

**Diane M. Zorri, Houman A. Sadri  
and David C. Ellis:**

## **IRANIAN PROXY GROUPS IN IRAQ, SYRIA, AND YEMEN: A PRINCIPAL-AGENT COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS.**

MacDill: Joints Special Operations  
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The contemporary dynamics within proxy warfare, their duration, severity, and consequences represent one of the significant research puzzles in the conflict research literature. Research on the degree of active conflict, vulnerabilities, threat assessment, and security dilemmas in proxy-host relations has witnessed a tremendous increase in interest in academic and policy-making circles. Undoubtedly, proxy warfare is now a core component of the present and future security architecture.

This book by Diane M. Zorri, Houman A. Sadri, and David C. Ellis represents an outstanding piece of research by offering novel insights and in-depth analysis of Iranian proxy groups and organizations operating in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen through the prism of the principal-agent theoretical perspective. The study aims to crystallize and bring a more balanced understanding of the heterogeneous nature of proxy warfare. The added value of the research is that the book fills the existing academic gap on 'how states use proxy groups to implement their foreign policy objectives and why proxies can sustain their influence in the host country' (p. 6). Furthermore, it illuminates significant features of the actual development, employment, and sustainment of Iranian proxy groups.

Few states in the modern era have employed so many proxy forces as an essential device of their defence strategy as the Islamic Republic of Iran. The book is structured with an introduction, four significant chapters, and conclusions. The introductory chapter presents the theoretical and analytical foundation of the research, along with the research questions, methods, and the neorealistic paradigm used to explain the phenomenon. Here the authors explore the values of proxies and the 'revisionist' approach to Iranian foreign policy objectives. The authors highlight that to understand Iran's relations with its proxies requires more than only a religious lens since the problem is multilayered and dynamic. As the authors rightly state, provoking domestic anarchy in each selected case, not a common religious identity, allowed Iran to increase its influence. The book develops a 'Divide-Empower-Control' model to show how Iran employs its proxy strategies. The analysis in the following chapters is built on a rich picture and empirically grounded evidence of the dynamics of the proxy groups' strategies in three case studies.

For a more profound understanding of Iran's proxy strategies, chapter 1 describes the internal and external dimensions of Iran's strategic environment. It clarifies the value of proxy groups in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. In this respect, the chapter depicts Iran's doctrine of 'forward deterrence' and various unconventional tools used by Iranian authorities. The role of Shiite Islam is also addressed subtly. It proposes a forward-looking diagnosis by arguing that 'under conflict conditions with non-Shi'a populations, the Shi's identity serves as a unifying principle, but once conflict abates, the differences become stark and could exacerbate the Principal-Agent Dilemma' (p. 26).

The second chapter explores a plethora of Iranian proxy activities in Iraq. The chapter demonstrates a deep understanding of the po-

litical landscape in Iraq and puts the Iranian proxy opportunities and techniques into the ethnoreligious context. The authors explain the success of the Iranian 'Divide-Empower-Control' strategy through cultural affinities, economic ties, and support of Iraqi political parties. Despite Iran's initial success, the authors argue that the biggest challenge and obstacle to further expansion of Iranian influence in Iraq has become an alternative Shiite leadership.

The third chapter touches on how Iranian proxies generated support in Syria. The Iranian strategy successfully established reliable ties with the Syrian population by employing Lebanese Hezbollah and loyal Shiite fighters from Afghanistan and Pakistan to overcome the consequences of Assad's authoritative control. On the other hand, the biggest challenge to Iran's success in Syria remains in the non-indigenous proxy forces. The authors underline that Iran's use of foreign Shia as proxies to achieve significant geostrategic initiatives and 'Shia Jihadism' in the region could be replicated in other places to maximize its influence.

The final empirical chapter focuses on Yemen as a specific case study. The chapter reviews historical, religious, and geopolitical factors to explain the complex security situation in the country. The authors identify five crucial challenges that differentiate Iran's involvement in Yemen from the Iraq and Syria cases. This includes (1) the belief among the Zaydi that identity issues have been under attack by the secular state and Wahhabi,

(2) maintenance of the neo-patrimonial regime, (3) Zaydi Houthi Movement calls for independence from Yemen, (4) grievances of the youth in Yemen, and (5) The Saudi Arabian threat perception of Yemen. Due to the strategic importance of Yemen, Iran will likely preserve its relations with the Houthi Movement and exploit the security dilemma.

*Iranian Proxy Groups in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen: A Principal-Agent Comparative Analysis* is a timely work. It expounds on Iran's proxy strategies and tactics, the internal and external factors of security dilemma issues, the activities of military actors, and the many political parties in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. The comparative case study approach is very well-tailored and reveals an interesting pattern of analysis of Iranian proxy activities. Impressively theorized explanations from the neorealist perspective are overtly linked with policy recommendations for policymakers. The conclusions are deeply embedded, rigorously formulated, and have significant political and societal relevance.

Noticeably, the book's findings represent a scheme to understand the strength and vulnerabilities of Iranian proxy strategies and their policy consequences for US Special Operations Forces. The book is essential reading for academics interested in Iran's proxy war strategies and for policymakers and diplomats in the region and beyond.

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