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Iran Proxy Groups in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen: A Principal-Agent
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(Jarosław Jarzabek)

The reviewed publication of Diane M. Zorri, Houman A. Sadri, and David C. Ellis is one of only a few aspiring to describe the phenomenon Iran proxy groups that operate in the Middle East. What makes *Iran Proxy Groups in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen: A Principal-Agent Comparative Analysis* a unique title are a few facts. Firstly, the Authors write the book not only from a position of a scholar. Each of them has a unique experience in academia, military, consulting, and business. Thanks to this, their view of the problem is more comprehensive and multidimensional. Secondly, the Authors apply a theoretical perspective of Principal-Agent theory. It organizes the analysis and makes the whole study coherent and transparent. Thirdly, the publication has a form of an advisory report. It not only focuses on the description and explanation, but it is also equipped with suggestions and proposed solutions that could be implemented by policy makers.

The *Iran Proxy Groups...* is a well written book, with tons of information about the domestic situation of the countries where Iran proxies operate, origins of those groups and their links with Iranian principal. The monograph is organized in an introduction, four thematic chapters, and conclusions. They are followed by an appendix consisting a list of Iraqi militia groups, list of acronyms and endnotes. In the Introduction Authors explain their understanding of the key terms they use throughout the book (i.a. proxy, proxy conflict etc.), present paradigm upon which their research is based (neorealism), state their research questions, describe a pattern of specific Iran's Divide-Empower-Control Strategy towards their proxies, and, finally, discuss the methodology utilized in their project. Chapter 1 is entitled „Iran's Strategic Environment”. It starts with the study of Iranian regime's policies, both in their internal and external dimension, as the Authors correctly assume that the Iranian use of the proxies is a crucial element of this state's larger political strategy. A very important factor, addressed here by the Authors, is Iran's doctrine of „forward deterrence”. Being aware of their serious limitations in terms of conventional warfare, Iranian authorities decided to develop various means of asymmetric and unconventional military capabilities.

Forward deterrence in the form of proxy groups is one of the most important elements of this strategy (next to the expansion of anti-aircraft and anti-tank weapons, unmanned aerial vehicles and special forces). This chapter also raises the subject of Shiite Islam in its various forms as a crucial element of the development of the Iran-backed proxy groups. Due to the diversity of denominations in Shiite Islam, not all the Shiites in the Middle East necessarily share the same point of view on religious and political matters. Depending on specific circumstances, this can be both a limitation or a handicap for Iranian efforts to develop their networks of proxy groups.

In the following three chapters Authors present a multidimensional analyses of the Iran-backed proxy groups in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. This comparative study successfully highlights both the similarities and differences in origins, character, *modus operandi*, and type of interdependence between Iran and its proxies in all of the three cases. In Iraq, most heavily infiltrated by Iranians, they had a better position to influence local Shiite groups and make them dependent on their own support and resources. Then, following their pattern of Develop-Employ-Sustain policy, Iran tried to monopolize Iraqi politics by filling the most important positions in the country with their own proxy leaders. For some time it was successful, but a serious problem for the Iranians became the existence of alternative Shiite centers of power, led by Grand Ayatollah Ali as-Sistani and Mukada as-Sadr. Those individuals and the political structures they controlled could not be subordinated by Iran, and consequently, further expansion of Iranian influence in Iraq encountered an insurmountable obstacle. In Syria Iran used a slightly different strategy, enforced by a different local circumstances. Firstly, the government of Bashar Assad is based on the minority social group of Syrian Alawis. To develop a potent proxy forces in Syria, Iran could not rely on recruitment of local Shiites or allied population, but had to „import” loyal militants from outside. To this end they employed mainly members of Lebanese Hezbollah and Shiites from Afghanistan and Pakistan. Secondly, the Assad's power has an authoritarian form, which has two consequences: it limits Iranian options in interfering into local politics and forces Iran to deal with Assad's regime more like with an ally than a subordinate. As Authors of the publication observe, Iranian tactics of importing loyal Shiite fighters from outside proved to be quite successful in Syria and in the future Iran may try to replicate it elsewhere. Yet different is the situation in Yemen. This war-torn country struggles with internal conflicts and foreign interventions for decades. In the current stage of the conflict Iran supports local Zaydi population (united around Ansar Allah movement) against Sunni-dominated government of president Hadi, supported by Saudi Arabia. The strategic importance of Yemen for Iranians results from its proximity to the crucial waterway, Bab al-Mandab as well as from the possibility to check and threaten its main regional rival Saudi Arabia from the south. However, as the Authors

indicate, in case of Yemen Iranian sponsorship of its local proxies is more indirect than in case of Iran or Syria. This results from a few factors. Zaydism is a form of Shiite Islam, but in religious doctrine and practices is as different from the Iranian Twelver Shiism as it is from Saudi Wahhabi Sunnism. Thus the relationship between Iran and Ansar Allah movement is based on the presence of common enemy and mutually beneficial cooperation rather than of any form of ideological premises. The distance between Iran and Yemen and lack of direct land connection also makes this cooperation more difficult.

The conclusion and analysis in the last chapter it is the perfect culmination of the authors' work. They identify strengths and vulnerabilities of Iranian proxy strategy, asses major variable and present policy implications of their research. The report ends with an appendix of Iraqi Militia groups that can be very useful as a secondary data for other scholars. The assessment of the choice of the topic, the development of the work structure and the selection of content is clearly positive. The presented case studies include all those relevant to the research topic in question. Each of them is important, tells about relevant aspects of Iranian proxy and presents data of interest, not only for the researcher and specialist, but also for the decision-makers and commanders on the ground. The deep analysis and comparative approach make the study a useful tool for a broad range of recipients.