Haileybury MUN

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Research Report

Middle East North Africa Committee

The Question of State Proxies

30 YEARS Haileybury MUN

THIMUN Foundation

Definition of Key Terms

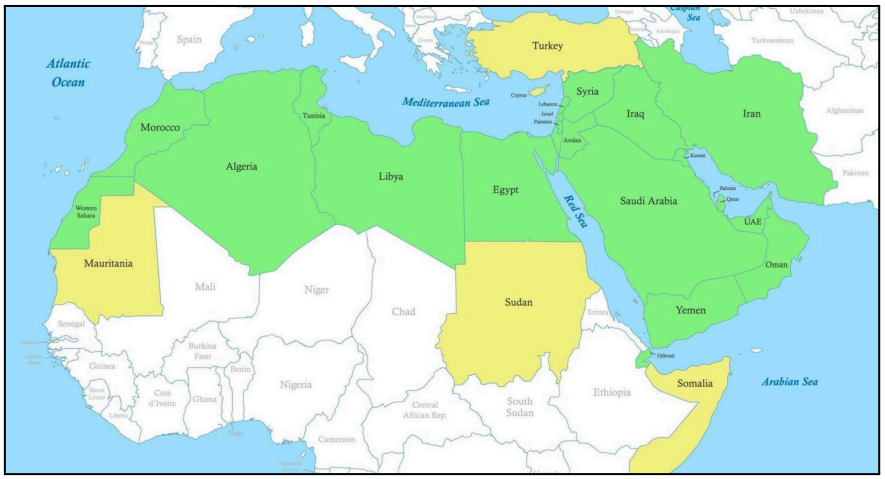
State Proxy → A non-state actor, mercenary or local group that is supported, funded or directed by a state to carry out objectives on its behalf (these could be political, military or social objectives). Proxies may be involved in civil warfare, intelligence operations or influencing local governance. Supporting states may give their proxies money, weapons or training. This allows states to exert regional influence without direct military intervention in other countries.

Non-state actor → An individual or organisation that has significant political influence but is not allied to any particular country or state. Non-state actors are often used in proxy warfare, because states can then exert indirect influence in conflicts, and are less easily held accountable by international bodies like the UN. An example is Hezbollah in Lebanon.

MENA → An apolitical definition of a geographical area including the Middle East and North Africa. Groupings may vary, but the term typically includes countries like Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Israel, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, the UAE, Yemen and Iran.

Asymmetrical warfare → when two conflicting powers have significant differences in tactics, strategies or military capabilities, so adopt unconventional strategies to attack each other. Usually this involves a weaker or non-state actor challenging a more powerful conventional military force, perhaps using guerilla warfare, terrorism or sabotage.

Sectarian conflict → conflict stemming from divisions and hostilities between different sects of a religion or ethnic group within a nation/community. Such divisions contribute to rivalries and instability within the MENA - specifically tensions between Sunni and Shia Muslims.



Above: common interpretation of the MENA region and its borders

Overview of Current Issue

State proxies in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have been a significant tool for regional powers to exert influence. Proxy warfare in the MENA region is deeply rooted in the region's strategic location and its complex geopolitical, sectarian, and historical dynamics. Its increasing use among rival powers offers a new threat to security in the region; indeed the use of non-state actors in political and military involvement (particularly Iran) presents a wider threat to global security.

1) Geopolitical rivalries

The MENA region is characterised by intense rivalries, notably between Iran and Saudi Arabia, each seeking to expand its influence through proxies in countries like Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon. For example, since the 1979 revolution, **Iran** has developed a network of proxies, including Hezbollah in Lebanon and various militias in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. These groups receive financial, military, and logistical support from Iran's Revolutionary Guards. Another example is **Turkey**, which utilises proxies in Syria and Libya to achieve its geopolitical goals, focusing on countering Kurdish forces and supporting aligned factions.

2) Sectarian divisions

The **Sunni-Shia divide** (two branches of Islam that disagree about whether the Prophet designated a successor) is a massive contributor to MENA instability and proxy warfare, with regional powers supporting aligned factions to counterbalance each other's influence. For example, roughly 90-95% of **Iran**'s Muslims are Shia - Iran's main proxies are therefore fighters within Shiite-majority countries like Iraq and Lebanon. **Saudi Arabia** (majority Sunni) is engaged in a long-standing proxy conflict with Iran; it supports Sunni groups in Syria and Yemen to counter Iranian Shia influence. Alliances that cross this divide - such as between **Iran** and **Hamas** in Gaza (who are a Sunni majority) are unstable, and driven by shared political goals rather than religious alignment. This contributes to regional volatility in the MENA. Equally, historic religious and ethnic divisions in Israel, Gaza and the Occupied Territories pose a real risk to global security.

3) Strategic Locations

The region's strategic importance (due to oil resources and trade routes) makes it a focal point for global powers, further complicating local conflicts. For example, the **Iranian**-controlled **Strait of Hormuz** lies between the Arabian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman. Over one-sixth of global oil production and one-third of the world's liquified natural gas flows through the Strait which is the only way to the open sea. These checkpoints allow Iran to exert political influence and disrupt

global energy supplies. As a large portion of Saudi (and other Gulf States') oil exports pass through the Strait of Hormuz, Saudi Arabia has a vested interest in ensuring it remains accessible. These conflicting economic interests have heightened Saudi-Iranian tensions and fuelled proxy warfare in the region.

4) Regional Dynamics

These are complex and multi-faceted. For example, **Iran** utilises proxies to extend its "axis of resistance," opposing US and Israeli influence while securing strategic depth. Whilst in the past, Iran has given $100 million annually to **Palestinian** groups (including Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad) this alliance is seen to function more as an unsteady 'marriage of convenience'. This was seen clearly on October 7 - Hamas' attacks against Israel were independent, and an unwelcome surprise for Iranian leadership. **Saudi Arabia** counters Iranian influence by supporting Sunni groups and governments in conflict zones, whilst **Turkey** engages in proxy strategies to assert its influence in Syria and Libya, often focusing on Kurdish opposition.

Historical Background

1) Colonial Influence

Colonial history in the MENA region led to fragmented governance and divisions that set the stage for proxy activities. This really began during and after WW1. The 1916 **Sykes-Picot Agreement** between **Britain** and **France** divided Ottoman-controlled lands and shaped many current borders in the region. However these divisions disregarded ethnic, religious and tribal boundaries, making long-term tensions inevitable. Western preferential treatment and economic elevation of tribal landowners paved the way for uneven state building in an example of 'divide and rule' colonial strategy. For example - the British government established a Mandate government in **Iraq** in the wake of WW1, concerned with creating domestic allies who could help them rule the country as local proxies. Equally, the **French** in **Lebanon** exploited internal ethnic and religious divisions in order to weaken national cohesion and prevent colonial uprisings. Its impacts have led to considerable turbulence, including the Lebanese Civil War. Decolonisation attempts have created power vacuums and exacerbated regional instability.

2) Cold War Influence

During the Cold War, both the US and the Soviet Union supported various factions in the region, establishing a precedent for proxy involvement. The US and USSR backed rival states and non-state actors as proxies to spread their ideologies and gain strategic advantages. The end of the Cold War brought wider changes within the international system - a shift from a bipolar

global system dominated by two superpowers to a ***polyarchic*** world order (as described by Seyom Brown). The power vacuum caused by the absence of these powers has created a region characterised by the distribution of power among multiple states/actors rather than single superpowers.

3) The USA

The US and its allies wanted to keep control of valuable **oil reserves** in the MENA region to avoid them falling under Russian control. They could only do this through maintaining access through cooperative local regimes. One example is the pivotal 1953 coup in **Iran**, orchestrated by the American CIA and British MI6, which toppled the democratically elected Prime Minister Muhammad Mossadegh. This event set a precedent for an American foreign policy of intervention in the region. Mossadegh sought to use the revenues from Iran's resources to benefit its people, leading him to nationalise the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC), much to the ire of the British who owned a golden share in the company. The AIOC's oil concession provided cheap oil to Britain, including its navy, at a price which was highly disadvantageous to Iran. As American fears about the influence of Communist Russia in Iran increased, and President Dwight Eisenhower replaced President Harry Truman in the White House, the CIA began a programme of propaganda against Iran's Prime Minister and eventually engineered a coup, deposing Mossadegh and centralising power through their proxy, monarch Shah Pahlavi.

4) Russia/Soviet Union

Russian ties to the Middle East go back centuries, dating back to its desire for access to the Mediterranean in the eighteenth century. After the fall of colonial powers in the wake of World War II, Russia courted new Arab states. The CIA sponsored coup in Iran prompted a Soviet decision to double down on its support of revolutionary movements in Algeria and Southern Yemen as well as to invest heavily in the Ba'athist regime of Assad in Syria. The election of nationalist Nasser in Egypt in 1956 (Suez Crisis in the same year) was supported by the Soviet Union. It marked a turning point as the Soviet Union prioritised building relationships with emerging Arab nationalist movements to use as proxies to help it gain traction in the region. Russia is still involved in the proxy warfare in the region - notably in Syria and Libya.

Relevant Countries: Modern Proxy Conflicts

Iran → Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps is the main point of contact with proxy groups, providing training, weaponry and money to promote Iranian regional objectives. Iran has multiple proxies: the Houthis in Yemen, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Iraqi paramilitaries operating as the Islamic

Resistance in Iraq... and has given financial support to militias/political movements in at least 7 countries: Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon, Palestinian Territories, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen. It is estimated that Iran gives Hezbollah $700 million/year, and has spent $16 billion + from 2012-20 propping up the Assad regime and supporting its proxies in Syria, Iraq and Yemen.

Syria → Civil war in the country, beginning in 2011, has created a complex, multi-layered conflict. Multiple actors, including Iran, Russia, the U.S., and Turkey, have supported different groups. Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia fund and support armed rebel factions within Syria, whilst Russia and Iran play a crucial role in supporting and backing the Assad regime in Damascus by providing weapons and funding and proxies/militias within Syria.

Yemen → The Saudi-Iranian rivalry is reflected in the support of the Yemeni government by Saudi Arabia and of the Houthi rebels by Iran. Yemen's civil war began in 2014 when Houthi insurgents (Iran-backed Shiite group) took control of the capital and overthrew the government. Since then, regional intervention from Iran and Saudi Arabia has drawn Yemen into a Sunni-Shia sectarian proxy conflict. Tensions have been worsened by Israel's actions in Gaza; since January 2024 the Houthis have attacked at least 33 commercial ships in the Red Sea and have vowed to continue military operations until a ceasefire is agreed to in Gaza.

Libya → Proxy warfare centres around 2 main rival factions: the Government of National Unity (GNU) in Tripoli (backed by Turkey) and General Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA) (backed by Egypt, Russia and the UAE). The conflict is fueled by competing foreign interests over

Libyan oil reserves. Turkey has given drones and troops to the GNU, reinforcing its control in western Libya. Russia, through the Wagner Group, backs the LNA to gain influence and secure energy footholds. This conflict proves the internationalisation of proxy warfare in the MENA region and the interplay of foreign strategic and political interests.

Gaza → Hamas (ruling faction in Gaza) receives funding, weapons and training from Iran. Iran's funding of Hamas and more importantly Hezbollah is viewed by Israel as a significant security threat. Regional war seems likely as Iran and Israel directly retaliate; this has built on acts of provocation such as the Israeli bombing of the Iranian consulate in Syria. Israel's actions in Gaza threaten to create a large regional conflict involving Iran, its proxies, and also the relationship between Islamic nations and sects in the MENA region.

Iraq → Iran's influence in Iraq increased following the 2003 US invasion + fall of Saddam Hussein but they have a complex agent-proxy relationship. Iran's strongest influence is through its paramilitaries' presence in Iraq's security apparatus, but Iraq has also exhibited some political independence from its neighbour, and maintains financial leverage over Iran. Iraqi paramilitaries operating as part of Iran's 'axis of resistance' have also attacked US forces in Iraq.

Lebanon [Hezbollah] → Hezbollah is a powerful Iranian-backed Shiite group. Hezbollah is a key component of Iran's proxy warfare strategy to counter Israeli influence. Syria has historically supported Hezbollah as well, improving its military capabilities and political influence. Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states have historically tried to counterbalance Iranian influence in Lebanon by supporting rival political factions. Tensions are escalating between Hezbollah and Israel, with the potential for serious conflict within Lebanon/on the border.

Possible Solutions

Security and Military Measures

Implementing and enforcing sanctions on state sponsors of proxies and their leadership can help to disrupt proxy financial and logistical networks. A focus could be on Iran. However, current Western/Gulf Arab reliance on sanctions and containment measures have been ineffective, and more robust policies need to be developed to address regional interferences (by Iran especially). Sanctions are not a long-term solution and really only deter immediate action. The UN has suggested a permanent third party body of investigation to stop other countries arming regimes. A permanent standing body that monitors the flow of weapons and other forms of support into war zones, in order to promote compliance with relevant sanctions regimes and treaty obligations, would replace ad hoc bodies created to monitor specific armed conflicts. This could help prevent the spread of proxy conflicts in the region.

Diplomatic and Political Approaches

Encouraging regional dialogue and mediation between rival states can help reduce sectarian and regional tensions that fuel proxy conflicts. For example, positive impacts of this approach can be seen in Iraq's role in facilitating talks between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Equally it is important to focus on and address the underlying grievances/political issues that make populations vulnerable to proxy recruitment. The UN for example could take extra measures to support good governance, economic development and political inclusion in the MENA region. Broadening ties with countries by working alongside Gulf states, including in foreign investment and a shift from a development or humanitarian aid framework towards normal bilateral ties, would allow for greater political inclusion and reduce proxy recruitment.

Political strategies at Individual State Level

Empowering local civil society organisations and moderate voices can help counter extremist narratives that fuel proxy recruitment. International bodies like the UN need to utilise long-term structural approaches to reform governance; supporting efforts to strengthen state institutions, reduce corruption, and improve economic independence could help vulnerable countries to become more resilient against proxy influence. By addressing the needs of individual states, this could remove states' reliance on proxies, and strengthen their ability to combat the spread of proxy warfare in the MENA region. The UN could incentivise positive change by providing economic and development assistance that is conditional on reforms and reduced military/political support for proxies.

International Cooperation

Multilateral strategies/responses through international bodies and regional organisations can help increase pressure on state proxy sponsors like Iran. Though current geopolitical tensions make cooperation more difficult, facilitating cooperation and communication between major regional powers with key interests is crucial to limiting proxy competition.

Economic Initiatives/Capacity Building

Increasing individual states' autonomy in the economic sector - for example by strengthening its financial institutions through global integration and digitisation - could have positive effects. Equally, strengthening the economic and security capabilities of vulnerable states can help states to better resist proxy infiltration, though this approach does pose a risk of fueling further

militarisation. Economic integration by promoting regional cooperation can create shared interests and disincentive proxy conflicts.

Relevant Websites and Articles

21st Century Proxy Warfare: Confronting Strategic Innovation in a Multipolar World

(Article about the Cold War and its influence on proxy warfare in the MENA region today)
https://www.newamerica.org/future-security/reports/twenty-first-century-proxy-warfare-confronting-strategic-innovation-multipolar-world/principal-rivalries-proxy-dilemmas/

How the UN Can Help Prevent the Spread of Proxy Conflicts

(Article about UN strategies to prevent proxy conflict)
https://www.justsecurity.org/70369/how-the-u-n-can-help-prevent-the-spread-of-proxy-conflicts/

Iran's Islamist Proxies in the Middle East

(Explains Iranian influence in the region through its proxy network)
https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/irans-islamist-proxies?t&utm_source=perplexity

Sectarianism, Proxies and De-sectarianisation Project

(Written evidence submitted to Parliament about the topic within the MENA region)
https://ecfr.eu/publication/proxy-battles-iraq-iran-and-the-turmoil-in-the-middle-east/
https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/125324/pdf/

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