions, provide opportunities for external actors to intervene (Gause, 2014). Geopolitically, the Middle East's strategic importance and resource wealth incentivize indirect engagement, while arms sales and resource control create economic incentives (Phillips, 2016). Politically, proxy wars can strengthen domestic support, distract from internal crises, and enhance international standing, all against a backdrop of enduring historical grievances, such as the Saudi-Iranian rivalry (Wehrey, 2018).

From 2010 to 2024, non-state armed actors and proxy wars have profoundly reshaped Middle Eastern security. These groups challenge state authority, exacerbate sectarianism, and perpetuate instability, while major powers leverage them to achieve strategic objectives at lower costs (Cockburn, 2016). The U.S.-Iran rivalry demonstrates how proxy wars allow powers to project influence indirectly,

often fueling prolonged regional conflicts (Gerges, 2016). Methodologically, research in this area combines historical analysis, descriptive evaluation, and content review, with sources ranging from government documents to academic studies, media reports, and interviews (ICG, 2019). Ethical considerations guide data collection and analysis, ensuring rigor and compliance.

The study applies three theoretical frameworks. Realism emphasizes power struggles, security concerns, and material interests, framing U.S.-Iran proxy wars as contests for regional hegemony (Mearsheimer, 2001). Constructivism highlights identity, ideology, and culture, revealing how state behavior is shaped by sectarian, religious, and historical narratives (Wendt, 1999). The Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) stresses the interdependence of regional security threats, illustrating how proxy wars in Iraq and Syria generate cascading effects across neighboring states, impacting Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and beyond (Buzan & Waeber, 2003). By integrating these frameworks, the research provides a holistic understanding of the multi-dimensional nature of proxy conflicts, incorporating material, ideological, and regional factors.

The literature review underscores a significant gap in current scholarship. While studies by Eisenstadt (2017), Lister (2015), Phillips (2016), Salisbury (2017), and Wehrey (2018) provide extensive military, strategic, and security analyses of proxy wars, there is limited examination of socio-economic, cultural, and humanitarian impacts. Existing research also often emphasizes Iranian strategy, underrepresenting other regional actors or local consequences (Gerges, 2016). This study addresses these gaps by combining historical U.S.-Iran relations with the operational role of non-state armed actors and their broader regional implications.

Non-state armed actors such as the PMF in Iraq and the SDF in Syria function as instruments of state strategy, allowing both Iran and the United States to pursue objectives indirectly (Byman, 2014). While effective for military and political leverage, these groups contribute to political fragmentation, sectarian tensions, and protracted instability (Phillips, 2016). Countries such as Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya exemplify the heightened security risks arising from these dynamics (Wehrey, 2018). By focusing on these case studies, the research examines how international strategies interact with local realities, providing insights into the strategic, operational, and humanitarian dimensions of proxy warfare.

In conclusion, the post-Arab Spring Middle East illustrates the centrality of non-state armed actors and proxy wars in shaping contemporary conflicts. Between 2010 and 2024, U.S.-Iran rivalry leveraged these actors to project influence, manage risk, and pursue ideological goals (Eisenstadt, 2017). The integration of realism, constructivism, and RSCT offers a nuanced understanding of these dynamics, highlighting the interplay of power, identity, and regional interdependence (Buzan & Waeber, 2003). Understanding the roles and consequences of non-state actors is essential for anticipating future trends in regional stability, developing effective policies, and addressing the structural and immediate drivers of insecurity in the Middle East. Proxy wars are not merely military contests but complex phenomena that reshape political, social, economic, and humanitarian realities across the region, with lasting implications for local populations and global security (Cockburn, 2016).

3. HISTORICAL FRAMEWORK OF U.S. AND IRAN FOREIGN POLICY

The historical trajectory of U.S.-Iran relations illustrates the interplay between systemic pressures, domestic politics, ideology, and strategic adaptation. Understanding these dynamics requires examining structural realism, which emphasizes how shifts in the international distribution of power—whether unipolar, bipolar, or multipolar—shape state behavior (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2001). During the Cold War, the bipolar system compelled the United States to cultivate Iran as a strategic ally against the Soviet Union, aligning closely with the Shah. Iran's position was both geographically and politically critical, as it served as a buffer state while providing access to vital oil resources (Gasiorowski, 1991). U.S. support included military assistance, intelligence cooperation, and economic aid, aimed at bolstering the Shah's regime and countering communist influence. Iran leveraged these resources to modernize its economy and strengthen state institutions, though nationalist resentment simmered due to foreign involvement (Abrahamian, 2008).

The early 1950s highlighted the tensions inherent in U.S.-Iran relations when Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh nationalized Iranian oil, challenging British and Western economic interests (Kinzer, 2003). Although initially tolerated, Cold War anxieties led the United States to orchestrate the 1953 coup (Operation Ajax), reinstating the Shah and solidifying Iran's alignment with Western strategic goals (Roosevelt, 1979; Byrne, 2013). This intervention reinforced the intertwining of domestic

political dynamics and external strategic pressures. During the subsequent decades, U.S.-Iran relations reflected a cooperative alignment, with Iran serving as a regional counterbalance to the Soviet Union, participating in intelligence-sharing initiatives, and benefiting from military modernization programs under U.S. guidance (Bill, 1988). U.S. investment in Iran's infrastructure, industry, and education sought to solidify the Shah's power, though it simultaneously sowed domestic discontent that ultimately contributed to revolutionary unrest (Abrahamian, 2008).

The 1978–1979 Iranian Revolution marked a fundamental rupture, transforming Iran from a U.S. ally into an adversary. The establishment of the Islamic Republic under Ayatollah Khomeini redefined Iran's foreign policy, prioritizing ideological goals, such as the "Export of Revolution," and asserting regional influence through support for proxy groups like Hezbollah and Hamas (Takeyh, 2009; Saikal, 2019). The revolution triggered immediate tensions, exemplified by the 1979 hostage crisis, which cast a long shadow over bilateral relations (Sick, 1985). The subsequent decade of the 1980s saw Iran embroiled in the Iraq-Iran War, during which the United States sought to balance regional dynamics, providing indirect support to Iraq while simultaneously managing broader security concerns in the Gulf (Hiro, 1991). Covert operations, such as the Iran-Contra affair, further complicated relations, revealing the United States' use of clandestine measures to pursue strategic objectives, while Iran cultivated resilience through asymmetric strategies (Byrne, 2013).

In the 1990s, under Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, U.S.-Iran relations remained characterized by tension, driven by ideological opposition, economic sanctions, and Iran's perceived destabilizing activities, including support for militant groups (Ansari, 2006). The Gulf War (1990–1991) underscored regional strategic challenges, as the U.S. presence strengthened while removing Iraq as a conventional threat, allowing Iran to consolidate indirect influence (Katzman, 1993). This period highlighted Iran's emerging strategy of asymmetric engagement, leveraging proxies to project influence without engaging in direct confrontation, a precursor to its later regional policy (Eisenstadt, 2017).

From 2000 to 2010, bilateral relations were shaped by a complex mix of historical grievances, domestic politics, and strategic calculations. The 9/11 attacks and subsequent U.S. interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq offered potential openings for cooperation. Iran, under reformist President Mohammad

Khatami, engaged in selective collaboration with the West, providing intelligence support and participating indirectly in counterterrorism efforts (Parsi, 2007). However, hardline factions within Iran resisted rapprochement, while in the U.S., the post-9/11 security paradigm and Bush administration policies, including the “Axis of Evil” designation, emphasized containment, deterrence, and sanctions (Litwak, 2007). Between 2001 and 2005, tensions escalated as Iran pursued nuclear development and supported regional proxies, prompting U.S.-led sanctions and increasing military concerns, particularly regarding influence in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon (Alfoneh, 2012).

The Obama administration (2009–2017) introduced a more diplomatic approach, emphasizing negotiations over confrontation, culminating in the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). This agreement reflected systemic and domestic calculations: the U.S. sought to reduce regional military commitments and manage the growing strategic challenge posed by China, while Iran accepted temporary nuclear limitations in exchange for sanctions relief (Maloney, 2015). Iran’s foreign policy demonstrated strategic opportunism, capitalizing on global shifts to expand influence, maintain regional proxies, and secure its nuclear and conventional programs (Ehteshami & Zweiri, 2012). The JCPOA’s success highlighted the potential of diplomatic engagement, but the U.S. withdrawal under the Trump administration (2018) and reimposition of sanctions illustrated how shifts in systemic power, domestic politics, and policy priorities could dramatically reshape bilateral dynamics (Tabatabai, 2020).

Iran’s adaptive strategies in response to sanctions underscore its resilience and capacity for strategic innovation. Targeted sanctions by the United States, the European Union, and the United Nations aimed to constrain oil revenues, access to financial systems, and international trade (Katzman, 2020). Iran responded by employing circumvention strategies, including smuggling, alternative trade routes, partnerships with China, Russia, and Venezuela, barter agreements, and digital currencies (Vakil, 2021). These approaches reflect both strategic pragmatism and domestic political considerations, balancing hardline calls for self-sufficiency with diplomatic engagement options. The interplay between sanctions and adaptation illustrates a core feature of Iran’s foreign policy: flexibility within constraints, designed to preserve autonomy, expand influence, and maintain ideological objectives (Ramazani, 2009).

U.S. policy toward Iran is equally complex, shaped by interagency priorities, domestic politics, lobbying influence, and international pressures. Congress exerts authority over sanctions and military funding, with partisan divides reflecting contrasting positions on engagement and coercion (Clawson & Rubin, 1999). Executive agencies, including the State Department, Department of Defense, CIA, and Treasury, coordinate and implement policy, while interest groups such as AIPAC advocate for hardline approaches, and think tanks like the Brookings Institution and Carnegie Endowment promote diplomacy and sanctions relief (Byman et al., 2001). This multi-layered domestic environment underscores the contested nature of U.S. strategy, where ideological, institutional, and public opinion factors converge to shape policy outcomes (Takeyh, 2010).

Geopolitical and economic factors remain central to bilateral relations. Iran’s strategic location, control over the Strait of Hormuz, and vast energy resources provide leverage in regional and global politics (Clawson, 2004). Its alliances with Russia and China enhance multipolarity, challenging U.S. dominance (Leverett & Leverett, 2013). Proxy engagement in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen exemplifies Iran’s strategy to maintain influence without direct confrontation (Eisenstadt, 2017). Conversely, the U.S. leverages military presence, sanctions, and strategic partnerships with Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Gulf allies to contain Iran, promote regional stability, and protect energy routes (Gause, 2014). Economic diplomacy, particularly through oil and natural gas trade, further shapes strategic calculations, linking domestic wealth, sanctions resilience, and regional influence (Maloney, 2020).

Human rights, military presence, and historical grievances also define U.S.-Iran interactions. Persistent criticisms of Iran’s domestic record, coupled with U.S. regional military positioning, shape diplomatic leverage and reinforce strategic calculations (Amnesty International, 2021). Historical events, including the 1953 coup, support for the Shah, and Cold War interventions, continue to inform Iranian perceptions of U.S. intentions (Kinzer, 2003; Abrahamian, 2008). Proxy conflicts serve as tools for extending influence, managing risk, and asserting regional presence, minimizing the costs of direct warfare while maintaining strategic objectives (Ehteshami & Zweiri, 2012).

The cumulative historical framework demonstrates that U.S.-Iran relations are shaped by structural systemic pressures, domestic politics, ideological contestation, strategic innovation, and

geopolitical-economic considerations. From the Cold War to the post-Arab Spring era, Iran has leveraged regional instability, global shifts, and proxy networks to advance its interests, while the U.S. has combined diplomacy, coercion, and alliances to counter perceived threats (Takeyh, 2009; Maloney, 2020). Understanding this complex interplay requires recognizing the intertwined nature of historical grievances, systemic imperatives, domestic politics, and adaptive strategies, all of which continue to influence contemporary bilateral relations and regional security dynamics.

4. U.S.-IRAN RELATIONS, REGIONAL DYNAMICS, AND PROXY WARFARE (2010–2024)

The election of President Barack Obama in 2009 marked a shift in U.S. policy toward Iran, emphasizing diplomacy over confrontation (Byman, 2019). Early in his administration, Obama called for dialogue with Tehran, signaling a potential opening after decades of tension. However, internal unrest in Iran following disputed elections limited the impact of this approach, revealing the constraints imposed by domestic political dynamics on international diplomacy (Milani, 2010). Despite these challenges, Obama prioritized negotiation, culminating in the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). The agreement required Iran to limit its nuclear program in exchange for relief from international sanctions, enabling Tehran to restore economic ties, increase oil exports, and reintegrate into the global economy while offering the international community assurances of compliance (Katzman, 2015). Yet the deal faced domestic skepticism in both nations: hardline factions in Iran resisted concessions, while many U.S. policymakers and interest groups doubted its efficacy, highlighting the limits of diplomatic agreements in contexts shaped by historical mistrust and ideological antagonism (Parsi, 2017).

From 2015 to 2024, regional conflicts and strategic shifts further complicated U.S.-Iran relations. Iran's support for Bashar al-Assad in Syria, Shiite militias in Iraq, and the Houthi rebels in Yemen strengthened its regional footprint, often clashing with U.S. objectives (Phillips, 2016). Partnerships with Russia and China bolstered Iran's position, offering military, diplomatic, and economic leverage to counterbalance Western sanctions and containment efforts (Leverett & Mann Leverett, 2013). The Trump administration's withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018 and the re-imposition of sanctions marked a return to confrontational policies (Katzman, 2020). Military escalations, including the targeted killing of IRGC

Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani and subsequent Iranian missile strikes, underscored the volatility of the relationship, combining asymmetric warfare, strategic signaling, and the risk of rapid escalation (Byman, 2020; Juneau, 2021). These dynamics illustrate the intricate balance between deterrence, diplomacy, and regional power projection, shaped by both systemic pressures and domestic political calculations (Gause, 2014).

Economic sanctions have been central to U.S. strategy, targeting Iran's oil, banking, and industrial sectors (Ehteshami & Zweiri, 2020). These measures caused drastic reductions in oil exports, a collapse in state revenues, currency depreciation, inflation, unemployment, and a recessionary economy (Maloney, 2015). The Trump administration's "maximum pressure" campaign sought to compel Tehran to renegotiate its nuclear commitments, but in practice, it intensified regional tensions and failed to achieve political objectives (Katzman, 2020). Iran adapted by gradually escalating nuclear and military programs while cultivating strategic partnerships with non-Western powers, notably China and Russia, including a 25-year cooperation agreement that enhanced trade, infrastructure development, and diplomatic alignment (Fulton, 2021). This resilience demonstrates the limitations of coercive economic measures in compelling strategic concessions while reinforcing Iran's reliance on multipolar partnerships (Wehrey, 2023).

Regional tensions are amplified through proxy conflicts, which have become central to the U.S.-Iran rivalry. Iran extends its influence by supporting groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, Shiite militias in Iraq, Houthis in Yemen, and allied actors in Syria, forming a "Shia Crescent" across the Levant and Arabian Peninsula (Levitt, 2013). These proxies allow Tehran to project power indirectly, shaping political outcomes and challenging adversaries while avoiding direct confrontation. The U.S., in turn, supports regional actors opposed to Iranian influence, including Kurdish-led forces, Sunni militias, and Gulf-aligned partners, employing military deployments, airstrikes, and training programs (Byman, 2019). Proxy warfare thus functions as a strategic tool for both sides, generating a cycle of asymmetric attacks and countermeasures that perpetuate instability, exacerbate humanitarian crises, and deepen sectarian tensions without escalating into full-scale war (Phillips, 2016).

Iran's strategic expansion has roots in post-2003 regional dynamics. The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq removed Saddam Hussein, creating a political and security vacuum that Tehran exploited by

embedding allies within Iraq's Shia political and militia structures, including the Popular Mobilization Forces (Biddle & Friedman, 2020). In Syria, Iran's support for Assad through the IRGC and allied militias enabled the creation of a land corridor to Lebanon, facilitating arms transfers to Hezbollah and reinforcing Tehran's long-term strategic depth (Fulton, 2021). Hezbollah itself evolved from a resistance movement during Lebanon's civil war into a hybrid political-military organization, combining guerrilla warfare capabilities with conventional military strength, intelligence networks, and extensive social services for Lebanon's Shia population (Levitt, 2013). This dual structure provides Iran with a resilient proxy, capable of deterring Israel, projecting power regionally, and participating in political institutions to amplify Tehran's influence (Wehrey, 2023).

The emergence of the Iran-Russia-Syria tripartite alliance further challenges U.S. influence. Each member contributes complementary strengths: Iran provides proxy networks, Russia offers military intervention and diplomatic support, and Syria serves as a strategic geographic conduit (Gause, 2014). The alliance's coordination—particularly Russia's 2015 air intervention—enabled pro-Assad forces and Iranian-backed militias to regain lost territory, secure a Tehran-to-Mediterranean corridor, and consolidate regional leverage (Phillips, 2016). Diplomatic forums, such as the Astana and Sochi talks, allowed the coalition to sideline U.S.-led negotiations, while Russia's UN Security Council vetoes shielded Syria and Iran from punitive measures (Solingen, 2012). Ideologically, the alliance promotes authoritarian stability and multipolarity, countering Western liberal norms and emphasizing sovereignty over external intervention (Wehrey, 2023). This durable coalition reshapes regional proxy dynamics and reinforces Iran's long-term strategic posture (Byman, 2019).

China's partnership with Iran complements the Iran-Russia-Syria axis, enhancing Tehran's economic, military, and diplomatic resilience. China remains Iran's largest oil purchaser and investor,

supporting infrastructure projects under the 25-year cooperation agreement and integrating Iran into the Belt and Road Initiative (Ehteshami & Zweiri, 2020). Beijing also leverages diplomatic influence, particularly at the UN Security Council, to prevent Iran's isolation and sanctions enforcement. Military and technological cooperation, including intelligence sharing, dual-use technology transfers, and joint maritime exercises, strengthens Iran's asymmetric capabilities and bolsters proxy networks (Fulton, 2021). This relationship not only sustains Iran's regional influence but also reflects broader shifts toward multipolarity, enabling China to secure energy resources and strategic leverage (Wehrey, 2023).

In Iraq, following the 2011 U.S. troop withdrawal, Iran leveraged the security vacuum to expand influence through political and security channels.

5. CONCLUSION AND EVALUATION

In the conclusion section, the general results obtained within the framework of the topic addressed in the introduction of the study should be presented and evaluated. Direct repetition of the findings presented in the previous sections should be avoided. Instead, this section should focus on providing the necessary information within the context of cause-effect and research-outcome relationships. The post-Arab Spring Middle East illustrates the centrality of non-state armed actors and proxy wars in shaping contemporary conflicts. Between 2010 and 2024, U.S.-Iran rivalry leveraged these actors to project influence, manage risk, and pursue ideological goals. The integration of realism, constructivism, and RSCT offers a nuanced understanding of these dynamics, highlighting the interplay of power, identity, and regional interdependence. Proxy wars are not merely military contests but complex phenomena that reshape political, social, economic, and humanitarian realities across the region, with lasting implications for local populations and global security..

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