

IRAN'S REGIONAL PROXIES: RESHAPING THE MIDDLE EAST AND TESTING U.S. POLICY

by

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Since the 1979 Iranian revolution, regional geopolitics in the Middle East has been significantly influenced by Iran's actions and interventions. Iran has strategically developed "anti-U.S." alliances, often fostering relationships with non-state actors despite differing ideologies, such as seen with Hamas. This complex dynamic highlights Iran's multifaceted approach to regional influence that seeks to challenge the U.S. As the strikes in response to the killing of [U.S. soldiers](#) in Jordan continue, anti-U.S. sentiments in Yemen, Iraq, and Syria have intensified, consequently bolstering the popularity of groups like the Houthis and Hezbollah.

Iran's Regional Influence

The constraints on U.S. efforts to curb Iran's influence can be attributed in part to its failure to anticipate key regional political shifts. Amid heightened tensions and escalating security threats to U.S. forces in the Middle East, Iranian proxy groups have increased their regional influence in recent years – politically and militarily. Iran's deeply entrenched relationship with these proxy groups has helped Iran to target the U.S. indirectly with "plausible deniability". However, it is important to note that Iran does not always dictate every decision, as many of these groups operate independently. This was evident in the recent situation in Iraq, where the Kataib Hezbollah agreed to cease further attacks against the U.S., possibly after [Iranian intervention](#) which implies that the initial attacks might have been conducted independently, without explicit approval from Iran, as Iran refrains from targeting U.S. forces directly.

Even though the U.S. airstrikes have reflected air superiority and military power, the U.S. has failed in curbing or deterring interventions by the Iranian proxy groups, especially in countries like Iraq where the ruling government in Baghdad led by Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al Sudani has come to

power with the alliance of the pro-Iran militia groups. These militia groups have increased their popularity primarily by projecting themselves as the only credible force that can challenge the U.S. and Israel – similar to the [popularity](#) enjoyed by Hezbollah post the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war.

Iran's Patronage and Support

The survival of these proxy groups is dependent on Iran's patronage and support, making it unsurprising that these proxy militia groups align closely with Iran's interests. While the degree of influence Iran wields over its proxy militias may vary from one to another, it is evident over time that Iran consistently serves as the primary [source](#) of economic, military, and diplomatic assistance to these groups. Several [reports](#) on the nature of weapons used by the Houthis and Hezbollah have proved the military support extended by Iran. Moreover, these [reports](#) have revealed that the [Houthis](#) and Hezbollah have received military assistance and weapons from [Iran](#), a fact further corroborated by some officials of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as well.

Amid the Gaza war, Iran's support to the proxy groups has been put to a test in terms of both the extent to which Iran would be willing to intervene and the ramifications of such support on regional dynamics and Iran's broader geopolitical objectives. Several [reports](#) have revealed Iran's supply of small to medium-range missiles and artillery rockets to proxy groups like Hezbollah, which remains one of the most heavily armed non-state actors. Some recent [reports](#) suggest training on Iranian air defense systems in Syria, raising concerns about their deployment in Lebanon and Syria. The potential deployment of any advanced air-defense system like Khordad-15 could counter Israeli air operations; however, so far there has not been any confirmation of Khordad-15 being deployed by Syria. The disparity in capabilities, along with continuous Israeli airstrikes targeting Iranian military assets in Lebanon and Syria, has prompted Tehran to strengthen air defense in recent years. Iran's emphasis on air defense underscores a wider strategy aimed at countering Israeli airstrikes and bolstering the capabilities of its proxies.

There exists a convergence of agendas between Iran and its proxy groups, with the primary objective being the expulsion of U.S. forces from the region, which is often reiterated in their [statements](#). This goal is clearly articulated through the rhetoric and actions of groups like Hezbollah, Kataib Hezbollah, the Houthis, Hashd al-Shaabi, and others. These non-state actors, or Iranian-backed militias, strive to confront the U.S. while the U.S. aims to limit their involvement, making containment challenging. Even economic sanctions are proving challenging to rigorously enforce.

Focus on Local Influence and Solidarity

The Middle East's regional geopolitics remains unique due to its volatility and the interplay of identity politics entrenched within conflicts. Iranian proxy groups often maintain their popularity by leveraging religious, sectarian, and anti-West narratives and justifications. For instance, following the recent killing of a Kataib Hezbollah commander in a U.S. attack in Iraq, numerous supporters rallied in [solidarity](#) for their “martyr.” This enduring popularity is sustained through a shared sense of victimhood and religious appeal which remains an important fulcrum of people's loyalty and solidarity. Iranian influence in the region has largely relied on strengthening its historical and cultural connections through its religious soft power, which is maintained through prominent Shia seminaries and shrines in Iran. Iranian interventions have been enabled to an extent because of the religious and ideological ties that the Iranian regime has strategically used to spread its revolutionary ideology and sustain and expand its geopolitical influence through regional allies and proxies.

Iranian proxy groups, on their part, have adjusted their narratives to resonate with a broader audience, capitalizing on the prevailing regional issues in the Arab world. Aligning themselves with these issues has become a strategic tool to build and strengthen their narratives in a politically polarized environment that has become increasingly hostile towards the U.S., especially amid the Gaza war. While they purport to launch attacks on behalf of the “axis of resistance,” the groups' domestic agendas and objectives remain distinct and focused on local influence and power.

U.S. Limitations and Challenges

The U.S. faces several limitations in its response to attacks by Iranian proxies. Domestically, the Biden administration encounters [pressure](#) from Republicans to take tougher action against Iran, with criticism over delays in response and calls for immediate action. Also, regional geopolitical developments in recent years have reflected more assertive positions by regional powers in a clear exhibition of their intent to increase their strategic autonomy. This has consequently been a challenge to U.S. hegemony in the region. The anger towards the U.S. has been further intensified by grievances over its unwavering support to Israel amid the Gaza war. Hence, justifying large-scale military action remains challenging amidst criticism from regional countries and concerns over violating their sovereignty and international law, further complicating the situation for the U.S.

The deep-rooted relationships between Iran and its proxy groups, coupled with their ability to leverage regional conflicts, challenge regional security and stability, especially as Iran continues to assert its influence amid escalating regional tensions triggered by the ongoing war in Gaza. The U.S. has so far been unable to tackle the root causes of the popularity of non-state actors like Hezbollah, Hamas, the Houthis, Hashd al Shaabi, etc. Targeting these groups inadvertently strengthens their support and legitimacy within their communities, as seen in previous cases and demonstrated by the increased support for Hamas and pro-Iran militias in Iraq following recent escalations amid the war in Gaza. Furthermore, most importantly it is critical for the U.S. to reassess the nature and level of its support for Israel if the goal is to avert further escalation and restore trust and credibility.

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