

# Shining a Light on Iran's Shadow War

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## Iran's Gray Zone Strategy

Iran is running the world's most effective gray zone campaign and hardly anyone has noticed. By combining a punishment strategy covered in plausible deniability with an influence strategy under the threshold of conflict, Iran is quietly reclaiming its place as the regional hegemon of the Persian Gulf. Iran employs ballistic missiles, maritime militias, mines, and drones to threaten international chokepoints in the Red Sea, Straits of Hormuz, and Bab Al Mandeb while simultaneously unleashing terrorism, bribery, disinformation, and weapons proliferation to influence regional adversaries (Eisenstadt 2021, 79, 81). Two recent articles shed light on Iran's multipronged gray zone campaign within the context of the Israel-Hamas War.

Iranian aligned militia groups have escalated its coercive attacks killing three U.S. troops in Jordan to impose cost on U.S. regional presence.<sup>1</sup> Iran uses a punishment strategy delivered by no-name proxies to coerce a U.S. withdrawal from the region to seize key terrain in the Levant and hold Israel at risk. Such gray zone tactics are ambiguous in nature designed to reap the gains normally associated with war without crossing the threshold of conflict (Brands 2016, 2). By

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<sup>1</sup> [3 U.S. Service Members Killed, Others Injured in Jordan Following Drone Attack > U.S. Department of Defense > Defense Department News](#)

leveraging proxies to carry out attacks against U.S. forces, Iran shrouds its complicity in ambiguity and prevents local escalation from threatening war with the U.S. (Brands 2016, 5).

The brilliance of the gray zone strategy lies in the ability to capitalize on gains normally achieved under the great cost of war. Iran will not soon forget the millions of lives lost in the Iran-Iraq War and instead elects to defer such cost to expendable Shia militia groups across the Levant. To achieve its broader goals of reclaiming regional hegemony over the Persian Gulf, Iran combines its proxy gray zone approach in the Levant with hybrid warfare in the Red Sea.

Houthi rebels struck the British-registered Rubymar vessel in the Red Sea disrupting international commerce and claiming the spoils of international commerce for themselves.<sup>2</sup> Iran seeks to erode Western influence in the Middle East by undermining international norms while simultaneously stealing vital economic goods from international shipping to sustain its ailing economy. Hybrid warfare combines the effect of both regular and irregular forces in an integrated concept to perform complex operations (Gaub 2015, 1). By deploying the Houthi rebels in tandem with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Iran can use conventional naval forces to deter intervention by the international community while conducting illegal operations to seize goods with irregular naval forces in the gray zone. The cornerstone of the strategy lies in the synergy gained between the two elements at play. One element capitalizes on the fear of sparking a regional war with Iran to freeze the international response while the other exempts itself from international rule of law and the associated expectations for state behavior (Eisenstadt 2021, 91). Iran's hybrid warfare concept holds the U.S. captive to international norms while subverting the same constructs in pursuit of a new regional norm favorable to Tehran's interests.

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<sup>2</sup> Reuters: [reuters.com/world/yemens-houthis-say-ship-attacked-gulf-aden-may-sink-2024-02-19/](https://www.reuters.com/world/yemens-houthis-say-ship-attacked-gulf-aden-may-sink-2024-02-19/)

### **Principles for Shaping the Gray Zone**

The key to maintaining U.S. global predominance is more about shaping and preparing the environment for future conflict than the threat of conflict itself. Deterrence theory hinges on communicating credible tripwires to conflict enforced by a firm commitment to follow through with force (Cimbala 2016, 58). However, deterrence theory best succeeds if it threatens a flashpoint when the threshold of war has clearly been crossed. Any ambiguity in deterrence leaves room for adversaries to salami slice commitments and pursue asymmetric ways of eroding the status quo. Hence the evolution of gray zone tactics and hybrid warfare as the timeless response to the conventional principles of war (Handel 2016, 2). When faced with overmatch by U.S. deterrents, adversaries choose to deny warfighting capability, seek plausible deniability beneath the threshold of conflict, and employ proxy forces to defer the cost of escalation. To meet the challenges of adversary asymmetry, three guiding U.S. principles can contest Iranian influence in the gray zone: transparency, partnerships, and integration. Transparency can illuminate gray zone ambiguity, partnerships can contest proxy influence, and an integrated approach can combine instruments of power to match the hybrid methods of global adversaries.

The first principle the U.S. must employ is transparency by using its technological edge to make information available to the public. Gray zone actors attempt to use ambiguity and misinformation to secure objectives without paying the traditional costs of war. For example, Russia blurred the conventional lines of conflict when it annexed Crimea in 2014 using 'little green men,' active measures, and cyber warfare to masquerade its intentions in a smokescreen of ambiguity (Galeotti 2016, 4). To shun such behavior requires transparency and awareness by the public to reveal and attribute the ambiguous behavior of gray zone actors (Mazarr 2105, 145). Doing so requires crowd sourcing, open-source intelligence, and grassroots social media to

dispel misinformation and propaganda. The way Ukraine combats Russian tactics today offers a real-world example of transparency in practice from the openly available intelligence used to warn of the impending invasion to the crowd-sourced solutions for ISR and C-UAS. Contesting the gray zone requires investment in a wide array of tools and technologies not exclusive to the military instrument of power to shape global narratives in favor of U.S. interests and build public resilience to misinformation (Morris et. al 2019, xvi). For the U.S. to maintain the moral high ground over gray zone tactics requires increased transparency and awareness.

The second principle the U.S. must practice is leading the response to proxy threats through local partnerships. One leg of a hybrid warfare strategy involves employing proxy forces to destabilize, terrorize, and circumvent the international order to shroud sponsorship and prevent escalation to war (Brands 2016, 5). For example, Iran has mobilized a network of Shia proxy forces across the Middle East using covert, paramilitary, and information operations to coerce regional rivals, influence potential partners, and destabilize the Middle East for its gain (Morris et. al 2019, ix). Countering a proxy strategy requires the U.S. to reveal proxy-sponsor relationships through transparency while leading the response to proxy brush fires through local partners. Two elements are key to a partner approach: collective action and deniability. The U.S. can tether itself to a regional band of like-minded states through coalitions, institutions, and multilateral processes by leveraging its role as the leader of the world order. Collective action increases public pressure against the sponsor and threatens a wider conflict if proxies continue unabated (Morris et. al 2019, xiii). Subsequently, when collective action fails to deter proxy aggression, the U.S. can act unilaterally or enable regional actors, like Israel, to strike back while providing deniability to the larger coalition (Goldenberg et. al 2020, 14). For the U.S. to combat proxy forces as an instrument of hybrid warfare requires partnerships and collectivity.

The final principle of a U.S. approach is operationalizing a whole-of-government response to hybrid warfare through improved interagency integration. The second leg of a hybrid warfare strategy combines the effect of regular forces with proxies to perform complementary operations (Gaub 2015, 1). Adversaries attempt to hold the U.S. beholden to the international order while subverting rule of law using a multi-pronged way of war leveraging diplomatic, information, military, and economic instruments to further their interests (Eisenstadt 2021, 77). For example, the PRC uses a centralized approach aligning propaganda, legal structures, economic pressure, and covert support to non-state actors to further its global agenda to usurp the U.S. as a global hegemon (Carment and Belo 2020, 22). To contest such an approach, the U.S. must blend its approach to warfare electing to meet gray zone adversaries in the seams of the international order. The U.S. must select from the whole menu of tactics and technologies to create a hybrid form of warfare not constrained by the models of the past (Mazarr 2015, 60). Doing so requires the alignment of economic deeds and diplomatic words to the application of military power through an integrated approach to global campaigning (DeGennaro 2017, 3-4). An integrated approach would sustain U.S. legitimacy under international law, reveal sponsor-proxy relationships through public transparency, seek aggressive diplomacy to create collective action against non-state aggressors, and reinforce deterrent actions as a clear threat to state belligerents (Morris et. al 2019, 144). Future U.S. national security strategy must leverage an integrated interagency response to hybrid warfare.

To meet the challenges of future conflict, the three guiding principles for U.S. strategy in the gray zone are transparency, partnerships, and integration. Transparency allows the U.S. to reveal gray zone tactics using increased transparency, resilience, and public awareness. For the U.S. to combat hybrid warfare requires local partnerships to contest proxy influence through

collectivity. Finally, U.S. strategy must include an integrated approach which combines instruments of power to match the multi-pronged effort of global adversaries. The future of U.S. national security lies in shaping the environment and preventing war by using an integrated approach to foreign policy bounded in the enduring values of a U.S.-led international order: transparency and partnerships.