The Paradox of Existence: Analyzing Israel's role in Iran's Regional Militia Expansion

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Abstract

This study explores a complex geopolitical paradox: how Israel's existence has inadvertently facilitated Iran's expansion of influence across the Middle East through the establishment and support of various militias. The central research question asks: How has Israel's presence enabled Iran to extend its power and sustain a network of militias in neighboring countries?

Employing a comprehensive case study approach, the research examines Iran's growing influence through its affiliated militias, illustrating how Israel's existence serves as a pretext for this expansion. The study delves into Iran's support networks, the geopolitical dynamics of the Middle East, and the historical context of Iran-Israel relations.

The findings reveal a paradoxical reality: Israel's existence is pivotal to Iran's regional strategy, providing Tehran with a justification for its expansive militia network under the guise of countering Israeli influence. The study argues that the Middle East, absent Israel, would fundamentally reshape Iran's narrative and strategic approach, potentially diminishing its rationale for widespread militia support. Iran's reliance on Israel's presence to enhance its own power underscores the intricate nature of Middle Eastern geopolitics, where the existence of one nation-state can be integral to the expansionist policies of another, reshaping regional power dynamics.

Key Words: *Middle East, Iran, Israel, Militias, Regional influence, Security dynamics, Proxy warfare.*

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Introduction

Introduction: The Middle East has long been shaped by complex geopolitical dynamics, with interactions between Israel and Iran serving as central drivers of both regional stability and conflict. Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979, Iran has pursued a strategy of expanding its regional influence, often positioning itself in direct opposition to Israel. This adversarial relationship has been characterized by Iran's support for various non-state actors and militias across the region, including Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, and various groups in Iraq and Syria (Byman, 2005; Hokayem, 2013). As Christopher Phillips (2016) notes, the Syrian Civil War has further served as a battleground where Iran has solidified its influence through these proxy forces, heightening the stakes of the Iran-Israel rivalry. Israel, one of the most significant military powers in the region, has consistently expressed concerns over Iran's expanding influence and nuclear ambitions. This geopolitical chess game presents a paradox: while Israel aims to counter Iran's influence, its very existence provides Iran with the justification to support and expand its network of militias under the guise of countering Israeli aggression (Mearsheimer & Walt, 2007; Nasr, 2006). Publicly, Iran asserts that Israel should not exist, aligning its rhetoric with actions aimed at undermining Israeli security. However, the paradox lies in the fact that Israel's existence inadvertently serves Iran's strategic interests. As Jones et al. (2020) highlight, Iran's expanding military capabilities, including its ballistic missile programs and proxy networks, are often framed as necessary to defend against Israeli threats. The presence of Israel allows Iran to justify its extensive militia network as essential for countering Israeli influence, thereby bolstering its regional power and control. Iran's continued expansion of influence depends on the perpetuation of Israel's presence, as the narrative of resistance against Israel provides Tehran with a powerful and unifying cause. Without Israel, Iran would lose this critical pretext for supporting its proxy militias across the Middle East, significantly weakening its ability to project power under the banner of defending Islam and the Muslim world (Guzansky & Yadlin, 2020). As Juneau (2016) notes, Iran's involvement in Yemen and its support for the Houthis serves as a microcosm of this larger strategy, whereby Iran leverages local conflicts to extend its reach under the guise of opposing Israel and its allies. This study delves into this complex geopolitical paradox, exploring how Israel's presence has enabled Iran to extend its power and maintain a network of militias in surrounding nations. The research question guiding this study is: How

has Israel's presence enabled Iran to extend its power and sustain a network of militias across the region? Using a comprehensive case study approach, this research examines the growth of Iran's power through its affiliated militias, demonstrating how Israel's existence serves as a pretext for this expansion. The methodology includes an in-depth analysis of Iran's support networks, the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East, and the historical context of Iran-Israel relations.

Historical Context and Geopolitical Dynamics

The relationship between Israel and Iran has been characterized by deep adversarial dynamics since the Iranian Revolution in 1979, which marked the establishment of the Islamic Republic. This period signaled the beginning of Iran's strategy to position itself as a counterbalance to Israel in the region. Iran's support for various militias and non-state actors, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, and numerous groups in Iraq and Syria, has been a cornerstone of its foreign policy, aimed at undermining Israeli influence and expanding its regional footprint (Byman, 2005; Hokayem, 2013). As Phillips (2016) argues, the Syrian conflict has become one of the most prominent arenas for Iran to entrench itself, using local militias to advance its geopolitical interests and challenge Israeli and Western influence.

This strategy has allowed Iran to project its power and influence across the Middle East, utilizing proxy groups as tools to destabilize rival regimes and counter Israeli and Western interests. The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), especially through its Quds Force, has been instrumental in training, funding, and arming these militias, which serve as a critical component of Iran's foreign policy strategy. The deployment of these proxies enables Iran to engage in asymmetric warfare, challenging Israeli security without direct confrontation (Jones et al., 2020).

Iran's Militia Network and Regional Strategy

Iran's development of a militia network is deeply embedded in both its ideological mission and strategic objectives. The IRGC and its Quds Force have been pivotal in establishing and supporting these groups, providing training, funding, and weaponry. Hezbollah, perhaps the most prominent example, was formed in the early 1980s with Iranian support and has since grown into a powerful military and political force

in Lebanon. It directly challenges Israeli operations in the region and exemplifies Iran's ability to project power through non-state actors (Norton, 2007; Ranstorp, 1997). Jones et al. (2019) further highlight Hezbollah's role in complicating Israel's security strategy, serving as a potent example of Iran's long-term strategic depth.

Similarly, the Houthis in Yemen and various Shiite militias in Iraq and Syria also reflect Iran's broader strategy of leveraging local grievances to establish lasting influence. As Juneau (2016) notes, Iran's relatively modest investment in the Houthis has yielded significant strategic returns, further destabilizing the region and challenging Saudi and Israeli interests. These militias enable Iran to wage asymmetric warfare against adversaries like Israel and Saudi Arabia while maintaining plausible deniability (Alimi, Demetriou & Bosi, 2015). This deniability is crucial to Iran's strategy, allowing it to exert influence without the immediate repercussions of direct military involvement.

Iran's success in embedding itself in conflicts like those in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen reflects its broader geopolitical ambitions, as well as its ability to adapt to changing regional dynamics. Guzansky & Yadlin (2020) emphasize that the evolving security architecture of the Middle East, especially post-Abraham Accords, poses new challenges to Iran's influence. However, Iran's well-established militia networks continue to provide Tehran with crucial leverage in ongoing regional conflicts.

The Paradox of Israel's Existence

While Iran publicly calls for Israel's destruction, its strategic use of Israel's presence to justify its actions reveals a complex paradox. The existence of Israel provides Iran with a pretext to expand its influence under the guise of defending the Muslim world against Israeli aggression. This dynamic has allowed Iran to consolidate its regional power, positioning itself as the defender of Palestinian rights and broader Islamic interests. In doing so, Iran garners support from various Islamist and nationalist groups across the Middle East, reinforcing its legitimacy among both state and non-state actors (Mearsheimer & Walt, 2007; Nasr, 2006).

President Joe Biden once remarked, "If there were not an Israel, the United States of America would have to invent an Israel to protect her interests in the region" (Biden, 1986). This study contends that Iran's strategic behavior mirrors Biden's observation. Israel's existence provides

Iran with a convenient and powerful pretext to extend its influence across the Middle East. As Jones et al. (2020) point out, Iran's militia networks and expanding military capabilities are framed as necessary responses to Israeli threats, enabling Iran to justify its proxy presence in multiple regional conflicts.

Without Israel, Iran would lose this crucial justification for its expansive proxy networks, which serve as a key mechanism for projecting power and destabilizing its adversaries. Guzansky & Yadlin (2020) emphasize that Iran's narrative of resistance is central to its ability to influence regional politics and mobilize local militias. Therefore, for Iran, if there were no Israel, the Islamic Republic would likely need to "invent" one to maintain its strategic posture in the region. Israel's existence not only provides a pretext for Iranian expansion but also serves as a unifying cause for Tehran's regional alliances, shaping the balance of power in the Middle East.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs the theoretical framework of Realism, with a particular focus on the balance of power and the security dilemma, to analyze the paradoxical relationship between Israel and Iran. In an anarchic international system, states like Iran and Israel act primarily to maximize their security and influence. Israel's presence as a powerful adversary compels Iran to develop a network of proxy militias to counterbalance this threat and bolster its regional power. As Jones et al. (2020) emphasize, Iran's expanding military capabilities, including its proxy networks, are critical tools in its strategy to challenge Israel and secure regional dominance.

The case studies of Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, and Shiite militias in Iraq and Syria demonstrate how Israel's military presence triggers Iran's responses within the security dilemma framework. Iran's support for these groups reflects its need to counter Israeli military superiority and project influence across the region. Guzansky & Yadlin (2020) argue that Iran's strategic use of militias is deeply intertwined with its broader goal of counterbalancing Israeli influence, particularly in light of shifting regional alliances such as the Abraham Accords.

This study explores how Iran's strategic use of militias serves as a direct reaction to the perceived Israeli threat, perpetuating regional instability (Mearsheimer, 2001; Waltz, 1979). By embedding itself within

local conflicts and supporting non-state actors, Iran positions itself as a key player in the Middle East's power dynamics, while reinforcing the security dilemma: steps taken by Israel to secure itself prompt countermeasures from Iran, escalating the cycle of conflict.

This dynamic creates a paradox in Iran's geopolitical strategy: although Iran publicly calls for Israel's destruction, Israel's existence provides Tehran with a powerful justification for its regional militia network. Iran's use of proxy militias is therefore a calculated response to Israel's actions, reinforcing the security dilemma. Jervis (1978) explains 7that in such dilemmas, defensive actions by one state inevitably lead to reactions that exacerbate insecurity on both sides. This framework helps explain why Israel's existence, while ostensibly a threat to Iran, also serves as a critical component of Tehran's strategy to legitimize its regional interventions and militia support (Waltz, 1979; Jervis, 1978).

Developing the Argument

The geopolitical landscape of the Middle East is profoundly shaped by the interactions between Israel and Iran. While the two are ostensibly adversaries, Israel's existence paradoxically serves as a crucial element in Iran's strategy for regional influence. This paradox is central to the study: despite Iran's public denunciations of Israel, Israel's presence provides Tehran with the justification it needs to expand its network of militias across the Middle East. One could argue that without Israel, Iran might not have been able to extend its power and influence as deeply throughout the region. This dynamic creates a complex interplay in which the existence of one nation-state directly influences the expansionist policies of another, ultimately reshaping regional power structures.

The Paradox of Israel's Existence

Iran's geopolitical strategy involves positioning itself as the leader of the resistance against Israeli and Western influence in the region. This stance is not only ideological but also practical, enabling Iran to justify its extensive network of militias. These militias serve as Iran's proxies, allowing it to project power and influence without direct confrontation with Israel (Byman, 2005; Hokayem, 2013). As Jones et al. (2020) highlight, Iran's expanding military capabilities, including missile systems and proxy militias, are framed as necessary measures to counter Israeli threats.

Publicly, Iranian leaders frequently call for the elimination of Israel, framing their rhetoric around the defense of Palestinian rights and the broader Muslim world. This narrative garner significant support from various groups that oppose Israeli policies (Mearsheimer & Walt, 2007). However, the presence of Israel paradoxically benefits Iran. Israel provides Tehran with a compelling pretext to support and maintain its network of militias, ostensibly to counter Israeli influence and defend the Muslim world (Nasr, 2006). Guzansky & Yadlin (2020) emphasize that Iran's strategic narrative of resistance against Israel plays a pivotal role in consolidating its alliances with non-state actors across the region.

Moreover, Israel's existence allows Iran to rally support from Shiite communities and other groups across the Middle East by portraying itself as the defender of Islamic values against Zionist and Western encroachment. This ideological stance enhances Iran's soft power and helps it cultivate strong alliances with non-state actors who share similar anti-Israeli sentiments (Ranstorp, 1997; Norton, 2007). Without the constant presence of Israel as a perceived threat, Iran's ability to project power through these alliances would be significantly diminished.

Realism and the Security Dilemma

This study applies the theoretical lens of Realism to explore the security dilemma that defines Israel-Iran relations. Realism posits that states act primarily to maximize their power and ensure their security in an anarchic international system (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2001). Israel, as a significant military power, poses a security threat to Iran, prompting Tehran to take countermeasures. These countermeasures include supporting militias in Lebanon, Yemen, Iraq, and Syria as a way to balance against Israeli power and influence (Alimi, Demetriou & Bosi, 2015; Juneau, 2016).

The security dilemma arises as each action taken by Israel to ensure its security–whether through military buildup or alliances–prompts a reaction from Iran. This, in turn, leads to further Israeli countermeasures. The result is a cycle of escalation that perpetuates regional instability and compels both nations to continually adapt their strategies (Jervis, 1978). For example, Israel's military operations in Lebanon and Gaza are often cited by Iran as justification for its continued support of Hezbollah and other militant groups (Byman, 2005). Phillips (2016) adds that the Syrian Civil War has become a key battleground where this security dilemma plays out, with both Israel and Iran increasing their involvement to counter each other's influence. Each step to fortify one's security leads to a perceived threat for the other, contributing to a never-ending cycle of militarization and proxy warfare.

Strategic Use of Militia Networks

Iran's use of militias is a strategic response to the challenges posed by direct confrontation with Israel. These militias provide Iran with a flexible, deniable means to exert influence and counterbalance Israeli actions (Ranstorp, 1997). Hezbollah's role in Lebanon, for instance, exemplifies how Iran leverages local grievances and conflicts to establish strong proxies capable of challenging Israeli interests without direct Iranian involvement (Norton, 2007).

Hezbollah's engagement in asymmetrical warfare against Israel, particularly in the 2006 conflict when it launched thousands of rockets into northern Israel, demonstrates the effectiveness of this strategy. The group's deep integration into Lebanese society and politics further complicates Israel's ability to counter its influence without risking significant civilian casualties and broader regional destabilization (Ranstorp, 1997; Norton, 2007). Hezbollah's operational success underscores Iran's strategic use of proxy networks to mitigate the risks of direct military engagement with Israel while still challenging Israeli military superiority. Jones et al. (2020) further argue that these proxy networks allow Iran to pursue its regional goals without directly engaging Israel in conventional warfare, thus minimizing risks while maximizing influence.

Expansion of Influence through Proxy Warfare

Iran's ability to use proxy warfare to its advantage hinges on its capacity to exploit local dynamics and grievances. In Syria, for example, Iran has supported the Assad regime by deploying militias such as the Fatemiyoun Division (Afghan Shiite fighters) and the Zainabiyoun Brigade (Pakistani Shiite fighters). These groups have been instrumental in maintaining Assad's control and countering both Israeli and Western efforts to weaken the regime (Phillips, 2016). By positioning its militias along Israel's northern border, Iran not only extends its influence in Syria but also poses a strategic deterrent to Israeli military actions in the region.

In Yemen, Iran's support for the Houthi rebels allows it to challenge Saudi Arabia, a key regional ally of Israel. Armed with Iranian-supplied weapons and training, the Houthis have been able to sustain a prolonged conflict, thereby enabling Iran to exert influence in a strategically important area. Yemen's location along vital shipping routes and its proximity to Saudi Arabia make it a critical theater in Iran's broader strategy of undermining Israel's regional allies (Juneau, 2016). By

supporting the Houthis, Iran destabilizes a key partner of both Israel and the United States, thereby extending its reach into yet another critical conflict zone in the Middle East. Guzansky & Yadlin (2020) argue that Iran's success in Yemen is a testament to its ability to leverage proxy forces to challenge both Israeli and Western interests without direct confrontation.

The Proliferation of Iranian-Backed Militias and Regional Implications

The proliferation of Iranian-backed militias has profound implications for regional stability. These groups not only pose significant challenges to Israeli security but also contribute to broader instability by perpetuating ongoing conflicts and undermining state sovereignty. The presence of such militias complicates diplomatic efforts and peace negotiations, as they often operate outside formal state control and pursue agendas closely aligned with Iranian interests (Alimi, Demetriou & Bosi, 2015; Byman, 2005). Their actions frequently exacerbate local tensions, making the resolution of conflicts more difficult. Phillips (2016) emphasizes that the involvement of these militias in protracted conflicts, like Syria, reinforces regional instability and prolongs the chaos in fragile states.

Furthermore, the entrenchment of these militias creates long-term dependencies on Iranian support, making it difficult for host countries to regain control and pursue independent foreign policies. This dependency perpetuates a cycle of instability, with Israel and its regional allies continually forced to respond to the threats posed by these groups (Ranstorp, 1997). The sustained presence of these militias acts as a deterrent to Israeli military actions, as any attack on them risks provoking a wider conflict involving Iran directly. Jones et al. (2020) highlight how Iran's proxy networks complicate Israeli security strategies by increasing the likelihood of regional escalation, given the asymmetric nature of these threats.

Case Study Approach

To substantiate these arguments, this study employs a comprehensive case study approach, focusing on key examples of Iranian militia networks. The case studies include Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, and Shiite militias in Iraq and Syria. Each case study examines

the historical development, organizational structure, funding mechanisms, and operational strategies of these groups. Through detailed analysis, this research seeks to demonstrate how Israel's existence has provided the justification and impetus for Iran's support of militias, thereby reinforcing Tehran's broader regional strategy (Byman, 2005; Hokayem, 2013; Juneau, 2016). Guzansky & Yadlin (2020) also emphasize that Iran's strategy to embed militias in local conflicts enables it to exercise control and influence across key geopolitical fault lines, making it difficult for Israel and its allies to develop coherent counterstrategies.

The Paradox of Israel's Existence in Iran's Regional Strategy

This paradox is central to Iran's geopolitical strategy: Israel's existence enables Tehran to justify its expansive network of militias under the guise of defending the Muslim world against Zionism and Western encroachment. By exploring this dynamic through a Realist lens and employing detailed case studies, this research aims to provide a nuanced understanding of Middle Eastern geopolitics. The findings contribute to the broader discourse on regional power dynamics, offering insights into how perceived threats, such as Israel's presence, shape state behavior and influence geopolitical strategies. As Jones et al. (2020) discuss, Iran's ability to frame its military support as defensive against Israeli aggression allows it to consolidate regional power under the pretext of resistance.

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses guide the research:

- **H1a**: The existence of Israel is used by Iran as a rhetorical and strategic justification for the establishment and expansion of Shiite militias in Lebanon, Yemen, Iraq, and Syria.

- **H1b**: Iranian-backed militias, justified by the presence of Israel, significantly enhance Iran's regional influence by embedding themselves in local conflicts and political systems.

- **H1c**: The activities of these Iranian-backed militias contribute to regional instability and complicate the security strategies of Israel and its allies.

These hypotheses will be examined through a detailed analysis of each case. The following sections provide evidence supporting the

hypotheses and illustrate how these dynamics contribute to regional instability while complicating Israeli security strategies. Guzansky & Yadlin (2020) argue that Iran's use of militias plays a pivotal role in shaping the regional security environment by continuously challenging Israeli and Western dominance through asymmetric tactics.

Case Study Methodology

The methodology for this research is designed to comprehensively analyze how Israel's existence has facilitated Iran's expansion of influence through its network of militias. This study employs a qualitative case study approach, allowing for in-depth exploration of the complex geopolitical dynamics and the strategic use of proxy warfare. By focusing on specific cases, the research seeks to provide detailed insights into the mechanisms and implications of Iran's regional strategies.

The selection of case studies is critical to understanding broader patterns of Iran's regional influence. This research focuses on the following key case studies:

1. **Hezbollah in Lebanon**
2. **The Houthis in Yemen**
3. **Shiite militias in Iraq**
4. **Shiite militias in Syria**

These cases were selected based on their significance within Iran's regional strategy, their direct and indirect interactions with Israeli interests, and the availability of comprehensive data and scholarly analysis. Jones et al. (2019) further emphasize that Iran's success in leveraging these militias reflects its ability to operate within the security dilemmas facing Israel, creating a persistent cycle of reaction and counter-reaction.

Analytical Framework

The analytical framework for this study is grounded in Realist principles, particularly the concepts of the balance of power and the security dilemma (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2001). These concepts help explain how states like Iran and Israel perceive and respond to each other's actions within the constraints of an anarchic international system.

1. Balance of Power: This principle is used to analyze how Iran leverages its network of militias to counterbalance Israel's superior military capabilities, enabling it to project influence despite its conventional military limitations. Jones et al. (2020) emphasize that Iran's reliance on proxy forces, such as Hezbollah and other militias, allows it to offset Israel's military dominance and maintain a strategic foothold in critical areas across the Middle East. By distributing its military influence through non-state actors, Iran can challenge Israel indirectly while avoiding the risks of direct confrontation.

2. Security Dilemma: The concept of the security dilemma will be explored to understand how actions taken by Israel to secure itself—such as military operations or alliances—trigger countermeasures by Iran, perpetuating a cycle of instability and conflict. Iran's support for militias in response to perceived Israeli threats exemplifies how this dynamic escalates tensions across the region. Phillips (2016) notes that the Syrian conflict has become a key theater for the Iran-Israel security dilemma, with both countries increasing their involvement to counter each other's influence, further destabilizing the region. This dilemma is evident in the tit-for-tat responses, where Israel's military strikes provoke further militia activity, deepening the regional instability.

Hezbollah of Lebanon

Historical Context

Hezbollah, or the "Party of God," was formed in the early 1980s during the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) as a direct response to Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon and the subsequent occupation of southern Lebanon. This invasion, aimed at rooting out the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), galvanized Shiite militias, including Hezbollah, into organized opposition against Israeli forces. Hezbollah's ideological foundation was heavily influenced by the Iranian Revolution of 1979, as its leaders embraced Ayatollah Khomeini's vision of establishing an Islamic state and resisting Israeli occupation (Norton, 2007).

The Israeli invasion provided Iran with a strategic opportunity. Under the guidance of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Iran sought to counter Israel's influence in Lebanon by supporting Hezbollah militarily and financially. Initially, Hezbollah was a coalition

of various Shiite factions, but it quickly coalesced into a cohesive political and military organization, becoming Iran's most significant proxy in the Levant (Ranstorp, 1997; Byman, 2005). Phillips (2016) emphasizes how Hezbollah has transformed from a grassroots militia into a key instrument of Iranian foreign policy, solidifying Iran's presence in Lebanon and the broader region.

Iran's Role and Hezbollah's Strategic Development

From its inception, Hezbollah's development was closely tied to Iran's strategic interests in the region. Iran, operating within the Realist framework, sought to balance against Israeli power by supporting Hezbollah as a counterweight. Realism posits that states seek to maximize their power in an anarchic international system where no higher authority exists to ensure their security (Waltz, 1979). Iran viewed Israel's military superiority as a threat and responded by bolstering Hezbollah's capabilities, allowing Tehran to project power in Lebanon and beyond, while avoiding direct confrontation with Israel (Norton, 2007; Ranstorp, 1997).

Hezbollah's evolution into one of the most formidable non-state military actors in the region was significantly facilitated by Iran's material and financial support. The IRGC, particularly its Quds Force, played a pivotal role in providing Hezbollah with training, arms, and strategic guidance. Iran's financial backing, estimated at hundreds of millions of dollars annually, enabled Hezbollah not only to engage in military operations but also to establish a robust social service network, which earned it widespread support among Lebanon's marginalized Shiite population (Byman, 2005). Hezbollah's ability to intertwine itself with Lebanese society–offering education, healthcare, and other services–solidified its legitimacy and deepened its influence in the region (Ranstorp, 1997).

This combination of military and social infrastructure demonstrates how Hezbollah fits into Iran's broader Realist strategy. By embedding Hezbollah into Lebanon's political and social fabric, Iran effectively increases its influence in a key strategic location, using Hezbollah as a buffer against Israeli military power. Hezbollah provides Iran with strategic depth and allows Tehran to balance Israeli power through asymmetric means (Mearsheimer, 2001). The ideological justification for Hezbollah's existence–resistance to Israeli occupation–aligns with Iran's need to legitimize its role in the region, reinforcing the balance of power between Israel and Iran.

Hezbollah and the Security Dilemma

The case of Hezbollah exemplifies the security dilemma at the heart of Israel-Iran relations. According to this concept, states' actions to increase their own security often inadvertently provoke insecurity in others, leading to a cycle of arms races and escalating tensions (Jervis, 1978). Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982, intended to neutralize threats to its northern border, triggered the creation and strengthening of Hezbollah. Iran's support for Hezbollah, in turn, increased Israel's perception of threat, prompting Israel to bolster its defenses and engage in preemptive strikes against Hezbollah targets (Ranstorp, 1997).

Hezbollah's growing military capabilities, largely financed and supported by Iran, are a direct manifestation of this security dilemma. Hezbollah's arsenal includes a wide range of sophisticated weapons, from rockets to anti-tank missiles, and its deep entrenchment in southern Lebanon allows it to launch attacks against Israeli targets. During the 2006 Lebanon War, Hezbollah launched over 4,000 rockets into northern Israel, demonstrating its ability to bypass traditional Israeli defenses (Byman, 2005). This conflict is a quintessential example of the security dilemma: Israel's attempts to eliminate threats on its borders led to Hezbollah's militarization, which in turn forced Israel to escalate its military responses (Jervis, 1978). Jones et al. (2020) argue that Hezbollah's missile capabilities and its deep integration into Lebanese society complicate Israeli defense strategies, creating a protracted security challenge.

Iran leverages Hezbollah's capabilities as a strategic deterrent against Israel. Hezbollah's military presence in southern Lebanon acts as a buffer and complicates Israel's security strategy. Any Israeli military action against Iran risks retaliatory strikes from Hezbollah, creating a multi-front conflict scenario. This strategic depth enhances Iran's regional influence and allows Tehran to counter Israeli actions indirectly, using Hezbollah as a proxy force (Norton, 2007).

Tying Hezbollah to the Hypotheses and Realism Framework

- **H1a**: The existence of Israel is used by Iran as a rhetorical and strategic justification for the establishment and expansion of Shiite militias in Lebanon. Hezbollah's formation is directly tied to Israel's military presence in Lebanon. Iran's rhetorical and strategic justification for supporting Hezbollah is rooted in the

narrative of resistance to Israeli occupation. Iran portrays itself as the defender of Islamic lands, using Hezbollah as a key instrument to counter Israeli expansionism. This exemplifies Realist principles—Israel's military dominance provides Iran with the pretext to build and support militias, increasing its power in the region (Byman, 2005; Norton, 2007).

• **H1b**: Iranian-backed militias, justified by the presence of Israel, significantly increase Iran's regional influence by embedding themselves in local conflicts and political systems. Hezbollah's evolution into a political and military force in Lebanon exemplifies this hypothesis. Iran has used Hezbollah to embed itself deeply in Lebanese society, utilizing the group to expand its influence far beyond its borders. Hezbollah's involvement in Lebanon's political system–holding seats in parliament and controlling vital social services–demonstrates how Iran can use militias to extend its reach, balancing against Israeli and Western power (Ranstorp, 1997; Norton, 2007). Guzansky & Yadlin (2020) further highlight Hezbollah's integration into Lebanese politics as a critical element of Iran's long-term strategy to challenge Israeli hegemony in the region.

• **H1c**: The activities of these Iranian-backed militias contribute to regional instability and complicate the security strategies of Israel and its allies. Hezbollah's continued military operations and its missile capabilities pose a persistent threat to Israeli security. This has forced Israel to adopt more aggressive defensive measures, such as the Iron Dome missile defense system, to counter Hezbollah's rocket attacks. However, Israel's ability to neutralize Hezbollah is complicated by the group's deep entrenchment in Lebanese society. Any attempt to dismantle Hezbollah risks destabilizing Lebanon as a whole, further perpetuating the regional security dilemma (Jervis, 1978; Norton, 2007).

In conclusion: Hezbollah's formation and growth, heavily facilitated by Iran, is a prime example of how Realism and the security dilemma shape regional dynamics in the Middle East. Iran, in an effort to counterbalance Israel's military superiority, has developed Hezbollah into a formidable force, capable of challenging Israeli dominance. At the same time, Hezbollah's integration into Lebanese politics and society enables Iran to project power without directly confronting Israel militarily. This case study highlights the paradox of Israel's existence–while publicly

Iran opposes Israel, it uses Israel's presence as a strategic necessity to justify its proxy networks and increase its influence. The security dilemma between Israel and Iran, perpetuated by Hezbollah's operations, illustrates how actions taken by one state to secure itself can lead to greater insecurity for its adversary, thus driving the cycle of conflict and instability in the region (Jervis, 1978; Waltz, 1979).

The Houthis in Yemen

Historical Context

The origins of the Houthi movement, officially known as Ansar Allah, trace back to the early 1990s in Yemen's northern Saada province. Founded by Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi, a prominent figure from Yemen's Zaidi Shia minority, the movement initially sought to address the socio-economic and political marginalization of the Zaidi population. The Houthis began as a religious revivalist movement, emphasizing Zaidi identity and resistance to perceived government neglect and Saudi influence in Yemen (Brehony, 2013).

The Houthi movement gained significant momentum in the early 2000s, culminating in a series of conflicts with the Yemeni government from 2004 to 2010, collectively known as the Saada Wars. These conflicts were marked by increasing Houthi military capabilities and significant violence, resulting in thousands of casualties. After Hussein al-Houthi's death in 2004, leadership passed to his brother, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, who radicalized the movement further and expanded its objectives (Phillips, 2011).

The outbreak of the Yemeni Civil War in 2014-2015 provided the Houthis with an opportunity to expand their influence. Capitalizing on the weakness of the Yemeni state and widespread discontent with the government of President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi, the Houthis captured the capital, Sana'a, in September 2014. Their advances triggered a Saudi-led military intervention aimed at restoring the Hadi government (Juneau, 2016). This conflict has since escalated, drawing in various regional and international actors.

Iran's Role and Strategic Justification

Iran's support for the Houthis has been a critical, though often debated, factor in the group's success. While the extent of Iranian involvement has fluctuated, there is clear evidence of Iran providing military aid, training, and political backing to the Houthis. This support

fits into Iran's broader Realist strategy of projecting power across the Middle East to counter Saudi and Western influence, and indirectly challenge Israeli interests (Juneau, 2016).

From a Realist perspective, Iran's involvement in Yemen aligns with its strategy to maximize influence and balance against regional adversaries. By supporting the Houthis, Iran weakens Saudi Arabia, a key Israeli ally. Iranian backing includes the provision of missiles, drones, and military training, often facilitated by the IRGC and its Quds Force (Peterson, 2016). These tactics mirror Iran's support for Hezbollah in Lebanon, demonstrating its reliance on proxy warfare to extend its reach without direct confrontation (Juneau, 2016).

Iran has also provided the Houthis with diplomatic support, advocating for their cause in international forums. This political backing has helped legitimize the Houthi movement on the world stage and strengthened its position domestically. Iran frames its support for the Houthis as part of a broader struggle against Zionism and Western influence, portraying the Houthis as participants in a wider resistance against Israel and its allies, even though Israel is not directly involved in Yemen (Brehony, 2013). This rhetorical maneuver aligns with Realist theory, where Iran utilizes Israel's presence as a justification to secure its own regional interests under the pretext of defending Islamic lands.

The Security Dilemma and Impact on Israel

The Houthi movement's implications for Israeli security are primarily indirect but still significant. The Houthis have adopted anti-Israel rhetoric, echoing Iran's broader ideological stance against Israel. The movement has issued threats to target Israeli interests and allies in the region, extending the conflict's ideological scope (Jones, Newlee, Harrington & Bermudez, 2019). This rhetoric aligns the Houthis with Iran's anti-Israel position, allowing Tehran to position itself as the defender of Islamic values in a broader geopolitical context.

The Houthis' military capabilities, particularly their missile and drone technology, pose a direct threat to Saudi Arabia, a crucial Israeli ally. This is significant because any instability in Saudi Arabia can indirectly impact Israeli security interests. The Bab el-Mandeb Strait, a strategic maritime chokepoint controlled in part by the Houthis, has potential ramifications for Israeli shipping routes and trade, illustrating how the Houthi presence affects Israel's strategic calculations in the broader region (Juneau, 2016).

Additionally, the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen has further solidified Saudi Israeli covert alliances, with both nations sharing a common interest in countering Iranian influence. This alignment highlights how Iran's support for the Houthis has contributed to strengthening ties between Israel and Saudi Arabia, altering the regional security dynamics (Jones, Newlee, Harrington & Bermudez, 2019).

Tying the Houthis to the Hypotheses and Realism Framework

• **H1a**: The existence of Israel is used by Iran as a rhetorical and strategic justification for the establishment and expansion of Shiite militias in Yemen. Although the Houthis are primarily engaged in conflict with Saudi Arabia and Yemeni government forces, their alignment with Iran's anti-Israel stance is evident. Iran uses anti-Israel rhetoric to justify its support for the Houthis, framing it as part of a broader regional struggle against Zionism and Western influence. This alignment allows Iran to provide military and financial support to the Houthis, extending its regional influence while balancing against Israeli interests (Jones et al., 2019).

  • **H1b**: Iranian-backed militias, justified by the presence of Israel, significantly increase Iran's regional influence by embedding themselves in local conflicts and political systems. Iran's support for the Houthis allows it to challenge Saudi influence in Yemen while indirectly affecting Israeli interests. The Houthis control strategic locations such as the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, which is vital for international trade and has implications for Israel's maritime security. By embedding itself in the Yemeni conflict through its proxy, Iran strengthens its position in the region and exerts influence over a key strategic area (Juneau, 2016).

  • **H1c**: The activities of these Iranian-backed militias contribute to regional instability and complicate the security strategies of Israel and its allies. The ongoing conflict in Yemen, fueled by Iranian support for the Houthis, has significantly complicated regional security dynamics. The Saudi-led coalition's intervention in Yemen, aimed at countering the Houthis, has further strengthened the informal alliance between Israel and Saudi Arabia, both of which seek to contain Iranian influence. This has contributed to regional instability, as the conflict escalates, and any potential solutions become more complicated by the entrenchment of Iranian-backed forces (Jones et al., 2019).

In conclusion: The case of the Houthis in Yemen illustrates how Iran strategically leverages the existence of Israel to justify and expand its network of militias across the Middle East. Although Israel is not directly involved in the Yemeni conflict, Iran uses the anti-Israel narrative as a broader pretext for its involvement in the region. By supporting the Houthis, Iran not only challenges Saudi influence but also indirectly affects Israeli interests, further entrenching itself in the regional balance of power. This case demonstrates how Realism and the security dilemma operate in the context of Iranian proxy warfare: Iran, seeking to counterbalance Israeli and Saudi power, uses militias like the Houthis to project influence and secure its interests across the region (Jervis, 1978; Waltz, 1979).

While the Houthis' primary conflict is with Saudi Arabia, Iran's broader strategy of opposing Israel and its allies plays a crucial role in justifying Tehran's support for the movement. Iran's involvement in Yemen underscores the complex interplay between Israeli existence, Iranian regional ambitions, and the security strategies of Saudi Arabia and Israel, contributing to ongoing instability and the entrenchment of proxy conflicts throughout the Middle East.

Shiite Militias in Iraq

Historical Context

The emergence of Shiite militias in Iraq can be traced back to the aftermath of the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, which toppled Saddam Hussein's regime and created a power vacuum. This vacuum, combined with the rise of extremist groups such as Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and later ISIS, provided fertile ground for the formation of Shiite militias. Initially organized as self-defense groups to protect Shiite communities from Sunni insurgents and extremist attacks, these militias grew in prominence.

Among the key Shiite militias were the Mahdi Army, led by cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, and the Badr Organization, which originated during the Iran-Iraq War as the military wing of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). Over time, these groups evolved into significant political and military actors in post-invasion Iraq. The Mahdi Army, for example, played a major role in the Battle of Najaf in 2004 before rebranding as the Peace Companies following a series of internal reforms and crackdowns (Phillips, 2016).

The rise of ISIS in 2014 marked a critical phase in the evolution of these militias. In response to the ISIS threat, the Iraqi government and prominent Shiite clerics, including Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, called for the formation of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) to defend Iraq. This led to the rapid mobilization of Shiite militias under the PMF umbrella, which received formal recognition and support from the Iraqi state (Witty, 2018).

Iran's Role and Strategic Justification

Iran has exerted considerable influence over Iraq's Shiite militias, utilizing historical, ideological, and strategic ties to these groups. The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its Quds Force have played a pivotal role in training, funding, and providing strategic guidance to these militias. For instance, the Badr Organization was originally formed in Iran during the Iran-Iraq War and has maintained close ties with Tehran ever since (Phillips, 2016).

From a Realist perspective, Iran's support for Shiite militias in Iraq is part of a broader strategy to maximize its influence and counterbalance U.S. and Israeli influence in the region. Iraq is viewed by Iran as a critical battleground where it can project power and create a buffer against hostile forces. This support goes beyond logistical and financial assistance; Iranian advisors have played crucial roles in militia operations, providing advanced weapons, including rockets, drones, and other military equipment (Witty, 2018).

The integration of these militias into Iraq's formal security apparatus under the PMF has allowed Iran to embed its influence within the Iraqi state. Many of these militias operate semi-independently, maintaining loyalty to both Iraq and Iran, complicating Iraqi sovereignty and further entrenching Iran's presence (Phillips, 2016; Witty, 2018).

Iran's framing of its support for these militias includes both sectarian solidarity with Iraq's Shiite majority and the need to counter Israeli influence. While Israel is not directly involved in Iraq, Iran portrays Israeli interests as extending through U.S. alliances with Sunni Arab states. The PMF's establishment is justified as part of a broader effort to defend Islamic lands from Zionist and Western aggression, aligning with Iran's narrative of resistance to Israeli and Western influence (Phillips, 2016; Witty, 2018).

The Security Dilemma and Impact on Israel

The presence and activities of Iranian-backed Shiite militias in Iraq have significant implications for Israel's regional security calculations. While these militias primarily operate within Iraq, their allegiance to Iran allows them to act as extensions of Iranian power, presenting indirect threats to Israeli security.

A key concern for Israel is the potential for Iraqi territory to be used by Iran to transfer weapons and supplies to Hezbollah in Lebanon and other proxies in Syria. The concept of an Iranian "land bridge" from Iran through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon would enable the movement of personnel, weapons, and logistical support, thereby enhancing the operational capabilities of Iran's allies and increasing the strategic threat to Israel (Al-Tamimi, 2018).

This entrenchment of Iranian-backed militias in Iraq also enables Iran to project power and encircle Israel with hostile forces, making it more difficult for Israel to contain Iranian influence. In response, Israel has strengthened intelligence and military cooperation with regional allies, such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, who share concerns about Iran's ambitions. This cooperation underscores the realignment of regional alliances, driven by the need to counter Iran's influence (Jones, Newlee, Harrington & Bermudez, 2019).

The case of Shiite militias in Iraq further illustrates how Iran has leveraged the existence of Israel to justify and expand its network of militias across the Middle East. By supporting these militias, Iran strengthens its influence within Iraq and extends its strategic reach, presenting indirect threats to Israeli security. This dynamic underscore the complex interplay between Israeli existence and Iranian regional strategy, highlighting the broader implications for Middle Eastern geopolitics.

Tying the Shiite Militias to the Hypotheses and Realism Framework

- **H1a**: The existence of Israel is used by Iran as a rhetorical and strategic justification for the establishment and expansion of Shiite militias in Iraq. Although Israel is not a direct actor in Iraq, Iran's rhetoric positions its support for Shiite militias as part of a larger effort to resist Israeli and Western influence. The Badr Organization, which has maintained close ties with Tehran since its formation during the Iran-Iraq War, has frequently justified its

operations through anti-Israeli narratives, even though its primary battles have been against Sunni insurgents and ISIS (Phillips, 2016). This aligns with Realist theory, where states seek to maximize power by using external threats—real or perceived—as justifications for expanding their influence.

- **H1b**: Iranian-backed militias, justified by the presence of Israel, significantly increase Iran's regional influence by embedding themselves in local conflicts and political systems. The integration of these militias into the Iraqi PMF has further entrenched Iran's influence within Iraq. These militias receive formal recognition and funding from the Iraqi government while maintaining close ties with Iran. This dual loyalty complicates Iraq's sovereignty and provides Iran with a powerful tool to influence Iraq's military and political structures (Witty, 2018). By framing their operations in the context of resisting Israel and its allies, these militias solidify their role as key elements of Iran's regional strategy.

- **H1c**: The activities of these Iranian-backed militias contribute to regional instability and complicate the security strategies of Israel and its allies. The presence of Iranian-backed militias in Iraq has significant implications for Israel's regional security strategy. These militias provide Iran with a platform to project power beyond its borders, potentially enabling the transfer of weapons to Hezbollah and other proxies. This "land bridge" from Iran through Iraq and Syria increases the strategic threat to Israel and necessitates greater military coordination between Israel and Arab states such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE (Jones et al., 2019). The resulting regional instability complicates efforts to contain Iran's influence, making Israeli security strategies more difficult to execute.

In conclusion: The case of Shiite militias in Iraq illustrates how Iran strategically leverages the existence of Israel to justify its extensive support for militias across the Middle East. Although Israel is not directly involved in Iraq, the anti-Israel narrative provides Iran with a powerful pretext to expand its influence in Iraq under the guise of resistance to Zionism and Western influence. The integration of these militias into Iraq's formal security structures strengthens Iran's regional foothold, further complicating the security landscape for Israel and its allies.

From a Realist perspective, Iran's support for these militias serves as a means of balancing power against Israel and the United States. The security dilemma between Israel and Iran is exacerbated by the presence of these militias, as each side's efforts to increase its security led to greater instability and potential conflict. Iran's ability to justify its actions by invoking the threat of Israel ensures that its regional ambitions remain entrenched, further highlighting the paradoxical role of Israel's existence in facilitating Iran's regional strategy.

Shiite Militias in Syria

Historical Context

The involvement of Shiite militias in the Syrian Civil War, which began in 2011, has been pivotal in shaping the conflict's dynamics and outcomes. The war quickly escalated into a multi-faceted conflict involving domestic opposition groups and various regional and global powers. President Bashar al-Assad's regime, predominantly Alawite (an offshoot of Shia Islam), faced significant opposition from groups seeking to overthrow the regime. This vulnerability led to greater reliance on foreign intervention and support, particularly from Iran and its network of regional allies (Hokayem, 2013).

One of the first foreign groups to intervene on behalf of Assad was Hezbollah, a Lebanese Shiite militia. Hezbollah played a crucial role in several decisive battles, such as the recapture of the strategically significant town of Qusayr in 2013. Following Hezbollah's intervention, several Iraqi Shiite militias, including Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Harakat al-Nujaba, and Kata'ib Hezbollah, also entered the conflict, further strengthening Assad's forces. These militias were instrumental in key offensives, such as the Battle of Aleppo, which marked a turning point in the war (Phillips, 2016).

Additionally, Iran orchestrated the deployment of fighters from Afghanistan and Pakistan, forming the Fatemiyoun Division and the Zainabiyoun Brigade. These militias provided essential manpower and contributed significantly to Assad's survival, serving as Iran's strategic tools in Syria (Al-Tamimi, 2018).

Iran's Role and Strategic Justification

Iran's support for Shiite militias in Syria has been extensive, encompassing logistical, financial, and strategic dimensions. The Islamic

Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), particularly its Quds Force, coordinated the deployment and operations of these militias. Iranian support included advanced weaponry, tactical training, and strategic planning, allowing the militias to be highly effective on the battlefield (Phillips, 2016).

Financially, Iran has made significant investments in the Syrian conflict, ensuring a steady flow of resources to its allied militias. This support extends beyond military operations to include fighters' salaries and the provision of social services in areas controlled by these militias, helping to secure local support and legitimacy (Hokayem, 2013).

Strategically, Iran's deployment of Shiite militias serves multiple purposes. Foremost, it stabilizes the Assad regime, a crucial ally, while also creating a network of loyal forces that can be mobilized across the region. Iran's long-term objective is to establish a "Shia Crescent", a corridor of influence stretching from Tehran to the Mediterranean, enhancing Iran's power in the Middle East (Phillips, 2016; Al-Tamimi, 2018).

Syria's geographical proximity to Israel makes it a critical theater in the broader Iran-Israel conflict. Iranian-backed forces, including Hezbollah and various Shiite militias from Iraq and Afghanistan, not only support the Assad regime but also serve as a deterrent against Israeli strikes. Iran frames its involvement in Syria as part of its larger struggle against Zionism, portraying the Assad regime as a bulwark against Israeli influence. Israel's airstrikes on Iranian targets in Syria reinforce Tehran's narrative that these militias are necessary to defend Syria and the broader Muslim world from Israeli aggression (Hokayem, 2013; Phillips, 2016).

The Security Dilemma and Impact on Israel

The presence of Iranian-backed Shiite militias in Syria has profound implications for Israeli security and regional strategy. Positioned near Israel's borders, these militias pose a direct and significant threat. Israel is particularly concerned that these militias could establish a permanent Iranian military presence in Syria, facilitating attacks on Israeli territory (Jones, Newlee, Harrington & Bermudez, 2019).

In response, Israel has conducted numerous airstrikes in Syria targeting weapons convoys, military installations, and key infrastructure associated with Iranian forces and their allied militias. These strikes aim to prevent the transfer of advanced weaponry to Hezbollah and disrupt the establishment of Iranian military infrastructure near Israel's borders (Jones, Newlee, Harrington & Bermudez, 2019).

The presence of Iranian militias in Syria complicates Israeli military planning and requires Israel to maintain a heightened state of readiness. This situation exemplifies the security dilemma: Israel's efforts to secure its borders and prevent Iran from gaining a foothold in Syria provoke further military action from Iran and its proxies, escalating tensions (Jervis, 1978).

Furthermore, confrontations between Israeli forces and Iranian-backed militias in Syria contribute to broader regional instability. Each Israeli strike in Syria risks escalating the conflict, potentially drawing in other regional actors. This highlights the broader dimensions of the Iran-Israel conflict, which stretches beyond Syria to other battlegrounds in Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen (Phillips, 2016; Hokayem, 2013).

Tying the Shiite Militias in Syria to the Hypotheses and Realism Framework

- **H1a**: The existence of Israel is used by Iran as a rhetorical and strategic justification for the establishment and expansion of Shiite militias in Syria. Iran's involvement in Syria, including its support for Shiite militias such as Hezbollah, is framed through the narrative of resistance against Israeli aggression. Iran portrays itself as the defender of Islamic lands, using the Israeli threat to justify its military presence in Syria. This fits the Realist framework of state behavior in an anarchic international system, where Iran seeks to maximize its power by using Israel's existence as a strategic justification for deploying proxy forces (Phillips, 2016; Hokayem, 2013).

- **H1b**: Iranian-backed militias, justified by the presence of Israel, significantly increase Iran's regional influence by embedding themselves in local conflicts and political systems. The deployment of Shiite militias in Syria has been instrumental in stabilizing the Assad regime and ensuring Iran's continued influence in Syria. By embedding itself in the Syrian conflict, Iran has effectively established a strategic foothold in the Levant, further extending its influence in the region (Al-Tamimi, 2018). These militias, with support from Iran, have become essential actors in the Syrian war, playing decisive roles in battles such as Aleppo and securing critical territories for the Assad regime.

- **H1c**: The activities of these Iranian-backed militias contribute to regional instability and complicate the security strategies of

Israel and its allies. The presence of Iranian-backed militias in Syria poses a direct threat to Israeli security, as evidenced by Israel's repeated airstrikes targeting Iranian military infrastructure. These strikes are part of a broader strategy to counter the Iranian presence in Syria, but they also risk escalating the conflict. Each Israeli military action heightens the risk of a wider confrontation, deepening the security dilemma between Israel and Iran (Jones et al., 2019).

Overall, the case of Shiite militias in Syria demonstrates how Iran leverages the existence of Israel to justify its regional strategy. By supporting these militias, Iran has not only bolstered the Assad regime but also created a network of forces capable of challenging Israeli influence in the region. The security dilemma between Israel and Iran, exacerbated by the presence of these militias, illustrates how efforts to enhance security on both sides lead to greater instability and conflict.

From a Realist perspective, Iran's actions in Syria serve to maximize its regional power and balance against Israeli and Western influence. The existence of Israel provides Iran with a powerful strategic justification for maintaining a military presence in Syria, allowing Tehran to project power and establish a corridor of control from Tehran to the Mediterranean. These dynamic underscores the paradox of Israel's existence: while Israel is viewed as a threat, it also serves as an essential enabler of Iran's regional ambitions.

Conclusion

Implications of the Research

Geopolitical Dynamics

1. **Regional Power Balance:**
    This research underscores how Israel's existence plays a pivotal role in Iran's regional strategy, serving as a justification for the expansion of its militia network. Iran leverages these militias to project influence and counterbalance Israeli and Western presence in the Middle East, thereby shifting the regional balance of power. Considering recent developments, such as the Abraham Accords, Iran's strategy has evolved to navigate the growing normalization between Israel and Arab states, intensifying its reliance on militias as a tool to counter this emerging alliance (Byman, 2005; Hokayem, 2013; Phillips, 2016).

2. **Security Policies:**

   The findings suggest that Israel's security policies must continuously adapt to the evolving threat posed by Iranian-backed militias. Recent Israeli strikes in Syria and Iraq highlight the ongoing challenge posed by these groups, and the need for advanced defense systems, such as the Iron Dome and David's Sling, to mitigate threats from groups like Hezbollah and other Shiite militias. The heightened tension underscores the security dilemma: as Israel strengthens its defenses, Iran fortifies its proxies in response (Norton, 2007; Ranstorp, 1997; Jones et al., 2019).

3. **Regional Alliances:**

   The research highlights how shared concerns over Iranian influence are fostering new regional security frameworks. The Abraham Accords have accelerated cooperation between Israel and Arab states such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. This realignment is reshaping traditional alliances, with regional actors increasingly unified against Iran's expansionist policies (Jones, Newlee, Harrington & Bermudez, 2019).

4. **Proxy Warfare and Instability:**

   The proliferation of Iranian-backed militias continues to contribute to regional instability, perpetuating conflicts and undermining state sovereignty. These militias operate outside formal state control, further complicating diplomatic efforts and peace negotiations. The ongoing conflict in Yemen and the destabilization in Iraq serve as prime examples of how these groups exacerbate existing tensions and impede resolutions (Alimi, Demetriou & Bosi, 2015; Byman, 2005).

Broader Implications

1. **International Relations:**

   The study provides critical insights into how perceived threats and the presence of powerful adversaries' shape state behavior and influence geopolitical strategies. Iran's reliance on proxy warfare in response to perceived Israeli and Western threats mirrors similar dynamics in other regions, such as Russia's use of proxies in Eastern Europe. These findings provide lessons that could apply to other global contexts facing similar security dilemmas (Mearsheimer, 2001; Waltz, 1979).

2. **Policy Formulation:**

    Policymakers can use these findings to better understand Iran's motivations behind supporting militias and to develop strategies that address both immediate threats and underlying causes of regional instability. For instance, diplomatic efforts should focus not only on curbing militia activity but also on addressing the socio-economic conditions that allow these groups to thrive. Recent U.S. sanctions on Iran and broader international efforts to contain its influence highlight the ongoing struggle to balance deterrence with diplomacy (Juneau, 2016).

Limitations of the Research

1. **Scope and Generalizability:**

    While this research offers a detailed analysis of Iranian-backed militias in Lebanon, Yemen, Iraq, and Syria, the findings may not be fully applicable to other regions. The unique historical, cultural, and political conditions in these countries limit the generalizability of the results. Future research should explore other regional contexts where Iran's strategy may differ, such as in Central Asia or North Africa, to determine whether the same dynamics hold (Hokayem, 2013; Phillips, 2016).

2. **Data Availability and Reliability:**

    This study relies heavily on secondary sources, such as academic literature and think tank reports, which can vary in reliability. To overcome this limitation, future research could incorporate primary data collection, such as interviews with militia leaders, policymakers, or stakeholders directly involved in the conflict. Such field research would provide richer insights and more nuanced understanding of militia operations (Norton, 2007; Ranstorp, 1997).

3. **Complexity of Proxy Relationships:**

    The relationships between Iran and its proxy militias are complex, often influenced by local dynamics and shifting loyalties. While this research provides an overview, future studies should delve deeper into the internal dynamics of each militia. For example, examining the leadership structure within Hezbollah or exploring how Iraqi militias balance loyalty between Tehran and Baghdad could offer a more granular understanding of their operations and motivations (Byman, 2005; Phillips, 2016).

4. Evolving Geopolitical Landscape:

The Middle East's geopolitical landscape is highly dynamic, with shifting alliances and emerging threats. Since this research captures a snapshot in time, continuous monitoring is necessary. As Iran-Israel tensions escalate and U.S. policy in the region evolves, the dynamics of proxy warfare will likely shift. Ongoing research will be essential to track these developments and ensure the relevance of future findings (Jones, Newlee, Harrington & Bermudez, 2019; Juneau, 2016).

Summary of Research

This research explores the paradox wherein Israel's existence inadvertently serves as a crucial element in Iran's regional strategy. Despite public denunciations, Israel's presence enables Iran to justify and expand its network of militias across the Middle East. Through comprehensive case studies, the research examines Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, and Shiite militias in Iraq and Syria, demonstrating how Israel's presence facilitates Iran's regional strategy.

• Hezbollah in Lebanon:

Established in response to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, Hezbollah has evolved into a sophisticated political and military organization, heavily supported by Iran. The relationship between Iran and Hezbollah exemplifies the balance of power and security dilemma: as Israel enhances its defense capabilities, Iran strengthens its proxy militias (Norton, 2007; Ranstorp, 1997).

• The Houthis in Yemen:

Iranian support has enabled the Houthis to challenge Saudi influence and indirectly affect Israeli interests. The alignment of the Houthis' anti-Israeli rhetoric with Iran's broader strategy illustrates the strategic use of proxy warfare. Iran's backing of the Houthis contributes to the security dilemma by threatening Saudi Israeli cooperation and expanding Iran's influence under the pretext of countering Zionism (Juneau, 2016; Jones et al., 2019).

• Shiite Militias in Iraq:

Iran's support for Shiite militias like the Badr Organization and PMF showcases how Iran embeds itself in local conflicts to exert regional

influence. These militias facilitate the transfer of weapons to Hezbollah, further complicating Israeli security strategies. Iran's use of these militias under the guise of resistance against Zionism, even in regions with minimal Israeli involvement, exemplifies the paradox that Israel's existence provides Iran with strategic justification for its militia expansion (Phillips, 2016; Witty, 2018).

• Shiite Militias in Syria:

Iranian-backed militias in Syria have bolstered the Assad regime while establishing a strategic foothold near Israel's borders. This complicates Israeli security strategies and contributes to regional instability. Iran's use of militias in Syria is framed as resistance to Israeli influence, furthering the security dilemma: as Israel tries to curb Iranian influence, Iran deepens its military presence (Hokayem, 2013; Phillips, 2016).

Future Outlook

1. **Evolving Geopolitical Alliances:**
   Covert cooperation between Israel and Arab states, driven by mutual concerns over Iranian influence, could evolve into formal alliances, reshaping the balance of power in the Middle East (Jones et al., 2019).

2. **Proxy Warfare Dynamics:**
   The role of Iranian-backed militias in regional conflicts will likely continue to evolve. Future research should examine the internal dynamics of these militias and their changing relationships with local governments (Juneau, 2016).

3. **Impact of International Policies:**
   The effectiveness of international policies, such as sanctions on Iran and diplomatic efforts, will play a critical role in shaping the future regional landscape. Understanding how these policies interact with regional actors will be key to future conflict resolution (Phillips, 2016).

4. **Technological Advancements:**
   Advances in military technology, including missile defense and drone warfare, will continue to influence the security dilemma between Israel and Iran. Monitoring these developments will provide insights into future conflict scenarios (Byman, 2005).

5. Sociopolitical Changes:

Internal political dynamics within Iran, Israel, and the broader Middle East will shape the future trajectory of regional conflicts. Shifts in leadership and public opinion could lead to changes in strategic priorities and influence the balance of power (Hokayem, 2013).

By continuing to explore these factors and their interconnections, future research can provide a deeper understanding of the complex geopolitical dynamics in the Middle East and contribute to more informed policy decisions.

Overall, this research has demonstrated the paradoxical relationship between Israel's presence and Iran's regional strategy. The balance of power and security dilemma frameworks help explain why Israel's existence, while perceived as a threat by Iran, simultaneously serves as the critical justification for Iran's militia networks. As both Israel and Iran continue to respond to each other's actions, this dynamic reinforces regional instability, with Iran advancing.

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