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The Evolution of Proxy War Patterns in the Transformation of Regional Order: A Comprehensive Study Based on the Escalation of the Iran War in 2026

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Abstract: Focusing on the question of how the transformation of regional order has altered the form of proxy warfare, this study proposes and substantiates a core argument: during the restructuring of the security architecture and the readjustment of deterrence relationships in the Middle East, proxy warfare has not been supplanted by traditional direct interstate conflict. On the contrary, it is evolving into a hybrid mode—proxy networks remain in operation while high-intensity direct strikes occur in parallel during the same phase. This study adopts a research design of "dual-layer evidence and cross-verification from multiple sources." At the macro level, it employs the UCDP External Support Dataset V.18 (1975–2017) to trace the structural evolution of externally supported conflicts in the Middle East. At the micro level, it focuses on the escalation of the conflict in Iran from February 28 to March 4, 2026, as a case for process tracing. Based on firsthand reports from authoritative media outlets, an auditable event database is constructed to analyze casualty patterns and indicators of conflict spillover. The policy implication of this paper is that crisis management frameworks should neither rely solely on linear de-escalation arrangements nor focus exclusively on ceasefires in isolated theaters. A more viable approach lies in strengthening joint governance of key nodes across conflict zones, securing energy and maritime transport routes, and establishing multi-actor information transparency mechanisms to mitigate the risks of miscalculation and escalation.

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1. Introduction

The escalation of the Iran war since February 28, 2026, has profoundly altered the conventional understanding of the "low-intensity proxy war" that characterized Middle Eastern conflicts over the past decade. In just a few days, battlefield casualties, cross-border strikes, base security incidents, and energy market fluctuations have been simultaneously amplified—indicating that regional conflicts have entered a phase of higher systemic coupling: proxy networks remain in place, but the frequency, visibility, and political consequences of direct military strikes have significantly increased. For international relations scholarship, this shift does not simply signify "the end of proxy war," but rather points to an evolutionary upgrade within the proxy war mechanism itself.

Traditional discussions often place proxy engagement and direct intervention on an alternating spectrum: if a sponsor opts for a proxy, it implies a reduction in its direct exposure; if it chooses direct action, it signals a shift away from the proxy path. However, the multiple crises in the Middle East since 2025 suggest that the reality is closer to a "logic of superposition": sponsors have not abandoned proxy networks, but have simultaneously intensified direct action during critical windows, pursuing deterrence and strategic shaping through a combination of "low-visibility networked operations" and "high-visibility cross-border strikes." As a result, conflicts are no longer easily contained locally; the speed of cross-theater spillover has markedly accelerated, and the chain reactions between economic and security domains have emerged earlier.

This study poses three core research questions:

1. Against the backdrop of regional order transformation, has proxy war in the Middle East evolved from "indirect outsourcing" to a hybrid mode characterized by "parallel proxy operations and direct action"?
2. Is this shift merely a short-term anomaly, or has it exhibited long-term and structural precursors?
3. How will this model influence crisis management, deterrence and stability, and the risks of conflict spillover?

To address these questions, this study adopts a combined approach of "long-term structural data + short-term event tracking." The long-term component utilizes the UCDP External Support Dataset V.18.1 to trace the evolutionary trajectory of externally supported conflicts in the Middle East from 1975 to 2017. The short-term component codes key conflict events from February 28 to March 4, 2026, constructing a verifiable timeline, casualty patterns, and spillover indicators. The purpose of this design is not to derive a "causal coefficient" through a single method, but to establish a more robust interpretive framework based on cross-temporal and cross-scale evidence. This study argues that as regional order enters a period of reorganization, proxy warfare may exhibit three trends: proxy networks become more fragmented, strike capabilities become more accessible, and escalation pathways possess fewer buffers, making them more prone to rapid acceleration.

This study makes three primary academic contributions. First, conceptually, it proposes the "proxy-direct parallel" model to refine the binary "proxy or direct" substitution framework. Second, empirically, it employs auditable data to demonstrate that externally supported conflicts in the Middle East have not experienced a long-term decline; instead, they resurged in the 2010s, with states remaining the primary sponsors. Third, in terms of policy, it argues that crisis management should extend beyond front-line contact zones, incorporating Gulf military bases, shipping insurance, energy corridors, and information misjudgment chains into an integrated risk management framework.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Expansion of the Proxy War Concept

Early research typically understood proxy war as a situation in which a state employs force indirectly through a third party, thereby reducing the political and military costs associated with direct intervention. Initial studies emphasized two key features: "deniability" and "low visibility." That is, the sponsoring state utilizes proxy actors to achieve limited objectives while seeking to avoid the risks of full-scale war [1][2]. This definition largely shaped academic research and discourse throughout the post-Cold War era.

In recent years, however, this understanding has been significantly refined. First, proxy warfare is no longer viewed as a singular "outsourcing" act, but rather as a continuous chain of actions encompassing training, intelligence support, equipment supply, financial assistance, targeting, and battlefield coordination [3][4][5]. Second, proxy operations and direct strikes do not always function as substitutes; both can operate concurrently within the same crisis and be employed simultaneously to achieve deterrence signaling and battlefield shaping [6][7]. Therefore, the focus of proxy war research is shifting: from "the use of proxies" to "how proxy means and direct means are combined."

2.2 Main Themes in External Support Research: Motivation, Control, and Escalation

In explaining "why proxy support occurs," existing research has developed a relatively mature principal–agent analytical framework. Salehyan (2011) notes that by delegating combat tasks to rebel groups, states can reduce the risk of casualties among their own forces and mitigate international accountability pressures. However, this approach entails significant control problems and is prone to goal divergence [8].

Further cross-national statistical research indicates that external support does not occur randomly, but is often associated with

geopolitical competition, border proximity, the risk of civil war spillover, and sponsors' expectations of strategic gains [3][9]. In terms of conflict dynamics, multiparty involvement significantly alters the duration and outcome structure of wars, making conflicts more likely to exhibit characteristics such as "more participants, stronger cross-border dimensions, and greater difficulty in termination" [10][11]. This pattern aligns with long-term observations in the Middle East: external support tends to enhance the viability of armed groups and increase the likelihood of conflict diffusion, particularly in conflict zones such as Syria [12].

In this research context, classic civil war studies also provide an important backdrop. Fearon and Laitin emphasize that state capacity, terrain conditions, and the feasibility of insurgency are fundamental factors in the onset of civil war [13]. Kalyvas and Balcells point out that shifts in the international system and military technology alter the nature of civil war, making it more likely for asymmetric conflicts to intersect with international competition [14]. Together, these studies suggest that proxy warfare is not merely a tactical choice, but rather the outcome of interacting factors including state capabilities, international structures, and organizational networks.

2.3 Regional Order Transformation Perspective: The Structural Reorganization of Middle East Conflicts

Discussing proxy warfare within the framework of "regional order transformation" represents an important advance in recent scholarship. According to regional security complex theory, security interactions are typically concentrated within a region, where the intervention of external powers becomes intertwined with the competition among regional actors, forming multi-layered threat chains [15]. In the Middle East, this implies that conflicts no longer remain confined to a single theater but are transmitted across multiple nodes through proxy networks. From this perspective, it becomes evident that sponsors do not always make a binary choice between "direct intervention" and "proxy intervention." Instead, they may shift between these two types of instruments—or employ them simultaneously—depending on deterrence needs, risk tolerance, and assessments of timing [1][5][6][7].

In addition, strategic secrecy and deniability remain important mechanisms in external support, but their functions are evolving. Research indicates that sponsors make strategic calculations between overt and covert support to simultaneously manage international costs and enhance military effectiveness [3][9]. This also suggests that the previous "low-intensity, proxy-oriented" model is being replaced by a more complex pattern: proxy networks continue to operate while coordinating with direct strikes during critical phases. For the Middle East, the convergence of regional order realignment, alliance restructuring, and the proliferation of unmanned operations has further compressed the buffer space for crisis escalation.

3. Theoretical Framework: From "Substitution Logic" to "Parallel Logic"

3.1 Traditional Substitution Logic and Its Limitations

The traditional "substitution logic" holds that sponsors choose between "proxy action" and "direct action," treating the two as trade-offs. This logic was more applicable in earlier periods, when technological levels were low and information dissemination was slow. Direct intervention often entailed high costs and faced stronger domestic political constraints, while the use of proxy tools could significantly reduce exposure risks. However, under current technical and organizational conditions, this substitution logic encounters three types of challenges:

First, long-range strike technologies reduce the human exposure costs of direct action, meaning that direct action does not necessarily imply high costs.

Second, proxy networks are more deeply embedded in cross-border relations, creating stronger linkages between conflict zones. Even if the sponsoring state does not increase direct action, conflict may escalate due to interactions among different nodes.

Third, information dissemination is more real-time, which reduces the space for "strategic ambiguity" and makes sponsors more inclined to use direct actions to rapidly transmit deterrent signals during crisis windows.

3.2 The Proxy-Direct Parallel Model

This study proposes the "proxy-direct parallel model." The core argument is that during periods of regional order transition, sponsoring states treat proxy actions and direct actions as a set of functionally complementary tools, rather than as substitutes.

The model comprises three mechanism chains:

1. Deterrence compensation mechanism: When proxy actions are insufficient to restore deterrence credibility, the sponsoring state intensifies direct actions to more rapidly recalibrate the adversary's expectations.

2. Network amplification mechanism: Proxy networks provide sustained pressure across dispersed locations, while direct actions deliver stronger and more conspicuous deterrent signals. The superposition of the two accelerates conflict diffusion.

3. Spillover transmission mechanism: Battlefield escalation transmits to markets through energy and shipping channels, triggering price fluctuations. These market movements, in turn, influence policy choices, forming a "conflict–price–policy" feedback loop.

3.3 Alternative Explanations and Distinctions

Possible alternative explanations include:

1. Statistical visibility effect: The parallel trend stems solely from more comprehensive data recording;

2. Single shock effect: The 2026 escalation is merely an incidental event and cannot be generalized;

3. Media amplification effect: Short-term market fluctuations do not necessarily reflect structural changes.

This study addresses these alternatives by tracing trend continuity over a decade using long-term datasets, documenting verifiable data in short-term events with clear sourcing and timing, thereby avoiding inferences based solely on narrative impressions.

4. Data, Samples, and Methods

4.1 Data Sources

This study utilizes two types of data: The first category is long-term structural data: the UCDP External Support Dataset V.18.1. This dataset includes dyad-year and triad-year observations, covering the period from 1975 to 2017. It provides information on conflict parties, external supporters, types of support, and years of involvement, making it suitable for tracing long-term structural changes. The second category is short-term event data: this paper codes authoritative reports from February 28 to March 4, 2026, constructing an event timeline, casualty snapshots, and spillover indicators. To ensure verifiability, this study retains source links for each recorded entry.

4.2 Definition of the Middle East Sub-Sample

To ensure consistency between the long-term and short-term units of analysis, this paper screens the following 16 countries/regions based on the location field: Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Turkey, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Palestine, and Egypt. Under this selection criteria, the sample coverage of the UCDP dataset is as follows:

There are 335 dyad-year observations, of which 305 have external support recorded;

Triad-year observations total 1,859, including 1,696 with external support recorded;

External support in dyad-year covers 27 conflict IDs, 55 dyad IDs, and 141 supporter IDs.

This coverage structure indicates that externally supported conflicts in the Middle East are not confined to a single theater, but rather represent a superposition of multiple conflicts, multiple actors, and multiple phases.

4.3 Variable Construction

Core variables include:

1. ext_sup: whether external support is present (0/1);

2. ext_nonstate: whether the supporter is a non-state actor (0/1, at triad-year level);

3. decade: ten-year grouping variable, constructed as floor(year/10)*10;

4. dyad_year_count: number of externally supported dyad-years within a decade;

5. supported_share_pct: proportion of externally supported dyad-years within a decade;

6. fatalities: cumulative number of fatalities among conflict parties (as of the snapshot taken on March 4, 2026);

7. share_pct: fatality share of each conflict party.

4.4 Methodological Strategy

This study adopts a combined approach of "descriptive statistics + process tracing" rather than a causal inference model. This

method serves two objectives:

1. To identify "whether the pattern has changed" over the long-term dimension;

2. To trace "how the change occurs" over the short-term dimension.

The specific steps are as follows:

Step 1: Count the number of observations with ext_sup = 1 in each decade at the dyad-year level to identify long-term trends;

Step 2: Analyze the composition of state and non-state supporters at the triad-year level;

Step 3: Code key events from February 28 to March 4, 2026, and extract casualty and spillover indicators;

Step 4: Juxtapose the long-term structural findings with short-term mechanism evidence to test three theoretical propositions.

4.5 Identification Boundaries and Research Ethics

The identification boundaries of this paper are specified as follows:

1. It does not estimate causal coefficients of the kind "a certain policy leads to a certain outcome";

2. The war snapshot data are current, and conclusions are timestamped accordingly;

3. It does not forcibly reconcile figures from inconsistent sources, relying only on verifiable metrics.

Regarding research ethics, this study does not publish unverified wartime details, refrain from secondary speculation on casualty figures, or substitute research narratives for official verification procedures.

5. Empirical Findings: Structural Trends and Crisis Processes

5.1 Long-Term Structural Results: The Nonlinear Evolution of Externally Supported Conflicts

Figure 1: Decadal Distribution of Externally Supported Conflicts in the Middle East

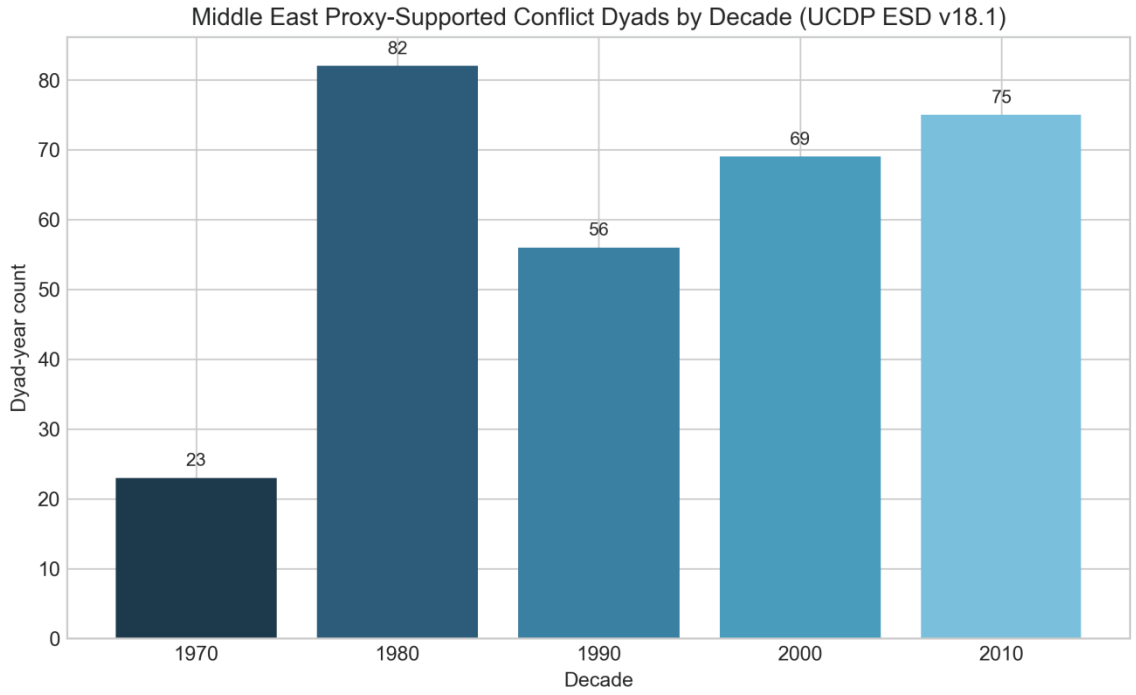


Figure 1 presents the decadal distribution of dyad-year observations in the Middle East. The corresponding values are:

1970s: 23; 1980s: 82; 1990s: 56; 2000s: 69; 2010s: 75

Based on the total dyad-year count under the same selection criteria, the support incidence can be calculated accordingly:

1970s: 82.14%; 1980s: 89.13%; 1990s: 94.92%; 2000s: 93.24%; 2010s: 91.46%

The above results convey three key findings. First, externally supported conflicts in the Middle East did not "naturally subside" after the Cold War; instead, they remained at elevated levels throughout the 2000s and 2010s. Second, the consistently high incidence rate over an extended period indicates that external support is not a marginal variable in the region's conflict structure. Third, the sustained high frequency from the 1980s to the 2010s supports the judgment that "the proxy mechanism exhibits strong resilience."

5.2 Findings on Supporter Structure: Coexistence of State Dominance and Network Diffusion

Triad-year statistics show that among externally supported observations:

State supporters: 1,538

Non-state supporters: 158

State supporters account for approximately 90.7%, while non-state supporters constitute about 9.3%. This result could be easily misinterpreted as "non-state support being insignificant," but a more nuanced interpretation is that resource provision and strategic calibration remain state-dominated, while non-state nodes enhance the transmission efficiency of conflicts through cross-geographical networks.

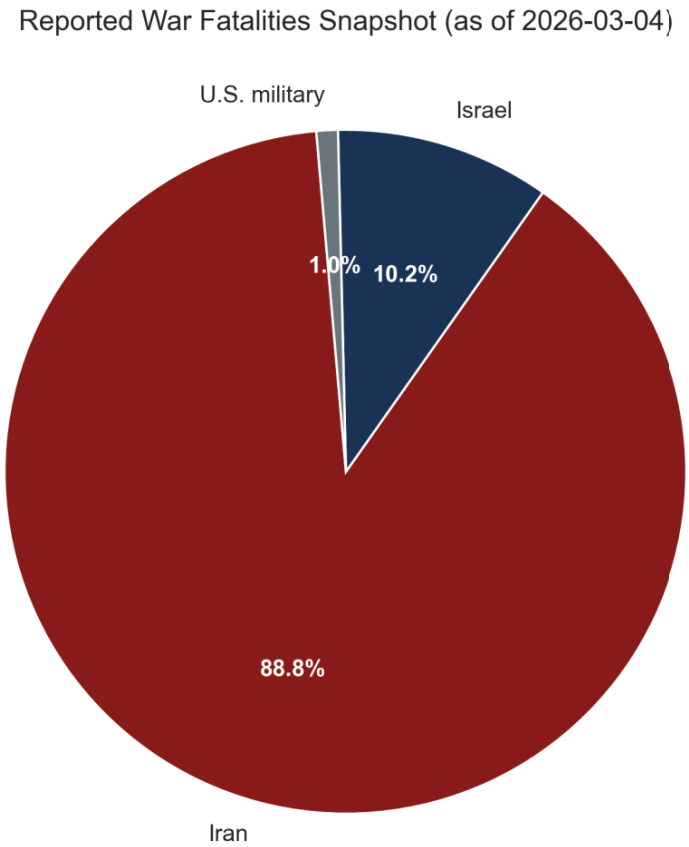
Examining the top ten triad-year observations further reveals the inclusion of both major state governments and organizational nodes with cross-theater influence. This suggests that the organizational structure of conflicts is not a single-layer "state-to-state" interaction, but rather a multi-layered network of "state–organization–theater nodes."

5.3 Tracing the 2026 Crisis Process: High-Intensity Escalation Within a Five-Day Window

Based on the event coding tables (February 28 to March 4, 2026), three nearly simultaneous processes can be observed.

First, military operations escalated rapidly. From February 28, 2026, the war entered a new phase, and by March 4, transnational casualties had already accumulated. Second, the number of involved actors increased. In addition to the main belligerents, security risks at U.S. military bases intensified significantly within the same time window. Third, economic spillovers emerged early. Oil prices, marine insurance premiums, and LNG prices moved in the same direction over a short period. As of March 4, 2026, the fatality snapshot was as follows.

Figure 2: Pie Chart of Fatality Shares as of March 4, 2026



Iran: 787 (88.8%)

Israel: 90 (10.2%)

U.S. military: 9 (1.0%)

Compared with the war snapshot of June 12, 2025, the 2026 data shows higher multi-actor involvement density within a shorter time window. This pattern is consistent with the "proxy-direct parallel model": conflict does not progress along a

single front, but rather exerts simultaneous pressure across multiple nodes.

5.4 Key Timeline

The key events coded in this paper include:

2026-02-28: The war escalated into a new phase;

2026-03-04: Cumulative fatalities were updated, showing an expansion of bilateral casualties;

2026-03-04: Casualties among U.S. personnel were reported, alongside heightened security risks at military bases;

2026-03-04: Energy and shipping spillover indices registered increases.

Juxtaposing these events with long-term trends reveals that the 2026 escalation is not an isolated shock "divorced from history," but rather a high-intensity eruption occurring within a conflict structure characterized by persistently high support rates over time.

6. Mechanism Analysis

6.1 Deterrence Compensation Mechanism

In a crisis marked by high uncertainty, actors often encounter a dilemma: the signals conveyed through proxy means may lack sufficient deterrent weight. While proxy actions offer greater tactical flexibility, they risk being interpreted by the adversary as indicating "limited commitment" or as falling within the opponent's "tolerance threshold." When the sponsoring state perceives that such signals are insufficient to alter the adversary's behavior, it becomes more likely to supplement them with direct strikes of higher visibility. Consequently, proxy actions and direct actions frequently appear concurrently within the same crisis episode, rather than functioning as substitutes for one another.

6.2 Network Amplification Mechanism

Proxy networks consist of numerous dispersed nodes, which makes conflicts more likely to ignite and facilitates their rapid spread. An attack or counterattack at one node can quickly alter the risk perceptions of other nodes, thereby enabling local conflicts to propagate along the organizational network. If direct state-level strikes are superimposed during such periods, the diffusion effect becomes even more pronounced. In the 2026 time window, the simultaneous escalation of base security risks and cross-border casualties provides empirical evidence indicative of this mechanism.

6.3 Spillover Feedback Mechanism

Unlike the linear sequence of "battlefield changes first, market reactions follow" observed in the past, market responses and military escalations now occur almost simultaneously in many conflict episodes. Fluctuations in energy prices, shipping insurance premiums, and supply chain expectations quickly feed back into the policy level, prompting all parties to adjust their operational tempo and negotiation postures. In other words, economic spillover is no longer merely a consequence of war, but actively shapes decision-making throughout the conflict process.

6.4 Mechanism Synthesis

The triple mechanism operates synergistically, forming the following dynamic chain:

1. Proxy actions alone prove insufficient to reset deterrence;
2. Direct strikes are employed to reinforce strategic signals;
3. The proxy network amplifies cross-theater impacts;
4. Economic spillovers feed back into the decision-making system;
5. Conflicts accelerate within a "military–market–politics" tri-domain cycle.

This chain helps explain why contemporary Middle Eastern crises often transition from "controllable friction" to a "multi-node high-risk state" within a short period.

7. Alternative Explanations, Robustness, and Reflections

7.1 Alternative Explanation 1: More Complete Recording Leading to an "Apparent Rise"

One might argue that the increase in externally supported conflicts during the 2010s merely reflects more complete data recording, rather than substantive change. This study offers two responses to this concern. First, all comparisons are conducted within the same database, minimizing discrepancies arising from differing data collection standards. Second, the

core findings of this paper do not rest on "rising absolute numbers," but rather on evidence of "persistently high incidence rates combined with a largely stable participation structure." Even with improved recording, it would be difficult to account for the simultaneous observation of "sustained high incidence" and "structural stability."

7.2 Alternative Explanation 2: The 2026 Escalation as a Short-Term Anomaly

Certainly, the escalation in 2026 was sudden, but the explanatory power of this study does not derive solely from isolated figures; rather, it emerges from comparing these events with long-term structural patterns. Over the long run, externally supported conflicts have persistently occurred at high frequency; in the short term, direct strikes have become demonstrably more concentrated within this specific window. Together, these two dimensions constitute an observable evidentiary chain supporting the "parallel model." To attribute the escalation merely to "contingency" would overlook the fact that the conflict structure already possesses the organizational and technical conditions necessary for rapid intensification.

7.3 Alternative Explanation 3: Media Narratives Amplified Market Reactions

To minimize bias introduced by media amplification, this study codes only verifiable figures from reports, without incorporating subjective inferences. Even so, oil prices, marine insurance premiums, and LNG prices trended in the same direction within the observed time window, indicating that the spillover effect is at least directionally robust. This study does not claim that the magnitude of spillover is constant across all periods, but rather emphasizes a more fundamental observation: within a short time frame, these market variables moved in the same direction.

7.4 Robustness Strategy

The robustness strategies employed in this study currently include:

1. Intertemporal comparison using the same database;
2. Clear specification of the Middle East sample selection criteria;
3. Retention of event-level source links;
4. Maintaining a distinction between "structural conclusions" and "snapshot conclusions";
5. Explicit indication of the statistical cutoff date.

7.5 Research Limitations

This study has three main limitations:

1. The current version of the UCDP ESD dataset extends only to 2017, and therefore cannot directly capture all structural changes occurring in the 2020s;
2. Wartime data from 2026 may be subject to revision upon subsequent verification;
3. Without causal identification, this study cannot estimate the magnitude of net effects between variables.

These limitations do not undermine the study's core conclusion regarding "pattern recognition," but they remind readers to distinguish between different levels of evidence when citing the findings.

8. Discussion

8.1 Upgrading the Crisis Management Framework

If conflicts have entered a stage of "proxy–direct parallelism," traditional ceasefire tools centered on the contact line are no longer sufficient. Policy design should encompass at least three levels:

1. Theater level: reducing the probability of high-intensity firefights along frontlines;
2. Node level: stabilizing the security of cross-border bases and critical infrastructure;
3. Channel level: simultaneously managing risk expectations in energy transportation and marine insurance.

All three levels are indispensable. The paradox of "military cooling down while markets heat up" often arises when only crossfire in the theater is suppressed, while risks at the node and channel levels are overlooked.

8.2 Transparency and the Control of Miscalculation

In the parallel mode, the number of actors increases and the tempo of operations accelerates, significantly raising the potential costs of miscalculation. It is necessary to establish a minimum information transparency mechanism, including:

1. Prompt notification of strikes on critical infrastructure;

2. Clarification of casualty figures with updated timestamps;

3. Clear distinction between tactical operations and strategic signaling.

Transparency does not require the disclosure of sensitive military details, but serves to prevent secondary escalation driven by information gaps.

8.3 Collaborative Governance of Economic Security

Energy and shipping spillovers have become integral variables in the dynamics of warfare. Policy institutions should position economic security tools proactively rather than reactively. Key measures include:

1. Establishing monitoring thresholds for insurance premium fluctuations during conflict windows;

2. Activating coordination between strategic reserves and emergency transportation plans;

3. Promoting joint risk assessments across energy, transportation, and financial regulatory domains.

Conclusion

This study proposes and substantiates the proposition of "proxy–direct parallelism" in the context of evolving proxy warfare amid regional order transformation in the Middle East. By juxtaposing long-term structural data with short-term event-level evidence, the paper draws the following conclusions:

First, externally supported conflicts are a long-term structural feature of the Middle East, exhibiting no simple linear decline. Second, state supporters remain the dominant actors, while non-state network nodes significantly influence the speed of conflict propagation. Third, the 2026 Iran war exhibited the defining characteristics of the parallel mode within a short time window: battlefield escalation, cross-border involvement, and economic spillover occurred simultaneously.

These findings suggest that the study of proxy warfare needs to shift its focus from tool substitution to tool combination, and that crisis management must move from single-line de-escalation to coordinated action across nodes.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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