



## Preventing the spread of proxy conflicts



GA1

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## Introduction

The spread of proxy wars, in which opposing global powers supply and influence conflicts through surrogate troops, has destabilized regions all over the world. Such conflicts not only escalate bloodshed within nations, but they also pose serious challenges to worldwide peace and security. Addressing and stopping the proliferation of proxy conflicts have become major geopolitical imperatives. Delegates must investigate and examine techniques, diplomatic measures, and international frameworks that can successfully limit the spread of proxy conflicts. Proxy conflicts are a regular global occurrence, occurring most often in non-Western or developing nations with ties to wealthier, more powerful powers. Proxy conflicts have an impact on people's lives outside of the global political chessboard. Families lose their homes, children are displaced, and entire towns are devastated. Displacement has far-reaching implications that go beyond the headlines, creating scars that will take generations to repair.

## Definition of Key Terms

### Proxy War

A proxy war is a conflict fought by one or more major powers that do not themselves become directly involved. These wars are characterised by the involvement of powerful nations that avoid direct military confrontation and orchestrate battles through surrogate forces. (Fair Planet)

P5

P5 refers to the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council. These countries include China, the Russian Federation, the United States of America, the United Kingdom and France.

### **Private Military Security Contractors (PMSCs)**

Private Military Security Contractors are private entities that provide military and security services, often hired by governments, organizations, or individuals for various military or security-related operations.

### **Shi'a Muslims**

Shi'a Muslims, predominant in countries like Iran, Iraq, and Bahrain, follow the teachings of Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, and believe that leadership should remain within the Prophet's family lineage.

### **Sunni Muslims**

Sunni Muslims, the largest branch of Islam found in countries like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Turkey, follow the Sunnah (traditions) of the Prophet Muhammad and emphasize the community's consensus in choosing leadership.

### **Hamas**

Hamas is an Iranian funded Islamist terrorist movement and one of the Palestinian territories' two major political parties. It governs more than two million Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, after seizing power from the Fatah Party in 2006. Hamas's main objective is the elimination of the State of Israel (Hamas [doctrine](#)). Hamas launches rockets at Israeli cities on a regular basis, in violation of international law.

### **Hezbollah**

Hezbollah is a Lebanon-based Shia Islamist political and militant group at least partially funded by Iran. It operates as a significant political force in Lebanon and is designated as a terrorist organization by several countries. Hezbollah launches rockets at Israeli cities on a regular basis, in violation of international law. See more under Hezbollah in the General Overview.

### **Houthi Rebels**

The Houthis are a rebel group fighting against the central government in Yemen. They are a proxy force funded and supported militarily by Iran. They are currently launching missile attacks in the Red Sea on civilian shipping vessels in violation of international law.

### **Terrorism**

“The unlawful use of violence and intimidation, especially against civilians, in the pursuit of political aims.” (Oxford Languages)

## **General Overview**

### **Weapons Flow into Armed Conflicts**

North Africa and the Middle East have long been plagued by proxy warfare. Protracted warfare and escalatory dynamics have resulted from cycles of foreign interventions in internal armed conflicts in recent decades. Even though arming local allies isn't always equivalent to engaging in proxy conflict, it can have negative consequences for rival regional powers, such as increasing the number of civilian deaths and injuries.

Since 2009, the P-5 have maintained a dominant position in the global arms-export industry. From 2014 to 2018, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) reported that the United States, Russia, France, China, and the United Kingdom collectively contributed over 73 percent of major weapons exports. When Germany is included, this figure nearly reaches 80 percent of the global market. Simultaneously, Middle Eastern countries saw a notable surge in imports, accounting for 35 percent of the total global imports during this period, marking a 61 percent increase from the previous five years. These statistics underscore the significant influence wielded by the P-5 in the arms market.

### **Saudi Arabia-Iran Proxy Conflicts**

#### **Arab Spring**

The conflict's latest phase emerged in 2011 during the Arab Spring, igniting upheavals across the Middle East and North Africa. This period witnessed revolutions in

Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen, along with civil unrest in Libya and Syria. These events disrupted the stability of key regional players like Iraq, Syria, and Egypt, creating a power vacuum.

The widespread uprisings triggered political turbulence throughout the Arab world. In response, Saudi Arabia advocated for a Gulf Union to strengthen bonds among the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states, aiming to curb potential uprisings among marginalized groups within the Gulf monarchies and counter Iran's influence in the region.

The proposed union aimed to consolidate Saudi Arabia's regional influence by granting it greater authority over military, economic, and political affairs concerning member states. However, apart from Bahrain, other members including Oman, Qatar, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates were apprehensive about the plan, fearing it would bolster Saudi dominance, thus rejecting the proposed federation.

### Yemen

Yemen has evolved into a proxy conflict, as Saudi Arabia and Iran support rival factions. The conflict began with the Houthi rebellion in the early 2010s and escalated when Houthi rebels, backed by Iran, gained control in 2014. Subsequently, the Saudi-led coalition, supported by the US and UK, intervened in 2015 to reinstate the internationally recognized government. However, all involved powers share responsibility for the severe toll on Yemeni civilians, turning the country into a geopolitical battleground at the expense of its people. According to the UN, the conflict in Yemen has caused over 377,000 deaths by the beginning of 2022, with 60 percent of them resulting from hunger, lack of healthcare and unsafe water.

### Syrian Civil War

The Syrian Civil War is a prolonged armed conflict within Syria, marked by a struggle for power between the government of President Bashar al-Assad and various opposition groups, leading to widespread devastation and a humanitarian crisis. Russia and the United States held crucial roles in the conflict. Russia supported the Assad regime alongside Iran, while the US-backed diverse opposition groups aimed to overthrow the Syrian government, with additional support from entities like the EU and Turkey. Furthermore, The Wagner Group (see more under Private Military Security Contractors: The Wagner Group) was on the ground in 2015, fighting in some of the Syrian government's offensives. "A Joint OCHA, UNHCR and UNDP statement calls the human cost of the

war "astronomical." In the statement, the UN also notes that more than 13 million people have been forced to flee their homes looking for safety, including 6.8 million Syrian refugees who have fled to neighboring countries where they have stayed for more than a decade." (Fairplanet)

In 2013, the USA began training Syrian rebel groups, which marked the start of their active involvement in the war. Iran entered the scene soon after, in June 2013, and has shown unyielding support to the Assad regime throughout the Syrian Civil War through technical, logistical, and financial support, as well as set up training programmes for the pro-government militia, the National Defence Forces. Meanwhile, their objectives may assume a quality of self-interest, seemingly molding the status quo to the conditions that will accommodate their influence, and protecting their regional assets, such as oil and gas pipelines leading into the Mediterranean. When the Trump administration took power in the US in 2016, Trump announced that the US would no longer continue its involvement in Syria. However, the USA is continuously carrying out counterterrorism attacks as part of Operation Inherent Resolve to eradicate ISIS. Israel, meanwhile, has stepped up its strikes since October, concentrating on Syrian and Iranian military positions in Syria as well as Aleppo and Damascus airports. There are no indications that the crisis in Syria will soon come to an end.

The ideological and geopolitical differences among major powers like Russia, the United States, Iran, and Turkey are apparent in their backing of opposing factions. This proxy conflict has escalated violence as external actors push for conflicting agendas, exacerbating the ongoing turmoil.

### Israel-Hamas War

The Israel-Hamas War, which was instigated by Hamas on October 7th 2023 could be viewed as a proxy war between the United States and Iran. Since that attack, the Iranian-backed Hezbollah in Lebanon, Houthis in Yemen, and militias in Iraq and Syria have launched attacks on Israel and U.S. forces in the Middle East, raising the risk of a wider regional war. "Relations with Iran are excellent, and Iran is the largest supporter of the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades [Hamas's military wing] with

money and arms,” Yahya Sinwar, a senior Hamas military leader, said in 2017” (AJC) It is noteworthy to mention that



[\(Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh meets with Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in Tehran, June 22, 2023. Photo credit: SalamPix/ABACA via Reuters Connect\).](#)

the Iranian government has denied playing any role in the attack, stating that “the accusations linked to an Iranian role... are based on political reasons,” foreign ministry spokesman Nasser Kanani told reporters. However, Iran’s terrorist training programs, and its consistent effort to arm Hamas over the years, are the reasons Hamas has been able to carry out attacks targeting Israel including the October 7 massacre. Hamas utilized rockets and funding from Iran in various conflicts against Israel from Gaza, occurring notably in 2008, 2009, 2014, and 2021. These conflicts involved thousands of rockets launched towards Israeli cities, resulting in civilian casualties. Additionally, Hamas has leveraged Iranian assistance to construct an extensive network of tunnels within the Gaza Strip and under the Israel-Gaza border. These tunnels are used for carrying out attacks, storing weapons, hiding hostages kidnapped in the October 7th attack, and hiding Hamas terrorists.

Furthermore, American support for Israel is seen through consistent military funding which goes to the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). “Since its founding in 1948, the United States has provided Israel with over \$130 billion in bilateral assistance focused on addressing new and complex security threats, bridging Israel’s capability gaps through security assistance and cooperation, increasing interoperability through joint exercises, and helping Israel maintain its Qualitative Military Edge (QME)... The United States annually provides \$3.3 billion in FMF and \$500 million for cooperative programs for missile defense.” (USA State Gov) Israel and the US are major allies, as Israel is the only democracy in the region, and additionally, Israel has been designated as a U.S. Major Non-NATO Ally under U.S. law.

## Hezbollah

Hezbollah, Iran's proxy in southern Lebanon, wields significant control over the Lebanese government, emerging during the Lebanese Civil War in the early 1980s among Shi'a Muslims. It gained notoriety after orchestrating the catastrophic U.S. Embassy bombing in Beirut in 1984, causing 63 fatalities, including 17 Americans. Founded on a platform of anti-Semitism, it advocates for the eradication of Israel and denies Jews the right to statehood. Hezbollah's Secretary-General, Hassan Nasrallah, confirmed in 2016 that the group relies on Iran for funding, supplies, and arms, viewing itself as an extension of Iran's supreme spiritual leader. Iran utilizes Syrian territory to furnish Hezbollah with weaponry, leading to Israeli strikes on Iranian arms shipments in Syria. Hezbollah poses a significant threat to Israel, amassing an estimated 150,000 missiles and rockets aimed at the Jewish state.

Following the October 7 attack by Hamas, Hezbollah initiated almost daily cross-border assaults on northern Israel using anti-tank missiles, suicide drones, and heavy warhead rockets. In response, Israel targeted Hezbollah positions, leading to evacuations along the Israel-Lebanese border. The skirmishes resulted in casualties on both sides, with six Israeli soldiers and three civilians losing their lives.

## Private Military Security Contractors: The Wagner Group

The role of Russian private military security contractors (PMSCs) in the continuing proxy warfare in the Greater Middle East and its surrounding regions is crucial. In critical hotspots across the globe, such as Libya, Syria, and Ukraine, they offer infrastructure security, training, logistical assistance, targeting intelligence, and backstopping for proxy militias and paramilitary groups. Their clandestine activities, both actual and perceived, have a significant influence on how Russia manages escalation and its relationships with allies and enemies.

In June 2023, Putin said, "the maintenance of the entire Wagner Group was fully provided for by the state," "From the Ministry of Defense, from the state budget, we fully financed this group." (Politico.eu) The Wagner Group maintains a source of revenue from their military services in various states. The increasing number of PMSC losses in Syria, Ukraine, and more recently Libya has called into question the plausibility of their denial of their ties to the Kremlin. The Wagner Group first appeared in 2014 and assisted pro-Russian forces in Ukraine during the Donbas War. Wagner was a major player in the Russian invasion of Ukraine that followed, recruiting Russian prisoners for



use in front-line warfare. Its numbers in Ukraine had increased from 1,000 to 20,000–50,000 by the end of 2022. The Wagner Group is known to have operated in at least 11 countries; Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, Syria, Sudan, Mozambique, Central African Republic, Mali, Libya, Venezuela, and Madagascar. “Wagner has also supported regimes friendly with Putin's Russia, including in the civil wars in Syria, Libya, the Central African Republic, and Mali” (Westpoint). The Wagner Group staged an uprising on June 23, 2023, following a period of rising hostilities between the Russian Ministry of Defense and Yevgeny Prigozhin, the group's then-leader. The two parties came to a resolution to end the disagreement the following day, June 24, 2023.

## Timeline of Key Events

Date	Event
<b>1987</b>	Israel designated Major Non-NATO Ally.
<b>2004-2010</b>	Houthi rebellion begins in the north against the Yemeni government, demanding more autonomy.
<b>2011</b>	Protests against President Assad begin in Syria.
<b>2013</b>	USA begins training Syrian rebel groups against Assad.  Iran provides support to the Assad government.  U.S.-led invasion that topples Saddam Hussein in Iraq empowers the country's Shi'ite majority and results in a shift in its political alignment towards Iran.  US-led coalition begins airstrikes against ISIS in Syria.
<b>2014</b>	Houthi rebels lead coup d'état.  Russian annexation of Crimea in Ukraine.  The Wagner Group is formed and is on the ground in the Donbas region of Ukraine.  Russia begins airstrikes in support of Assad's government.
<b>2015</b>	Saudi Arabia forms a coalition, including the UAE and other Arab states, launching airstrikes against Houthi positions, with alleged Iranian support for the Houthis.  Houthis fire missiles into Saudi Arabia, escalating regional tensions.  The Wagner Group is on the ground in Syria.

- 2016** Temporary ceasefire in Syria negotiated by the US and Russia.
- 2018** US, UK, and France launch airstrikes against Syrian government targets after alleged chemical attack in Douma.
- Southern Yemeni separatists - backed by the United Arab Emirates - seize control of Aden, the main city in the south.
- 2019** Separatists and government sign power-sharing agreement to end conflict in southern Yemen.
- 2022** Full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia, The Wagner Group contributes to the Russian offensive.
- US and European countries contribute military aid to Ukraine
- October 7th massacre of Israeli citizens by Iranian-backed terrorist group Hamas, deadliest day for Jews since Holocaust.
- Hezbollah launches nearly daily cross-border attacks on northern Israel, military and civilian casualties.
- 2023** Attacks against U.S. forces deployed in the Middle East, most notably in Iraq and Syria, intensified after the Hamas-Israel war erupted.
- Israeli retaliation against Hamas and hostage rescue in Gaza, many civilian casualties.
- Syrian Assad government has recaptured much of its land.
- The Wagner Group staged a rebellion against the Russian government in June, it was resolved the following day.

## Major Parties Involved

### Islamic Republic of Iran

Iran has been involved in many proxy conflicts in the Middle East and elsewhere in the Muslim world. Iran has funded, armed, and trained groups such as Lebanon, Hezbollah, Hamas, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), which have attacked Israel. Iran and Saudi Arabia are engaged in a perpetual struggle for influence in the Middle East and other areas of the Islamic world. This contest has drawn comparisons to Cold War-era developments. Proxy armies, most notably Hezbollah in Lebanon, but also Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Gaza have become Iranian foreign political trademarks in 2022. More than a dozen major militias had allies, some with their own political parties, and opposed local and neighboring governments. Iran's elite Revolutionary Guard Corps and

Quds Force have provided arms, training, and financial support to military and political groups in at least six countries: Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, and Afghanistan.

### **Russian Federation**

Russia has been involved in proxy conflicts, including the Russia-Ukraine war, where it has used proxies as an auxiliary to take the punch out of combat losses combined with protection from conventional Russian military forces there, by turning the war into a proxy dump, as Russia's goal is to weaken Ukraine's relations with the West and force it out of NATO and the EU. On the other hand, the United States is trying to defeat Russia in the Ukraine conflict, by arming and training the Ukrainian armed forces, as well as providing intelligence and logistical support. Since August 2014, the Russian Federation's involvement in the war has been obvious, however, the country hasn't done anything to conceal it.

### **Israel**

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been seen as a proxy war since the 1950s when the Soviet Union chose to aid the Bedouin cause for Palestine, while the US upheld Israel. In any case, Israel's cooperation in mediating conflicts is not limited to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Israel has been involved in mediating clashes with Iran, particularly through its support for hostile Iranian gatherings in Syria and Lebanon. Thus, Iran has used proxy powers, for example, Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza to attack Israel. The use of proxy conflicts has been a brand name of Iranian international strategy, and given that Iran says it supports such "deterrence powers", they operate independently. The relationship between Iran and its proxies is complex, and the level of independence that these gatherings have enjoyed from Iran has involved upheaval. The ongoing conflict between Israel and Hamas has raised concerns that Iran could launch a separate front attack against Israel, considering Lebanon-based Hezbollah, the Islamic Progressive Gatekeeper Corps' most established and deadliest mediator.

### **Syrian Arab Republic**

Syria has been engaged in a mediation conflict since the beginning of the Syrian war in 2011. Most people describe the conflict as a series of proxy wars between regional and global powers, especially the Arabs between the US, Russia, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. The US, France, and the UK have provided political, military, and tactical support to opposition and allied opposition groups in Syria. Then again, Russia has continued to support the Syrian government and has been accused of using mediation and indirect mediation to achieve its goals. The Syrian conflict has become an intense

transnational conflict, with local global actors, both state and non-state actors, and regional overflows and increased commitment. The dispute has led to significant spills, not only terror-based oppressors like the Islamic State (ISIS) and Al-Qaeda -Alliances, but, in addition, regional superpowers like Turkiyë as well.

### **United States of America (USA)**

Throughout history, the United States has been involved in many proxy wars. Proxy warfare involves an external state supporting actors to influence the outcome of violent conflict for the external state's own interests. During the Cold War, the United States fought several proxy wars with the Soviet Union, including the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the Cuban Revolution. In recent years, the United States has been engaged in proxy wars in Syria, including at least 23 covert proxy wars around the world, according to documents obtained through the Freedom of Information Act, it provided political, military, and logistical support to opposition and para-rebel groups. The use of strategic warfare which allows governments to harm an enemy without actually declaring war and sending in troops, has been beneficial for the US and other superpowers after World War II.

### **Saudi Arabia**

Saudi Arabia is currently engaged in proxy wars, especially with Iran. The Iran-Saudi proxy conflict is a struggle for political influence in the region between the two countries and is playing out mainly in other Middle Eastern countries. During the Cold War, Saudi Arabia funded extremist militants for the United States against the Soviet Union and was later used against the Iranian-backed Shia movement. The Saudi-led coalition has carried out more than 24,000 airstrikes since 2015, according to data collected by the Yemen Data Project. In addition to arming and financing proxies such as Hamas and Hezbollah, Saudi Arabia has adopted diplomatic measures, such as negotiating with Fatah and Israel and supporting the 2002 Arab Peace Process.

### **Yemen**

Yemen's civil war began in 2014 when Houthi rebels captured the capital Sanaa and forced the internationally recognized government into exile. The Saudi-led Gulf coalition launched a campaign of economic isolation and attacks in March 2015 against the Houthi rebels to force them into surrendering. The war has received attention from regional powers, including Iran, which has been accused of supporting the Houthis. Due to the widening Sunni-Shia divide, the conflict has turned into a regional proxy conflict, with Saudi Arabia splitting the conflict, encouraging Iran to

support the Houthis, creating a humanitarian crisis that has displaced millions resulting in humanitarian aid from Saudi-led forces.

## Possible Solutions

One method is to put stricter restrictions on weapons transportation and military aid. This requires abiding by international rules and regulations as well as developing. Treaties like the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) say that countries must regulate their weapons to avoid violating human rights. Along with international treaties, countries must also have national laws and policies that comply with international human rights.

The other feasible solution for this issue is to increase the price of destabilization. By enforcing financial sanctions on nations that overtly help proxy wars, or with the aid of finding strategies to raise the fee of destabilizing the use of diplomatic and economic stress, this solution may be applied and therefore, assist in preventing proxy wars. The United Nations also can prepare a permanent body that could regulate the manufacturing and spread of warfare weaponry, as a diplomatic method to save proxy wars from going on in the future and additionally promote peaceful decision-making and stability in regions struggling with conflict.

## Further Reading

[List of Proxy Wars and their supporters](#)

[Arms Trade Treaty \(ATT\) Text](#)

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