

PROXY WARS AND PERIPHERAL BATTLEFIELDS: THE ISRAEL–IRAN CONFLICT AND EMERGING SECURITY RISKS IN AFRICA

Kingsley Chigozie Udegbonam, Ph.D.

Department of Political Science and Diplomacy, University of Nigeria,
Nsukka (UNN), Nigeria

Dr. Onyinye Nkechi Onwuka, Ph.D.

ECOWAS Commission, Abuja, Nigeria

Sophia Daniel Sonime, Ph.D.

Department of Peace and Conflict Studies, Ignatius Ajuru University, Rivers State, Nigeria

Uduak Uduak Ituen

National Institute for Security Studies,
Lower Usama DAM, Ushafa, Federal Capital Territory, Nigeria

Abstract

The Israel–Iran conflict has escalated recently, with Israeli airstrikes and Iranian reprisals increasing the risk of broader regional confrontation. Although centred in the Middle East, the conflict’s repercussions are increasingly visible across parts of Africa. Using a qualitative, document-based case study approach, this article examines the emerging security risks facing African states. It analyses how proxy warfare dynamics, ideological spillovers, and transnational militant linkages, including Iran’s renewed engagement in Sudan, maritime insecurity in the Red Sea, and Israel’s expanding diplomatic and security ties in East Africa, may draw segments of the continent into the conflict’s periphery. The study argues that Middle Eastern rivalries can shape militant alignments and security calculations within Africa, particularly in areas where governance fragility creates opportunities for external influence. It concludes by calling for a more anticipatory African policy response grounded in geopolitical awareness and institutional resilience to mitigate the risks of entanglement in external power competition.

Keywords: Israel–Iran conflict, proxy warfare, regional security complex, maritime security, Israeli diplomacy.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Israel–Iran conflict, a decades-long geopolitical rivalry anchored in ideological opposition, strategic competition, and mutual suspicion, has escalated dramatically since mid-June 2025. Israeli airstrikes have targeted Iranian military assets, notably Quds Force commanders and nuclear-linked facilities, in Syria, Lebanon, and Iran itself (Reuters, 2025; Washington Post, 2025). In retaliation, Iran, often through its proxy Hezbollah, has launched coordinated missile and drone

strikes against Israeli positions and civilian infrastructure, marking a shift from covert proxy engagements to increasingly overt military confrontation (Washington Post, 2025; Reuters, 2025).

These developments come on the heels of Iran's large-scale April 2024 missile and drone attack on Israel, the first direct strike since 1979, demonstrating Iran's willingness to confront Israel beyond proxy intermediaries (Reuters, 2025; Washington Post, 2025). The region is now at risk of broader war, with the United States and Gulf states on high alert and the implications extending well beyond the Middle East into Africa.

Africa seems to be getting more involved in this growing conflict, shown by several connected factors: the spread of ideas among militant Islamist groups, Iran sending drones and weapons to countries like Sudan, Israel trying to strengthen its security and intelligence ties in East Africa, and increased danger at sea along the Red Sea route. African states, often characterised by fragile governance and porous borders, are therefore exposed to new strategic pressures arising from a conflict that was initially distant from their shores.

Despite this growing exposure, limited research has been conducted by scholars on Africa's evolving role in the Israel–Iran confrontation. Most analyses are confined to Middle Eastern theatres or Western policy responses, thereby overlooking African theatres where proxy networks and external influence may be taking root. This paper aims to fill that gap by posing the following guiding questions:

1. What emerging security risks does the intensifying Israeli–Iran conflict generate for African states?
2. How are militant groups, national governments, and regional bodies in Africa responding?
3. What strategic adjustments are required to shield Africa from becoming a peripheral battlefield?

Grounded in proxy warfare theory (Lai & Rodman, 2019) and regional security complex theory (Buzan & Wæver, 2003), this article contends that Africa's security landscape is increasingly reshaped by external entanglements in Middle Eastern rivalries. By framing Africa as a peripheral battlefield, the study emphasises the convergence of the ideological, operational, maritime, and political dimensions of conflict exposure. The following sections will explain the literature review (Section 2), the methods used (Section 3), and the theories behind the study (Section 4); look at historical examples of proxy involvement (Section 5); examine specific cases in Africa (Sections 6–8); and finish with strategic advice that addresses Africa's specific challenges.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The phenomenon of proxy warfare has become a defining feature of contemporary international conflict, evolving significantly from its Cold War roots. Traditionally conceptualised within the principal-agent framework, proxy wars are conflicts in which external actors, whether state or non-state, engage indirectly by supporting local agents in pursuing their strategic objectives. This form of conflict enables states to exert influence, gain leverage, and pursue foreign policy goals while avoiding the political, economic, and human costs of direct military intervention. As geopolitical competition intensifies in various regions, particularly in the Middle East and increasingly in Africa, scholarly attention to proxy wars has expanded, resulting in new theoretical debates and empirical case studies.

Recent studies highlight the shortcomings of the traditional principal-agent theory, which assumes a one-way relationship where a powerful actor (the principal) hires a weaker agent (the agent) to act on their behalf. While this model captures aspects of control, delegation, and plausible deniability, it fails to account for the complexity and fluidity of contemporary proxy relationships. Abbott and Willis (2021) argue that proxy wars are often embedded in negotiated and co-dependent arrangements, where agents may have their agendas and manipulate their sponsors as much as they direct them to. Similar to this, Farasoo (2022) underscores that ideology, identity, and opportunity, rather than strict control mechanisms, often shape the evolution of proxy relationships.

Building on this critique, McFate and Soeters (2022) propose a market-based theory of modern proxy warfare. According to them, the global diffusion of weapons, training, and funding mechanisms has created a "marketplace of violence", where states and non-state actors transact with influence and operational capacity. In this view, proxies are not merely passive instruments but active participants in a deregulated environment of military contracting, often overlapping with mercenaries, warlords, and ideologically motivated insurgents. Byman (2020) supports the argument by noting that many modern proxy relationships, especially in the Middle East, are transactional and opportunistic rather than based on long-term alliances.

Typologies of proxy wars have also expanded. Rauta (2020) offers a comprehensive typology that categorises proxy wars by their degree of alignment, operational control, and strategic depth. He distinguishes between sponsorship (low control, high deniability), orchestration (moderate control and mutual interests), and delegation (high control, minimal autonomy). These distinctions help elucidate why certain proxies maintain loyalty to their sponsors, while others deviate or change alliances, a phenomenon evident on the intricate battlefields of Syria and Libya.

In the aftermath of the Arab Spring, proxy warfare has intensified across the Middle East and North Africa. Syria is frequently cited as the paradigmatic proxy war of the 21st century, involving actors such as Iran, Russia, Turkey, the United States, and various Gulf states supporting opposing factions. Berti and Paris (2020) document how the Syrian battlefield evolved into a multi-tiered proxy environment, where overlapping interests and ideological divisions created a prolonged and

intractable conflict. The protraction of the Syrian war is often attributed to the conflicting goals and diverging strategies of the external actors who use local militias to fight on their behalf.

Yemen also serves as a telling case. The Saudi-led coalition's support for the Hadi government and Iran's backing of the Houthis have turned the conflict into a binary regional rivalry. Juneau (2020) emphasises that while Iran's investment in the Houthis is relatively low-cost compared to its other regional involvement, it yields significant strategic returns by tying down Saudi military resources and disrupting Red Sea security. The conflict's impact on humanitarian conditions has drawn international condemnation, but the structural logic of proxy warfare, low cost, high ambiguity, and strategic depth continues to incentivise such engagements.

Libya has likewise become a complex proxy theatre, with the UAE, Turkey, Egypt, and Russia intervening on opposing sides of the civil conflict. According to Megerisi (2021), the presence of foreign mercenaries, surveillance drones, and military equipment underscores the technological sophistication of modern proxy wars. This proliferation of actors has complicated peacemaking efforts and weakened Libya's institutional capacity to restore sovereignty. Libya demonstrates how proxy wars can fragment national authority and entrench war economies, especially when there are no strong institutions to regulate external influence.

Beyond the Middle East, there is growing scholarly interest in the global diffusion of proxy war practices. Kilcullen (2020) identifies an international trend in which asymmetric conflict is increasingly outsourced to hybrid actors such as non-state militias, private military companies, and ideological insurgents, who can be managed from a distance. Technological advances such as drone warfare, cyber operations, and encrypted communications have facilitated the remote control and surveillance of proxies, thus reducing direct exposure for sponsoring states. This shift has eroded traditional distinctions between war and peace, combatant and non-combatant, and internal and external threats.

The role of ideology in shaping proxy dynamics has also come under renewed examination. Farasoo (2022) suggests that, often, ideological affinity rather than material benefit drives alliances. For example, Hezbollah's relationship with Iran rests not only on shared goals but also on a coherent ideological narrative of anti-Zionism and resistance. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has systematically cultivated networks in Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, and beyond, embedding them in both sectarian and geopolitical discourses. Zelin (2021) highlights how Salafi-jihadist groups have also adopted transnational ideological frames that mimic proxy logics, even when there is no formal sponsor-agent relationship.

In Africa, literature on proxy warfare is still emerging, but recent conflicts increasingly entangle the continent in global proxy dynamics. Reports in 2024 confirmed the delivery of Iranian drones, including the Mohajer-6, to the Sudan Armed Forces, reinforcing Sudan's role as a site of Iranian engagement (Habtoor, 2022). Despite being nominally state-to-state, this engagement bears the hallmark of proxy warfare: external military assistance aimed at shifting the balance in an internal

conflict with wider regional implications. The Iranian–Israeli rivalry has thereby opened a new front in Africa, with Sudan as a peripheral but strategically significant battlefield.

Libya continues to serve as a prime example of proxy militarisation on African territory. Russian mercenaries, particularly the Wagner Group, have operated alongside Libyan National Army forces, while Turkey has deployed Syrian fighters to support the Tripoli government. Donelli and Gonzalez-Levaggi (2021) argue that Libya illustrates how failed states provide fertile ground for external actors to wage proxy wars without accountability. These interventions have undermined Libya's sovereignty and destabilised its neighbours through arms proliferation, migrant flows, and transnational criminal networks.

In Nigeria, the Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN) has drawn attention for its ideological and symbolic affiliation with Iran. While there is little evidence of material support, the group's public alignment with Tehran's revolutionary values and its annual Quds Day marches suggest a form of ideological proxy behaviour (Ogunrotifa, 2020). Such behaviour raises questions about the boundaries of proxy warfare, including whether it must involve military assistance or whether ideological penetration alone constitutes a form of soft proxy engagement.

Accountability remains a significant challenge in proxy conflicts. Because principals often operate covertly and deny formal involvement, violations of international law go unpunished. Civilians frequently find themselves caught in the crossfire, as proxies often act with less discipline and are more prone to human rights abuses. Marten (2022) argues that the use of proxies contributes to the erosion of humanitarian norms, especially when there is no incentive for principals to regulate their agents. Moreover, the proliferation of proxies leads to fragmented battlefields, where overlapping alliances and competing goals make peace negotiations exceedingly difficult.

Another central theme in the literature is the risk of escalation and loss of control. While proxy wars are initially attractive for their deniability and cost-efficiency, they often produce unintended consequences. Agents may pursue independent agendas, shift allegiances, or provoke reactions that spiral into broader conflicts. Byman (2020) notes that the United States, Russia, and Iran have all faced backlash from empowered proxies who later acted against their sponsors' interests. This unpredictability challenges the strategic logic of proxy warfare and highlights its double-edged nature.

Finally, there is growing concern that proxy warfare is becoming a normal feature of the international system. As the use of direct military force becomes politically costly and legally constrained, proxy engagement offers an expedient alternative. However, this trend weakens the international order by encouraging conflicts that deliberately obscure responsibility and accountability. The result is a strategic environment where war is perpetual, peace is elusive, and weak states become arenas for external manipulation.

In summary, contemporary scholarship on proxy wars reflects a deeper appreciation for the actors, motivations, mechanisms, and consequences of indirect conflict. While the traditional principal-agent model provides a starting point, recent contributions demonstrate the importance of more

flexible, context-sensitive frameworks that consider ideology, technology, and local agency. The literature also points to the growing relevance of proxy conflict in Africa, particularly in the context of global rivalries such as Iran versus Israel. As proxy wars proliferate, their implications for sovereignty, conflict resolution, and international norms demand urgent scholarly and policy attention.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design anchored on document analysis and case study methodology. The aim is to explore how the Israel–Iran conflict, through proxy dynamics and trans-regional competition, is reshaping Africa’s security landscape.

The analysis draws on primary and secondary data sources, including:

- Official reports and policy documents from institutions such as the African Union Peace and Security Council, ECOWAS, and the UN Security Council;
- Open-source intelligence and investigative journalism from credible international outlets (e.g., *Reuters*, *Bloomberg*, *France 24*);
- Scholarly literature published between 2019 and 2025, sourced from peer-reviewed journals, think tank publications, and institutional policy briefs;
- Conflict timelines and escalation data are based on publicly documented military engagements and diplomatic responses.

A case-based analytical approach was employed, focusing on Sudan, Nigeria, the Red Sea corridor, and broader West and East African security complexes. Purposive sampling selected these cases based on their strategic relevance, exposure to proxy engagement, and documented links to Israeli or Iranian influence.

The study uses ideas from proxy warfare theory and regional security complex theory to look at how different groups are connected, their beliefs, and how strategies affect each other. The coding categories included proxy alignment, ideological narratives, external military partnerships, and maritime disruption.

Given the evolving nature of conflict and real-time developments in 2025, the study integrates a limited degree of real-time event tracking, triangulating data across multiple sources to ensure validity and minimise bias.

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To analyse Africa’s emerging role as a peripheral battlefield in the ongoing Israel–Iran conflict, this study draws on two complementary theories: Proxy Warfare Theory and Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT).

Proxy Warfare Theory

Proxy warfare involves states using local non-state actors to pursue geopolitical objectives, allowing denial, cost avoidance, and strategic influence without overt military commitment (Morris, 1991; McFate & Soeters, 2022). Abbott et al. (2021) highlight that today's proxy conflicts go beyond basic models of control, showing that main state actors and their proxies have similar stories that influence how they see friends and enemies (Farasoo, 2022). Iran's use of Hezbollah, Hamas, and Houthi forces exemplifies this model, demonstrating how ideologically aligned proxies can project power regionally (Nasr, 2025; Shanahan, 2024). Applying this to Africa, Iran's active support for militant groups in Sudan, Nigeria, and West Africa points toward deepening proxy linkages beyond the Middle East.

Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT)

Developed by Buzan and Wæver (2003), RSCT posits that security dynamics are geographically clustered; states interlinked by shared threats form Regional Security Complexes (RSCs), where their security is interdependent, while interaction with outsiders is limited (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Buzan et al., 1998). While RSCT was initially designed for regions like Europe and the Middle East, it has been successfully applied to Africa (Walsh, 2021), where overlapping regional security subsystems (e.g., the Sahel, Horn, and Great Lakes) show that instability easily travels across boundaries (Walsh, 2021; Kebede, 2020).

The Israel–Iran confrontation exemplifies a super-complex scenario—two regional complexes (the Middle East and Africa) converging through military, ideological, and maritime nexuses (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Jarzabek, 2021). The inclusion of African theatre disrupts established insularity and suggests emerging trans-regional security interdependence.

By combining proxy warfare theory with the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT),

- We trace how Middle Eastern states weaponise transnational proxies to target adversaries while legitimising their involvement through securitisation and ideological alignment.
- We observe how Africa, particularly the Red Sea corridor and weak states like Sudan and Nigeria, becomes entangled in these cross-regional security dynamics.
- RSCT allows us to map spillover effects across geographic spaces, such as how a conflict ignited in the Middle East produces security externalities that are felt in Africa.

This integrated theoretical foundation enables systematic exploration of:

1. Operational linkages between Iran-linked proxies and African jihadist/insurgent groups.
2. Maritime vulnerabilities are mainly due to the Red Sea's proximity to African coastlines.
3. Political securitisation and alignment are evident in African UN voting patterns, regional diplomacy, and elite narratives.

In the next section, we will apply these theories empirically, beginning with historical trajectories of proxy engagement and progressing through current case-based analyses in Africa.

5. HISTORICAL PATTERNS OF PROXY ENGAGEMENT

This section traces the trajectory of proxy dynamics, first within the Middle East and then as they extend into Africa, including Iran's drone-backed military engagement in Sudan and Israel's evolving security footprint in East Africa. These historical patterns set the stage for the contemporary diffusion of the Israeli-Iran conflict beyond its regional origins.

Middle East Origins of Proxy Warfare

Iran and Israel have engaged in proxy strategies for decades, primarily utilising non-state actors such as Hezbollah, Hamas, and Houthi groups to project influence and counter their adversaries (Nasr, 2025; Shanahan, 2024). This model adheres to proxy warfare theory, wherein states transfer risk, costs, and political deniability onto aligned militant proxies (Morris, 1991; McFate & Soeters, 2022). The pattern of securitisation alignment, in which state and proxy narratives fuse into coherent strategic messaging, has enabled these actors to wage indirect conflict while avoiding overt war (Farasoo, 2022; Abbott & Willis, 2021).

Iran's Proxy Extension into Africa

Recent years have seen Iran extend its proxy toolkit into Africa, particularly via military and logistical support:

- Sudan (2023–present): Since renewing diplomatic ties in October 2023, Tehran has supplied Mohajer-6 and Ababil drones to the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF), significantly bolstering SAF counter-offensives in the civil war and aiding in retaking Khartoum (Reuters, 2024; Habtoor, 2024; BBC Summary). Iran has also reportedly participated in intelligence sharing and SAF training initiatives (Habtoor, 2024; Wikipedia, 2025).
- The inflow of drones altered the balance of power across Sudan's conflict zones, including drone-assisted SAF operations around key urban and Red Sea areas, signifying Iran's deeper military footprint in Africa (Financial Times, 2025; Bloomberg, 2024).

Beyond Sudan, Iran has pursued logistics and security ties in West Africa and aims to establish dual-use ports on the Red Sea coast, aligning with broader strategic goals (Wikipedia, 2025).

Israel's Security Diplomacy in Africa

Since the 2010s, Israel has strategically enhanced its security presence in Africa:

- There has been a marked increase in military, intelligence, and counterterrorism cooperation with countries such as Ethiopia and Kenya (INSS, 2022), supporting narratives that portray Africa as a security priority rather than just a development partner.

- Israel has exported surveillance technologies, drones, and military training, along with deploying advisory personnel to assist in counter-insurgency operations (INSS, 2022; Al Jazeera, 2016).
- The Covid-era Abraham Accords (2020 onwards) involved Israel strengthening ties with North and East Africa, with Egypt, Morocco, and Kenya playing intermediary roles (INSS, 2022; INSS Gaza analysis, 2023).

Convergence and Trans-Regional Spillover

Tracing these historical paths demonstrates how Middle Eastern proxy practices, using drones, intelligence, and militant ideologies, have leapfrogged into African arenas. According to the Regional Security Complex Theory, the Red Sea and Horn of Africa have become zones of super-complex security interdependence, where rivalries between Middle Eastern powers directly intersect with African state fragilities (Donelli & Gonzalez-Levaggi, 2021).

Proxy warfare is no longer confined to regional battlegrounds. Instead, it spills into African theatres, reconfiguring local civil wars (e.g., Sudan), altering maritime routes, and reshaping political alliances. These patterns highlight the reason Africa has become a significant, yet understudied, front in the confrontation between Israel and Iran.

6. AFRICA AS A PERIPHERAL BATTLEFIELD

The intensifying confrontation between Israel and Iran has now spread beyond the Levant. Africa, particularly its Red Sea corridor, conflict-affected states, and diplomatically fragile regions, has emerged as a secondary arena for influence, military manoeuvring, and proxy alignment. This section examines how both Iran and Israel are projecting power into Africa and how African states and non-state actors are becoming entangled in their rivalry.

Iran's Strategic Re-entry into Sudan

Sudan represents the most concrete case of Iranian re-engagement in Africa. After years of diplomatic estrangement, Tehran resumed relations with Khartoum in 2023 and, by 2024, began supplying drones, specifically the Mohajer-6 and Ababil-3, to the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) (Habtoor, 2024; Reuters, 2024). These drones were reportedly used in SAF operations to regain control of Khartoum and defend Red Sea positions from the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), significantly altering the military balance (BBC Monitoring, 2024; Bloomberg, 2024).

Iran's strategic interests in Sudan go beyond immediate battlefield advantage. Analysts suggest that Tehran seeks to regain access to Port Sudan for dual-use logistics, both commercial and military, potentially expanding its influence along the Red Sea (Donelli & Gonzalez-Levaggi, 2021). This positioning aligns with Iran's long-term maritime rivalry with Israel and its desire to pressure Israeli-linked trade and security corridors.

Hezbollah and West African Militant Networks

While evidence remains mostly indirect, observers have long suspected Iranian influence among Shi'a communities in Nigeria and parts of West Africa. The Islamic Movement in Nigeria (IMN), led by Sheikh Ibrahim Zakzaky, has expressed support for the Iranian Revolution and vocally aligns with Iran's anti-Israel rhetoric (Ogunrotifa, 2020). Although the Nigerian government has designated the group as a security threat, Iran has condemned this designation, framing it as persecution of Shi'a Muslims.

Analysts caution that Iranian outreach, particularly through religious seminaries and cultural organisations, may serve as soft-power channels to shape militant ideologies, build networks, and generate sympathy for Iran's regional confrontations (Farasoo, 2022). While the IMN has not been definitively linked to armed violence on Iran's behalf, the potential for ideological alignment and escalation exists, particularly in periods of broader regional conflict.

Israel's Deepening Security Presence in East Africa

Israel's security footprint in Africa has expanded significantly in the last decade. In countries like Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda, Israel has supplied military technology, training, and intelligence support as part of counterterrorism cooperation frameworks (INSS, 2022; Berman, 2020). These relationships have been largely transactional but are now acquiring a geostrategic dimension in light of the threat from Iran.

Israeli naval intelligence is reported to have operated near Djibouti and Eritrean waters, monitoring Iranian-linked shipping and missile activity across the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait (Donelli & Gonzalez-Levaggi, 2021). With the resurgence of instability in the Red Sea, particularly during the Houthi-linked blockades, Israel's collaboration with East African nations has become increasingly robust and militarised.

Maritime Insecurity and Strategic Chokepoints

The Red Sea has emerged as a key security theatre where the Israel–Iran conflict intersects with African vulnerabilities. Beginning in late 2023 and escalating through 2025, Houthi militants, widely understood to be Iranian proxies, have repeatedly targeted international vessels, including those suspected of Israeli ties (France 24, 2024). These attacks have forced commercial rerouting around the Cape of Good Hope, significantly increasing costs for African coastal economies dependent on Suez-linked shipping (Financial Times, 2024).

African ports such as Port Sudan, Berbera, and Djibouti are thus at the centre of new geopolitical contests over maritime control. Iran's push to re-establish maritime influence in this zone is perceived as part of a broader strategy to encircle or pressure Israel's access points via Africa's maritime borders.

Implications for Fragile and Conflict-Affected States

Sudan is not alone. Fragile states across the Sahel and Horn of Africa, already beset by insurgencies, ungoverned spaces, and external dependency, may become low-cost battlefields for external powers. Just as Syria became a laboratory for proxy warfare, African conflicts may serve as testing grounds for Iranian drones, Israeli cyber tools, and proxy insurgent strategies.

This raises the likelihood of indirect entanglement for African states through arms flows, ideological penetration, militant coordination, and political pressure. These spillovers heighten insecurity, overwhelm state capacity, and may undermine regional integration efforts such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA).

7. MILITANT NETWORKS AND IDEOLOGICAL ALIGNMENT

One of the most potent, though less visible, spillover effects of the Israel–Iran confrontation is the ideological mobilisation and narrative alignment of African militant groups with Middle Eastern actors. These alignments do not always manifest as formal alliances or logistical cooperation but rather as ideological convergence, particularly around anti-Zionist, anti-Western, and sectarian narratives.

The Palestinian Struggle as a Mobilising Narrative

The Israeli–Palestinian conflict, as an integral aspect of the Israeli–Iran rivalry, remains a powerful symbolic catalyst for extremist mobilisation across Africa. Jihadist groups such as Boko Haram, Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), and al-Shabaab have periodically invoked Palestinian suffering to frame their anti-government and anti-Western campaigns in broader religious terms (Botha, 2022; Onyango, 2023). While these groups have Sunni Islamist foundations and are not ideologically aligned with Iran's Shi'a revolutionary doctrine, their rhetorical alignment against Israel creates fertile ground for indirect sympathy or collaboration.

Social media platforms, sermons, and propaganda videos amplify these narratives, portraying Israel as a Western proxy oppressing Muslims globally. As Farasoo (2022) argues, this phenomenon, termed securitisation alignment, allows local conflicts to be ideologically reframed in support of distant geopolitical causes.

Shi'a Mobilisation and Iranian Soft Power in Nigeria

Nigeria hosts the most visible Shi'a movement in sub-Saharan Africa: IMN, led by Sheikh Ibrahim Zakzaky. Though officially banned in 2019, the group continues to hold annual Quds Day marches and vocally supports Iran's position in the Israel–Palestine conflict (Ogunrotifa, 2020). The IMN draws theological, financial, and moral inspiration from Tehran, often acting as an informal ideological outpost of Iranian foreign policy in West Africa.

There is currently no definitive evidence linking the IMN to armed activities on Iran's behalf. However, its sustained mobilisation and continued persecution by the Nigerian state could deepen its radicalisation trajectory, particularly in the context of heightened tensions in the Middle East.

Scholars have warned that soft-power infrastructures, such as religious seminaries and cultural organisations sponsored directly or indirectly by Iran, can evolve into platforms for proxy recruitment (Berti & Paris, 2020).

The Sunni Salafist Response: ISWAP and AQIM

Paradoxically, the expansion of Iranian influence in Africa has prompted reactive radicalisation among Sunni extremist groups. For instance, ISWAP has explicitly denounced Shi'ism and has threatened Shi'a communities in northern Nigeria, branding them as “infidels” aligned with Iran (Botha & Abdile, 2023). Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), while regionally focused, has increasingly invoked transnational Islamic solidarity themes, especially around Palestine, in its messaging.

This dynamic mirrors the sectarian logic of Middle Eastern conflicts, where Sunni-Shi'a polarisation drives proxy alignments. Thus, as Iran extends its influence into Sudan, Nigeria, and the Red Sea corridor, Sunni extremist groups may accelerate anti-Shi'a or anti-Iranian campaigns in retaliation, creating layered and unpredictable forms of ideological warfare (Zelin, 2021).

Media, Narratives, and Disinformation

Digital platforms play a central role in diffusing conflict narratives. Iran's state-backed outlets, such as Press TV and Hezbollah's Al-Manar, broadcast into African media markets, particularly in English- and French-speaking countries. These platforms propagate anti-Israel, anti-Western, and pro-resistance narratives that resonate with both leftist intellectuals and Islamist movements (Berti & Paris, 2020; Botha, 2022).

In return, Israeli-linked digital diplomacy via embassies, diaspora groups, and counter-disinformation campaigns attempts to frame Iran as a destabilising force in Africa. Thus, militant groups, political elites, and foreign actors are competing for ideological legitimacy, drawing the continent into a narrative battlefield.

Security Risk Amplification

The convergence of ideological narratives with military technologies, such as Iranian drones, Israeli cyber tools, and militant propaganda, creates a new frontier of hybrid insecurity in Africa. Governments face the challenge of distinguishing between domestic dissent and proxy-driven radicalisation. Weak intelligence capacities and contested religious spaces further complicate threat assessments.

More dangerously, militant groups that once fought for localised grievances may now find themselves symbolically aligned with global jihadist or resistance movements, raising the risk of regional spillover, foreign funding, and multi-front insurgencies.

8. REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS AND STRATEGIC RISKS

The widening Israel–Iran confrontation has exposed Africa not only to ideological and proxy entanglements but also to multidimensional security risks, from maritime disruption to the hardening of regional rivalries. These risks pose structural threats to already fragile governance systems and undermine Africa’s collective security aspirations.

Maritime Insecurity

One of the most immediate risks lies in the Red Sea maritime corridor, which has become a frontline in the Israel–Iran rivalry. The Bab el-Mandeb Strait, which connects the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden, is of critical importance to African and global trade. Iranian-backed Houthi forces in Yemen have repeatedly attacked vessels suspected of Israeli ownership or Western alignment, including tankers and commercial shipping (France 24, 2024; Financial Times, 2025). These attacks, often carried out using drones and mines, have forced the rerouting of cargo ships around the Cape of Good Hope, raising shipping costs and delaying deliveries to East and Southern Africa (Bloomberg, 2024).

These disruptions affect global markets and erode the economic and energy security of countries like Djibouti, Kenya, and Sudan that depend on maritime trade. Foreign powers have militarised Red Sea ports through naval exercises, arms shipments, and strategic leases, turning the Horn of Africa into a contested geopolitical interface (Donelli & Gonzalez-Levaggi, 2021).

Security Vacuum in the Fragile States

The intensifying confrontation between Israel and Iran risks exacerbating instability in fragile states, especially those with weak state institutions and unresolved internal conflicts. Sudan’s ongoing civil war, for example, has already seen foreign powers such as Turkey, the UAE, Iran, and Russia competing for influence and port access (Habtoor, 2024; Reuters, 2024). The entry of Iranian drones into the battlefield and the SAF’s turn toward Tehran risk internationalising the conflict and hardening its duration and intensity.

Other states in the Sahel, including Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, already strained by coups and extremist insurgencies, could become targets for soft power or proxy engagement as the Middle Eastern conflict deepens. Aning & Atta-Asamoah (2020) note that these dynamics resemble Cold War-era interventions that exploited African instability for global strategic positioning.

Weapon Proliferation and Technology Transfer

Iran’s deployment of combat drones, loitering munitions, and explosive-laden UAVs to proxy forces has revolutionised low-cost warfare. The proliferation of these technologies in African regions raises concerns about potential future arms races among non-state actors (Berti & Paris, 2020). Already, intelligence reports have indicated that local militias in Sudan and possibly Libyan factions have reverse-engineered or adapted Iranian-style drones (Financial Times, 2025).

Similarly, Israeli technology, surveillance systems, smart fences, and cyber defence tools are being exported to African allies, including Kenya and Ethiopia (INSS, 2022). While often justified as

counterterrorism support, these tools could also serve domestic repression, undermining civil liberties and weakening governance legitimacy.

Diplomatic Realignment and Geopolitical Fragmentation

African states increasingly face pressure to choose sides diplomatically and militarily. Some countries, such as Eritrea and Sudan, lean toward Tehran; others, like Kenya and Rwanda, are deepening ties with Israel. This fragmentation undermines regional cohesion and complicates the continental integration agenda, including the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) (AU Peace & Security Council, 2023).

Moreover, the competition for diplomatic loyalty often comes with economic incentives or security guarantees. Iran has offered oil deals and ideological alignment; Israel has promised technology transfers and military training. Such transactional diplomacy threatens to polarise African regional blocs and weaken the African Union’s ability to speak with one voice on global affairs (Adebajo, 2021).

Escalation Risk and Policy Blind Spots

The final, and perhaps most dangerous, implication is that escalation may be miscalculated. As African actors become enmeshed, wittingly or not, in the broader Israel–Iran conflict, the risk of retaliation, sabotage, or spillover grows. A drone strike misattributed to an African ally, a vessel attacked in Djiboutian waters, or a proxy attack in Nigeria with suspected Iranian links could all provoke disproportionate international consequences.

However, few African countries have contingency plans for such scenarios. Most have focused narrowly on domestic terrorism or piracy while failing to grasp the external dimensions of their vulnerability. This policy blind spot leaves Africa exposed to geopolitical crises that are not of its making.

9. AFRICA’S STRATEGIC RESPONSES

As the Israel–Iran conflict continues to escalate and exert influence across Africa’s geopolitical landscape, the urgency for a coordinated, anticipatory African response becomes paramount. This section highlights important ways that African countries and regional groups, especially the African Union (AU), ECOWAS, IGAD, and individual national governments, can reduce new threats and stop outside powers from using Africa as a battleground for their conflicts.

Strengthening Regional Intelligence Cooperation

The infiltration of Middle Eastern proxy dynamics, including drone warfare, ideological radicalisation, and covert arms flows, necessitates enhanced intelligence-sharing frameworks among African states. The existing systems in Africa, like the Continental Early Warning System (CEWS) and the African Standby Force (ASF) lack enough funding, face political challenges, and do not have up-to-date information about conflicts involving outside forces.

Africa must revive CEWS with a broader focus on transregional threats, including the following:

- Proxy warfare detection,
- External arms transfers,
- Maritime monitoring along the Red Sea and the Gulf of Guinea.

Engagement with non-African early warning hubs (e.g., those run by the EU or UN) should also be institutionalised to bridge intelligence gaps and predict spillovers from crises in the Middle East.

Enhancing Maritime Security Capacity

Given the vulnerability of Africa's Red Sea, Indian Ocean, and Gulf of Guinea littorals to external militarisation, states must invest in joint maritime security platforms. Initiatives like the Djibouti Code of Conduct (Jeddah Amendment) and the Yaoundé Code of Conduct provide legal and operational blueprints for coordination. However, implementation remains uneven (Okafor-Yarwood & Van den Berg, 2021).

Recommendations include:

- Integrating Israeli and Iranian maritime movements into African maritime threat analyses,
- Deploying naval assets (where available) for port surveillance and flagged vessel tracking,
- Training coastguards and customs units to identify proxy-linked shipments or drone parts.

Such efforts should remain non-aligned to avoid a perception of siding in external conflicts.

Managing Foreign Military Partnerships

African states must become more strategic in their military partnerships with Israel, Iran, or any other external actors. African-owned norms, such as transparency clauses, dual-use technology controls, and legislative oversight, should govern security cooperation (Aning & Edu-Afful, 2019).

For instance, countries receiving Israeli surveillance tools or Iranian drone systems must:

- Conduct risk assessments regarding civilian and opposition group targeting.
- Monitor for technology leakage to non-state actors.
- Ensure security support aligns with domestic accountability systems.

The AU Peace and Security Council can convene to issue voluntary guiding principles on managing extra-regional partnerships in conflict-prone environments.

Invest in Strategic Diplomacy and Narrative Control

African diplomatic voices have been marginal in the discourse on the Israel–Iran conflict despite the continent's increasing exposure. There is an urgent need to:

- Coordinate AU and RECs' positions in UN debates involving Middle Eastern crises.
- Avoid bloc fragmentation over pro-Iran or pro-Israel alignments.
- Amplify Africa's peacebuilding legacy in global forums (e.g., through mediation models drawn from Liberia, Mozambique, or Rwanda).

Simultaneously, African states must monitor digital narrative warfare being waged through state-aligned media (e.g., Press TV, Al-Manar, and Israeli social channels) that seek to polarise African opinion or stir domestic unrest (Berti & Paris, 2020; Botha, 2022).

Adopting a Continental Strategic Posture

Most critically, the African Union and sub-regional bodies must adopt a continental strategic posture that treats external geopolitical entanglement as a legitimate threat to African sovereignty. This could take the following forms:

- A continental doctrine on the role of foreign powers in African conflict zones,
- A permanent AU-led Working Group on Proxy Conflicts,
- The group will engage in scenario planning exercises that involve civil society, military planners, and foreign policy analysts.

Africa must assert that it cannot continue to be a passive arena where others settle their disputes.

10. CONCLUSION

This study has critically examined how the protracted and now intensifying conflict between Israel and Iran is reshaping Africa's security landscape, transforming the continent from a distant observer into a peripheral battlefield in an evolving trans-regional confrontation. Drawing on proxy warfare theory and regional security complex theory, the analysis traced how both Israel and Iran are using ideologies, proxies, and technologies to assert influence, often in ways that exacerbate Africa's existing vulnerabilities.

Key findings show that:

- Iran's re-entry into Sudan, coupled with drone warfare and ideological outreach, has established a new front for indirect confrontation with Israel.
- Israel's security diplomacy in East Africa has deepened, primarily as a hedge against Iranian maritime and proxy expansion.
- The broader Middle Eastern rivalry increasingly shapes militant networks and ideological alignments, from Shi'a movements in Nigeria to pan-Islamist narratives in the Sahel.
- Africa's maritime chokepoints and fragile states are particularly exposed, with the Red Sea emerging as both a conduit for proxy militarisation and a contested geostrategic zone.

These dynamics demand a coherent African response that transcends narrow national security approaches. African institutions must act now to build regional resilience, regulate external military partnerships, and protect the continent from becoming a theatre for foreign disputes.

By asserting strategic autonomy and leveraging Africa's diplomatic weight, the continent can reposition itself not merely as a passive recipient of external insecurity but as an active shaper of its geopolitical future.

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