



History:

Collection: 2026

Received: April 13, 2026

Status: Published

Identifiers:

ID: 4-26/DTN

Year: 2026

Volume: 15

First Page: 158

Last Page: 164

Correspondence: Zaighum

Javaid, 935 Ferguson Dr, Milton
ON L9T 6V7, Canada. +1 (647)
285-5959, zjkayani@gmail.com

Funding Statement: The authors declare that no specific funding was received for this study.

Ethics Approval Statement:

Ethical approval was not required for this study, as it did not involve human participants, animal subjects, or identifiable personal data.

Consent for Publication

Statement: The author has reviewed and approved the final manuscript and consents to its publication in accordance with journal policies.

Additional information is available at the end of the article.



Analytical Review Article

**PROXY WARFARE AND REGIONAL POWER
COMPETITION IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

Taha Nazir¹, Zaighum Javaid^{2,3}

1. Director Advanced Multiple Inc., Canada. Thomson Reuters - ID N-5730-2015 | orcid.org/0000-0002-5308-6798 | <https://tahanazir.com>
2. Chief Executive, Media South Asia Canada Inc., Canada.
3. Host, community radio programs WTOR 770 AM Toronto ON and CFRF FM 90.5 Saskatoon SK Canada.

Abstract

Proxy warfare has become a defining feature of conflict in the Middle East, where regional and global powers pursue strategic objectives indirectly through non-state actors. By synthesizing current literature, the study highlights how ideological rivalry, sectarian divisions, and strategic competition drive proxy engagements. The findings indicate that proxy warfare prolongs conflicts, destabilizes governance structures, and complicates international legal accountability. The review concludes that sustainable regional stability requires diplomatic engagement, conflict resolution mechanisms, and strengthened international norms.

Running title: proxy warfare Middle East, regional power competition, non-state actors conflict

Keywords: militia groups Middle East, Iran proxy network, Saudi Iran rivalry, hybrid warfare strategy

Data Source: Archives, Biographies, Databanks, Encyclopedias, Libraries, Metadata Registries, Reports, Repositories, arXiv, Crossref, OpenAI, Wikipedia, World Health Organization, Zenodo.

Conflict of Interest Statement: The author declares all potential conflicts of interest and affirms that any such interests have been appropriately disclosed in accordance with standard ethical guidelines.

AI Tools and Assistance Statement: Artificial intelligence tools were utilized to support content structuring, data analysis, and evidence synthesis. All outputs were critically reviewed and validated by the author, who assumes full responsibility for the accuracy, interpretation, and conclusions of the work.

Introduction

The Middle East remains one of the most geopolitically contested regions in the world. Instead of direct wars between states, conflicts are increasingly fought through proxy actors, including militias, armed groups, and political organizations. This approach allows regional and global powers to pursue strategic objectives while avoiding the high costs and risks of conventional warfare.



Concept of Proxy Warfare

Proxy warfare refers to a situation where external powers support local actors—military, financial, or political—to achieve strategic goals. These actors operate within conflict zones while advancing the interests of their sponsors.

Table 1: Key Features of Proxy Warfare

Feature	Description	Strategic Advantage
Indirect Engagement	States act through intermediaries	Reduced direct risk
Cost Efficiency	Lower financial and military burden	Sustainable conflict
Plausible Deniability	Limited accountability	Diplomatic flexibility
Local Knowledge	Proxies understand terrain and society	Operational effectiveness

This model enables states to maintain influence without full-scale military involvement.

Regional Power Competition

The Middle East's proxy conflicts are driven by competition among regional powers, including:

- Iran seeking strategic depth and regional influence
- Saudi Arabia countering Iranian expansion
- Israel focusing on security and deterrence
- External actors influencing balance of power

These rivalries transform local conflicts into regional power struggles, where proxy groups become key instruments of policy.

Role of Non-State Actors

Non-state actors are central to proxy warfare, functioning as both military forces and political entities.

Hezbollah

Hezbollah is one of the most prominent examples of a proxy actor. Based in Lebanon, it operates as both a political party and a powerful militia. It receives support from Iran and plays a critical role in regional conflicts, particularly in Lebanon and Syria. Hezbollah's capabilities include advanced missile systems, organized military structures, and strong ideological motivation.



Militias and Armed Groups

Various militia groups across the Middle East act as proxies in different conflict zones. These include:

- Shia militias in Iraq

- Armed factions in Syria
- Non-state groups in Yemen

Table 2: Types of Non-State Actors

Type	Characteristics	Role in Conflict
Ideological Militias	Religious or political motivation	Sustained resistance
Armed Factions	Loosely organized groups	Tactical operations
Hybrid Actors	Political + military roles	Governance and warfare
Insurgent Groups	Irregular warfare tactics	Destabilization

These actors often combine military operations with political influence, making them difficult to counter.

Strategic Functions of Proxy Actors

Proxy groups serve multiple strategic purposes:

- Extending influence beyond national borders
- Creating pressure on adversaries without direct conflict
- Maintaining continuous low-intensity warfare
- Shaping political outcomes in fragile states

Conceptual Figure — Proxy Warfare Model

State Sponsor → Support (Funding/Weapons/Training) → Proxy Actor → Conflict Zone → Strategic Influence

This model highlights how states indirectly shape conflict outcomes through intermediaries.

Impact on Regional Stability

Proxy warfare contributes significantly to instability in the Middle East. It prolongs conflicts, complicates peace processes, and increases humanitarian crises. The involvement of multiple actors creates overlapping interests, making resolution difficult.

Table 3: Impact of Proxy Warfare

Dimension	Impact
Security	Prolonged conflicts
Politics	Weak state institutions
Economy	Infrastructure damage
Society	Displacement and instability

These effects extend beyond the region, influencing global security and migration patterns.

Future Prospects

Future research should explore the role of emerging technologies, including cyber capabilities and AI, in proxy warfare. Additionally, the evolving nature of non-state actors and their integration into political systems requires further analysis. The impact of shifting global alliances on regional power dynamics is another important area for investigation.

Recommendations

Policy responses should focus on diplomatic conflict resolution and reducing external interference in regional conflicts. Strengthening international legal frameworks and accountability mechanisms is essential. Investment in reconstruction, governance, and socio-economic development can help mitigate the root causes of proxy warfare. Enhanced regional cooperation and dialogue are also critical for long-term stability.

Conclusion

Proxy warfare is a central feature of regional power competition in the Middle East. Non-state actors such as Hezbollah and various militias play critical roles in advancing the strategic interests of their sponsors. While this approach allows states to avoid direct confrontation, it contributes to prolonged conflict and regional instability. Addressing proxy warfare requires coordinated international efforts, stronger governance, and diplomatic engagement to reduce reliance on indirect conflict strategies.

Review Typology and Reporting

Review designs were classified into standard categories (scoping, umbrella, rapid, qualitative, and mixed-methods), with reporting aligned to established guidelines (PRISMA-ScR, PRIOR, PRISMA-RR, ENTREQ, and PRISMA/MMAT) to ensure methodological rigor and transparency.

Editorial Statement:

This is research-based manuscript, prepared and structured in a scientific manner. Modern AI-assisted tools used to access current and authentic info. The digital archives, bibliographic databanks, online libraries, research articles, academic repositories and encyclopedias employed.

Preprint Notice:

This manuscript is shared as a non-peer-reviewed preprint on platforms such as Zenodo, SSRN, and Research Square to support scholarly discussion. The content is research-based and developed using publicly available and verifiable sources. Readers are encouraged to interpret the material as preliminary and subject to revision.

Legal Disclaimer

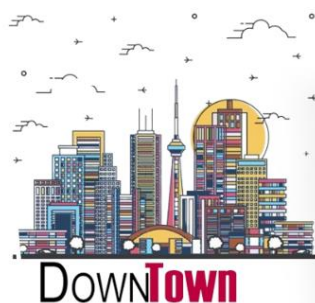
This manuscript is provided for academic and informational purposes only and does not constitute professional advice. While based on publicly available data and presented in good faith, no warranties are made regarding its accuracy or applicability. The author assumes no liability for any outcomes arising from its use, and readers should consult qualified professionals before making decisions.

Peer Review Statement: This manuscript has not undergone external peer review, as it represents a structured synthesis and analysis of existing evidence. The methodological approach adheres to established standards to ensure rigor, transparency, and scientific validity.



References:

- Atlantic Council. (2026, February 25). The state of great power competition in the Gulf. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/the-state-of-great-power-competition-in-the-gulf/>
- Eurasia Review. (2026, March 23). The fault lines of a new Middle East: The 2025-2026 US-Israel-Iran war and the reordering. <https://www.eurasiareview.com/23032026-the-fault-lines-of-a-new-middle-east-the-2025-2026-us-israel-iran-war-and-the-reordering->
- Geopolitical Monitor. (2024, May 12). The proxies and militias of Middle East geopolitics. <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/backgrounder-proxies-and-militias-of-middle-east-geopolitics/>
- McGill University Flux. (n.d.). The case of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry [PDF]. <https://fluxirr.mcgill.ca/article/view/6/15>
- NATO Veterans. (2026, March 11). Proxy wars without end: How regional rivalries reshape NATO's southern strategy. <https://nato-veterans.org/proxy-wars-without-end-how-regional-rivalries-reshape-natos-southern-strategy/>
- New America. (2026, January 24). Proxy warfare in the Greater Middle East and its periphery: An atlas. <https://www.newamerica.org/insights/twenty-first-century-proxy-warfare-confronting-strategic-innovation-multipolar-world/proxy-w>
- The New Arab. (2025, December 22). The key trends set to shape the Middle East in 2026. <https://www.newarab.com/analysis/key-trends-set-shape-middle-east-2026>
- U.S. Central Command. (2021, February 8). Great power competition adds to challenges in Middle East. <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/NEWS-ARTICLES/News-Article-View/Article/2498619/great-power-competition-adds-to-challenges-in-midd>
- Wikipedia. (2016, January 3). Iran–Saudi Arabia proxy war. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iran%E2%80%93Saudi_Arabia_proxy_war
- World Politics Review. (2024, September 23). Iran and Saudi Arabia battle for supremacy in the Middle East. <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/israel-iran-saudi-arabia-battle-for-supremacy-in-the-middle-east/>
- International Institute for Strategic Studies. (2025). Proxy conflicts in Yemen and Syria: Iran-Saudi competition. <https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-dossiers>
- Carnegie Endowment. (2026). Regional rivalries post-2026 Iran war. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2026/regional-power-dynamics>
- Chatham House. (2026). Proxy warfare escalation in the Gulf. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2026/proxy-warfare-middle-east>



© 2025 DownTown News. This publication is released under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) license. You are permitted to: Share: Copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format. Adapt: Remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, including commercial use. These freedoms cannot be revoked if the licensing terms are followed.
License Terms: Attribution: You must provide appropriate credit to *DownTown News*, include a link to the CC BY 4.0 license, and indicate if any changes were made. Attribution must be given in a reasonable manner that does not imply endorsement by DownTown News. No Additional Restrictions: You may not apply legal terms or technological measures that restrict others from exercising the permissions granted by this license.

For full license details, please refer to the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0).