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THE ISLAMIC REVOLUTIONARY GUARD CORPS AND IRAN'S ASYMMETRIC STRATEGY TOWARD THE UNITED STATES: MECHANISMS OF DETERRENCE AND REGIONAL POWER PROJECTION

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Abstract
Iran's security policy towards the United States has been changing with the persistent imbalance of conventional military power. This study evaluates the deterrence and regional power projection capabilities of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in support of this strategy. Using process tracing, qualitative content analysis, and comparative case analysis of Hezbollah, Iranian-aligned groups in Iraq, Iran's role in Syria, and the Houthi movement in Yemen, the research utilizes open-source evidence from Iran's war in 2026. The framework of Offensive Realism enriches the understanding of the structural IRGC incentives for asymmetric compensation, and the institutionalization of these responses can be explained with Neoclassical Realism. The same standards of evidence are applied to Iranian, American, Israeli, and third-party claims. The results show that IRGC's success is the highest in its power projection, cost imposition, and operational resilience in the region, yet low in reliable and comprehensive deterrence. The results show neither a distinct failure on the Iranian part, nor a clear Iranian success.

INTRODUCTION

The strategic partnership of Iran and the United States has developed a significant imbalance in terms of conventional military forces. The U.S. has a considerable superiority in terms of airpower, naval forces, intelligence, precision strike, coordination, and global reach. In comparison, Iran, which is constrained by sanctions, technology access and resources, has turned to asymmetric means, including ballistic and cruise missiles, drones, maritime anti-access and area-denial weapons, dispersed forces, gray zone and cyber operations, and allied relationships between armed groups in the region (Zafar & Shahzad, 2026; McInnis, 2017; Katzman, 2017). Notably, both reports, by Katzman and by McInnis, were prepared for two think tanks that incline to take a hawkish view of Iran: the U.S. Congressional Research Service and the American Enterprise Institute. They are the claims which are not treated as neutral fact but are considered with Iranian and independent sources.

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The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) is at the core of Iran's strategy for dealing with the conventional military inferiority. The IRGC has been given institutional primacy in the fields of missile and drone warfare (IRGC Aerospace Force), maritime denial (IRGC Navy), and external relations (Quds Force), in addition to conventional territorial defense, which is managed by Artesh. Hence, the IRGC is the key institutional network that connects Iran's strategic goals with the means of asymmetric competition, as it is identified in the literature.

Iran's external dimension of its strategy is important. Iran has built a decentralized regional security network via Hezbollah in Lebanon, through its Iraq ally networks in Syria and the Houthis in Yemen. Tehran perceives this network as defensive, reflecting its sense of being "encircled," while Washington and Israel and some Arab states understand it as an "offensive" tool of coercion. Both views are reflected in the literature and evaluated in this analysis. Küpeli (2026) calls the grand strategy "forward defense," defined as "defending regional threats as well as extending regional influence.

One of the analytical issues in the center is that cost imposition is not necessarily a deterrent. A state can take action that will be effective but not stop an opponent. The 2026 conflict between Iran, Israel and the United States is a good example, as the Iranian missile and drone threat failed to deter the United States and Israel from carrying out large-scale attacks on Iranian soil, and the attacks did not bring a lasting political solution that Washington and Jerusalem would have wanted. Likewise, regional influence is not necessarily a sign of a fear of an opponent. This paper explores the role the IRGC plays in Iran's asymmetric strategy of deterrence and regional power projection against the U.S.

The following questions are used to analyze.

1. Why does Iran rely on asymmetric balancing rather than conventional balancing, and what strategic considerations shape this approach to countering U.S. power?
2. How does the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), particularly the Quds Force, translate Iran's asymmetric balancing strategy into operational capabilities through power projection, proxy networks, and deterrence?
3. What are the strategic limitations and effectiveness of Iran's IRGC-led asymmetric balancing strategy, and to what extent has it enhanced Iran's power and strategic position vis-à-vis the United States?

The study holds that the IRGC's asymmetric approach can be interpreted as a type of strategic compensation for the conventional inferiority. This does not eliminate the military imbalance, but it costs more to coerce; it creates strategic depth; it makes adversary planning more difficult; it allows Iran to have retaliatory capacity when it is needed; and it gives Iran greater influence. The main thrust of the idea is that the IRGC has proven more effective in power projection, operational resilience, and cost more effectively than in providing reliable deterrence against superior U.S. military power.

Through this study, four cases of the region are examined: Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, along with Iran's missile, drone, and maritime power capabilities. The cases highlight the wide range of approaches used by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its associated organizations to promote Iran's influence, to place costs on rivals, and to increase Iran's strategic resilience. The analysis also considers the evidence of the Iran conflict in 2026, to look at what it would be able to accomplish and what it would be lacking.

2. Literature Review

The literature defines Iranian strategy as a comprehensive reaction to the structural military inferiority of Iran, not as an outcome of a particular capability or military theater. Many books and articles have been devoted to the

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subject of asymmetric warfare in Iran, and many authors have put forward the notion that material factors have led to such a form of warfare. Many of the sources refer to Iranian asymmetric warfare in terms of material constraints. One of Iran's salient features of its security environment is that it cannot match the United States' conventional military strength (Katzman, 2017). McInnis (2017) shows how sanctions, resource constraints, technological constraints, and self-sufficiency have influenced the acquisition of defense. Abbas (2026) relates missile development to the conventional vulnerabilities that Iran has experienced, and Zafar and Shahzad (2026) demonstrate that Iran's maritime strategy is based on sea denial and not sea parity. In a recent article, Nematpour and Shariati (2024) assert that the "maximum pressure" sanctions by the United States did not hinder domestic development of missiles but rather accompanied it; pointing from a missile imported from the Iran-Iraq War to indigenous production. But the link is not so established as to be a definitive cause since there was no decrease in Iran's investment in asymmetric capabilities when it obtained partial sanctions relief under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

This material perspective is complemented with scholarship which evaluates the institutional position of the IRGC. The IRGC enjoyed a higher level of political trust and priority for acquisition when compared with conventional forces regarding asymmetric warfare, according to McInnis (2017). Seeing this preference in the context of the ideology of the 1979 revolution, Alsudani (2026) argues, and Sharma (2026) points to the IRGC's wider political role. The institutional lens is important because besides structural pressures, other factors like organizational dynamics, perceptions, ideology, and resource allocation will affect the state responses.

The Quds Force literature takes the institutional argument down a different path, to the regional level. Within a gray-zone and Hybrid strategy, Gémesi (2025) places the Quds Force. Tariq, A., Naz, S., & Khan, A. B. indicate that both the military and political aspects of relations with Hezbollah, Iraqi militias and the Houthis (2025) receive attention. Küpeli (2026) ties these linkages to a forward-defense doctrine and Hatzidiakos (2026) examines the last four decades of Iranian strategy-building and observes a notable lack of understanding in Western debates. The literature indicates that the Quds Force also has a significant role in building an architecture that spreads out the strategic risk among several theaters, besides having an impact on the organizations that it supports.

Syria complicates the focus of the literature on "proxy warfare." As the Syrian government was under intense pressure, Chowdhury (2026) said that Iranian involvement shifted from advisory to military, as they participated in the conflict directly. The culmination of this evolution shows that Iran's approach is a continuum from indirect support to direct involvement and that to be effective in the region, Iran must maintain connectivity in multiple playhouses and not just individual partners.

The other strand of literature is about deterrence. Theory suggests that, in relation to deterrence, Iran's asymmetric capabilities serve to deter in the following ways: deterrence by punishment, deterrence by denial, deterrence by delegated action, and deterrence by uncertainty (Gémesi, 2025; Abbas & Kazmi, 2026). The concept of Iranian deterrence has been increasingly conceptualized in the literature as a multi-layered deterrence instead of a singular deterrence. This can be seen as a "mosaic" of methods of coping, as Sadeghi-Boroujerdi (2026) describes it, and is broadly consistent with the way Tehran has been describing this phenomenon, which is interpreted here as one of several perspectives.

However, recent studies have brought into question the notion that asymmetric capability leads to effective deterrence. Seyam (2026)

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suggests that the factors to be considered for delegated deterrence are proxy survivability, credible control, and intelligence security. Qadir and Magsi (2026) separate the elements of Iran's offensive strike and its ability to defend against superior conventional strike power and explain that Iran might have long range strike capability, but is vulnerable to advanced air power, intelligence, and precision strike power.

The other principal-agent issue, argues Şimşek (2025), is that Iran's proxy strategy brings both advantages and disadvantages: proxies have their own interests that can, of course, be instrumental to Iran's strategy but, when operating independently, can also make them resilient and hard to control. In Pokorny's (2026) dataset, American fatalities are listed under the category of Iranian state actors, proxies, and sponsored organizations, but the data collection process recognizes interpretative judgment and selection bias. The dataset is useful for measuring the cost imposition but could not prove direct Iranian control or that the imposition of costs was a deterrent to the United States' decisions.

Bukhari and Mujaddid (2025) and Sari (2026) stress the importance of signaling, red lines and escalation, making the notion of the "stability" of an enhanced asymmetric capability more complicated. A capability designed to discourage can escalate or provoke counter-escalatory response. This dynamic is also subject to economic limitations, as there are resources and sanctions that affect the sustainability of the project, but not stop development (McInnis, 2017; Razzaque, S., Jamal, M., & Jan, A.). (2026). The strategy, therefore, comes with costs for Iran, as do continued deployments and the enforcement of sanctions on Iran for the United States and its partners. After the 2026 US war against Iran, Imam, Odama, and Okpo (2026) warn that early war 'winners' are still hotly debated because the outcome of the war depends on 'control of the territory, number of casualties, political goals, and regional views'. This is evident throughout the use of contemporary sources in the study.

The main research question tackled in this study is, how do institutional adaptation and strategic outcomes relate? A few studies have combined the IRGC's institutional position, the regional network of the Quds Force, the missile capacities, and the maritime capacities, along with the concept of proxy relationships, all of which the concepts of power projection, cost imposition, operational resilience and deterrence need to be distinguished. This study's goal is to fill this gap by comparing the situations of Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen in the light of the empirical evidence documented in the 2026 war.

Two other threads should be highlighted. First, there are several sources that have known orientations - Katzman's report comes from the nonpartisan United States Congressional Research Service, McInnis's from a United States think tank that is generally critical of Iran, and Sadeghi-Boroujerdi's from a more venue-friendly to portraying Iranian strength as vindication. These sources do not take away from the arguments made but an understanding of institutional perspectives will help to interpret the argument in a more nuanced manner. Second, there is a growing literature that separates the ability to possess missiles, drones, or partner networks from the ability to impose costs, and imposing costs from deterring an adversary's choice of action. This distinction is also independently arrived at by several studies conducted in 2025–2026 (Seyam, 2026; Qadir & Magsi, 2026; Şimşek, 2025) and thus seems to be a substantive change instead of being a mere framing by the authors.

The literature, taken as a whole, has transcended the idea of Iran simply being an "asymmetric power. The up-and-coming approach is one involving missile, drones, maritime denial, proxy relationships, and gray zone capabilities – all in one portfolio. The strategic depth and capacity to impose costs on an adversary are well known but

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the effectiveness of these resides in Few factors including survivability, control, intelligence security, economic resources, and adversary adaptation. The difference between IRGC capabilities and the real impact these forces have on a more powerful opponent forms the core of this analysis in the study.

3. Theoretical Framework

The research paper combines two strategies: Offensive Realism and Neoclassical Realism with two theories: deterrence theory and the principal-agent theory of proxy warfare. Offensive Realism accounts for Iran's quest for power in face of conventional inferiority, and Neoclassical Realism explores the nature and transmission of pressure from outside to inside into policy through the institutional structure of Iran, notably the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The deterrence theory examines the impact of these capabilities on the behavior of the adversary, and the principal-agent theory outlines the capabilities and constraints of regional partners. Strategic adaptation is not a new theory, but rather a process of linkage that connects the physical and social processes together.

Offensive Realism theory claims that under international anarchy and uncertainty, states try to maximize relative power and minimize vulnerability (Mearsheimer, 2001). Iran cannot compete with the U.S. in terms of air, naval power, intelligence, and technology, not to mention under the pressure of international sanctions (Katzman, 2017; McInnis, 2017). Thus, it has acquired missiles, unconventional force, and maritime A2/AD capabilities to counterbalance its conventional limitations and throw obstacles in the way of the adversary planning (Abbas, 2026; McInnis, 2017; Zafar & Shahzad, 2026). Its forward defense policy is also aimed at building strategic depth in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen

Proposition 1: The higher the conventional inferiority, the more Iran will seek capabilities that give strategic advantages without the need of military parity, or asymmetric capabilities. However, the variables of structure do not account for the policies and partner behavior of Iran. Neoclassical Realism is a theory that moves beyond this limitation by focusing on perceptions of leadership, domestic institutions, and material constraints (Rose, 1998; Schweller, 2004; Taliaferro, Lobell, & Ripsman, 2009). The IRGC, especially its Quds Force, turns what they see as threats into missile programs, unconventional warfare, and collaborating with partners in the region (Katzman, 2017; McInnis, 2017)

Proposition 2: The military reactions of Iran to external pressure are filtered through the lenses of threat perception, institutional arrangements, economic factors, and the status of IRGC.

The deterrence theory looks at whether such capabilities affect adversary decisions based on expected costs (Schelling, 1960; Morgan, 2003). The analysis is based on five concepts: capability, cost imposition, power projection, operational resilience, and deterrence. Successful deterrence does not mean capability, cost, or survival. Iran's strategy of deterrence could be by punishment (missiles and drones), denial (dispersed forces), delegation (proxy networks), and strategic uncertainty.

Proposition 3: Proxy networks make a more significant contribution to deterrence when their influence can alter adversary calculations, especially if these networks can survive, possess intelligence security, and credible cost-imposition capabilities. The principal-agent perspective acknowledges that Iranian-backed entities have their own interests and autonomy to a certain extent, as summarized by Şimşek (2025). Tehran's ability to control escalation may be curtailed and their regional legitimacy and flexibility of operation may reinforce regional power projection.

Proposition 4: Increasing autonomy of partners may lead to improved power projection and

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resilience but may diminish Tehran's capacity to control escalation and delegated deterrence.

Overall, the structure is top-down (external pressure to institutional interpretation to asymmetric adaptation to cost imposition and strategic outcomes). It separates decisions, support, coordination, and autonomy of partners in Iran. Finally, deterrence is evaluated bidirectionally: Iran attempts to deter U.S. and Israeli actions, and the United States and Israel try to deter Iran. Propositions 1-4 thus are applicable to both sides, and not necessarily to the extent that high material capabilities automatically equate with successful deterrence.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative approach that combines a comparative case study analysis, process tracing, and qualitative content analysis (Checkel, 2006). Comparative analysis is used to highlight similarities and differences in Iran's regional relationships, and process tracing is used to analyze how Iran's strategic goals are realized in the activities and results of the IRGC. Patterns identified through thematic analysis include adaptation, asymmetric warfare, deterrence, and power projection.

The primary unit of analysis is the role of the IRGC in helping to support Iran's asymmetric strategy. Four sub-cases are explored: Hezbollah in Lebanon, Iranian-backed groups in Iraq, Iranian entanglements in Syria and the Houthis in Yemen. They illustrate the varying strategic contexts of institutionalized partnerships in Lebanon, cooperation in the face of a major U.S. presence in Iraq, direct involvement by Iranian forces in Syria, and long-range power projection and maritime dimension in Yemen.

Process tracing analyzes how U.S. military pressure relates to Iran's threat perceptions, strategic goals, IRGC institutional responses, their asymmetric capabilities, operational activities, external responses, and strategic outcomes. The analysis identifies direct Iranian involvement, Iranian support, institutional coordination, and partner autonomy instead of ascribing Iranian orders to activities conducted by partners.

The four concepts of qualitative content analysis are: asymmetric capabilities, such as missiles, drones, maritime denial, and partner networks; cost imposition, which is military, economic, political or strategic costs; power projection, which is Iran's influence beyond its borders; and deterrence, which is influencing, delaying, limiting or preventing adversary actions through anticipated costs. The analysis considers that ability and cost imposition do not necessarily lead to deterrence, as diplomacy, competition and resource constraints can also influence the nature of deterrence.

The study draws on public documents, such as government and congressional reports, peer-reviewed scholarship, institutional research, reputable journalism, and data sources like ACLED's Iran war coverage dataset and attribution data by Pokorny (2026). All sources, including U.S., Iranian, Israeli, and independent sources, are considered interested sources and evaluated on an equal footing regarding the evidentiary standard. Triangulation emphasizes claims supported by multiple sources that have institutional perspectives. The findings are based on quantitative data, which although acknowledged as having methodological weaknesses and inconsistencies, supports the findings.

There are two stages of coding. The first categorization of evidence is based on its connection to the four core concepts, while the second is based on the fact that claims depend on interested or independent evidence. Secondly, claims are checked for validation against sources with different institutional affiliations and gaps in corroboration are documented. It should be noted that estimates of casualties and damage are not precise due to uncertainty.

Some constraints of the study are non-availability of planning documents, incomplete information

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on partner involvement in the war of 2026 and outdated information which had to be updated during the writing process. Thus, the analysis is theory-based and is not an exhaustive reconstruction of the decision-making process.

5. ANALYSIS

5.1 Transition from Conventional Military Inferiority to Asymmetric Strategic Compensation

Asymmetric balancing is the reason behind Iran's continued efforts to gain conventional military balance with the U.S. The U.S. has considerable air force, naval, intelligence, precision strike, logistics and force projection strengths. However, Iran is subject to sanctions, technological constraints, and resource constraints (Katzman, 2017; McInnis, 2017; Zafar & Shahzad, 2026). Consequently, these structural shortcomings also have enabled Tehran to build up its power to escalate the potential costs of conflict rather than to somehow mirror U.S. conventional power (McInnis, 2017; Gémesi, 2025; Küpeli, 2026).

Missiles, drones, maritime denial and unconventional or partner-based capabilities are the main priorities of Iran's military strategy (McInnis, 2017; Abbas, 2026; Zafar & Shahzad, 2026). These assets are not valuable due to their direct match with U.S. capabilities, but because they can help to move the competition to areas where Iran will be able to exploit geographical, technological, and organizational strengths. Missile and drone forces give Iran the capability to strike from a distance; maritime denial operations make it difficult to access strategically significant waterway regions and regional partnerships allow Iran to extend its influence beyond its national limits (McInnis, 2017; Zafar & Shahzad, 2026; Gémesi, 2025; Küpeli, 2026).

Missile development is an example of such an adaptive approach in Iran. According to Nematpour and Shariati (2024) this change from reliance were imported systems to indigenous production of systems such as Zelzal, Fateh and Shahab missiles. By focusing on domestic production, Tehran has also ensured it is not reliant on foreign suppliers and, even though it is technologically and economically limited, it retained its strategic capabilities (Nematpour & Shariati, 2024; McInnis, 2017). Therefore, missile development has happened within the framework of the security environment of Iran rather than in the context of the one-off crisis (Nematpour & Shariati, 2024).

These asymmetric capabilities are built and fielded within the framework of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The IRGC's organizational structure includes three components: the Aerospace Force, the IRGC Navy, and the Quds Force, which are responsible for missile and drone development, maritime capabilities, and external operations, respectively (McInnis, 2017; Gémesi, 2025; Zafar & Shahzad, 2026). The way this is structured allows Iran's asymmetric capabilities to be used as complementary instruments in a broader institutional approach to compensate for the gaps of conventional military forces (McInnis, 2017; Küpeli, 2026).

Sanctions have played a role in shaping the context within which Iran has developed its strategy but cannot fully explain why it persisted. However, asymmetric capabilities have remained a top priority for Iranian military policy even during the short-lived periods of partial sanctions relief, which indicates that threat perceptions, institutional preferences, self-reliance, and strategic learning have also influenced military policy (McInnis, 2017; Nematpour & Shariati, 2024). This pattern, therefore, can be understood more as an accumulation of responses to the problems of inferiority in the structure of the military, lack of resources and institutional priorities than as a response to sanctions alone.

5.2 Lebanon: Strategic Depth through an Institutionalized Partnership

Lebanon is one of the most developed components of Iran's regional approach. In the

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framework of Iran's regional network, Hezbollah plays a pivotal role, while the Quds Force acts as the tool for maintaining the network of regional partners (Gémesi, 2025; Küpeli, 2026). The significance of this relationship lies in its ability to reach out beyond the country's borders without the need for the permanent presence of Iranian conventional military forces (Gémesi, 2025; Küpeli, 2026).

Cooperation with Lebanon adds to Iran's strategic depth by enlarging its strategic environment with a political and military entity that is separate from it. The agreement provides an extra layer of security between Iran and its potential adversaries and allows Tehran to have a different geographical base on which to exert strategic pressure (Küpeli, 2026; Gémesi, 2025).

Nevertheless, Hezbollah cannot be seen as an extension of Iranian control. Its political arrangements and interests are their own and it possesses its own influence and support, and it does not simply exert control over the other (Seyam, 2026; Pokorny, 2026). There is also a principal-agent problem, since Iranian support can improve a partner's military and political strength, but the partner retains the autonomy to make decisions on its own.

It is important to distinguish this for the purpose of understanding the case. The relationship represents Iranian strategic reach but does not mean that every Hezbollah decision is taken by IRGC. Similarly, a competent partner does not automatically mean that the costs that are likely to be imposed on the opponent have become more significant and hence have affected the opponent's strategic goals (Gémesi, 2025; Pokorny, 2026). It is thus more evident in the Lebanese case of the regional projection of power and strategic depth than the uniform deterrent effect.

5.3 Iraq: Cost Imposition and the Limits of Strategic Control

Iraq is a special case in Iran's asymmetric approach: the pro-Iranian groups have been in close contact with some of the most important U.S. military interests and forces. Iraq's political and security landscape, which changed with the removal of Saddam Hussein in 2003, provided Iran with new scope to build political, economic, religious and military ties with Iraq's political and security actors, including armed groups in the context of the larger Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) (Ansari, 2026; Tariq et al., 2025; Küpeli, 2026). Iraq is important not just for the level of Iranian influence, but because Tehran was able to build its influence without solely relying on its military forces.

These two events are noteworthy. First, the political and security landscape in Iraq had undergone change which increased opportunities to influence Iraqi decision-making (Ansari, 2026; Küpeli, 2026). The second aspect of this was the presence of U.S. forces and interests, which added other avenues for pressure to be applied via relations with armed organizations (Tariq et al., 2025; Pokorny, 2026). All these reduced Iran's dependences on force and created new ways of military and political costing.

Such connections were the basis for Iran to deduct costs from its enemies. The attacks against U.S. personnel or interests resulted in military and political costs, and the presence of Iranian-backed organizations made for a security challenge to U.S. forces (Pokorny, 2026; Tariq et al., 2025). But it does not necessarily mean that imposing costs means deterring. A tangible cost is not enough to prove that an enemy has changed its game plan. Such evidence is more likely to support the power of Iran to impose costs, than to support any direct causality between attacks by Iran-aligned groups and changes in U.S. policy (Pokorny, 2026; Gémesi, 2025).

Iraq is another example of the constraints of strategic control. While Iraqi organizations have their own political and organizational agenda and their activities are not necessarily a direct reflection of IRGC decision making, they can in some cases be sufficiently linked to it for analysis

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(Pokorny, 2026; Tariq et al., 2025). Iran's ties with these actors increase its strategic reach, but do not mean complete control over the choices they make or over the nature of escalation. The Iraqi case thus shows how Iran's asymmetric strategy is a two-sided affair in which partner networks can also help increase the ability to impose costs and create new challenges of attribution, coordination, and control (Pokorny, 2026).

5.4 Syria: Strategic Depth Through Direct and Indirect Intervention

Syria is a more complex case of Iranian involvement in its region, which involves both direct Iranian involvement and cooperation with local and allied actors. The country was soon to become an integral part of Iran's forward-defense strategy and its geographical connection between Iraq and Lebanon (Küpeli, 2026). Iranian participation was through various means, such as advisory functions and by participating in combat with its own forces (Chowdhury, 2026).

The Syrian case is an example of Iran's approach to is not limited to proxy warfare. Meanwhile, Tehran's actions are mediated by other local and allied actors, and at times, it intervenes directly in the strategic context as necessary (Chowdhury 2026; Gémesi 2025). IRGC's interventions are not limited to a single mode of action, but can be indirect support, coordination, or a direct intervention.

In particular, the geographical dimension is especially important. By getting into Syria, Iran has created a strategic corridor from Iraq to Syria to Lebanon, expanding the zone of Iranian associated relationships and capabilities (Küpeli, 2026; Gémesi, 2025). This growth enhances Iran's strategic reach beyond its borders and provides more opportunities to project its power in the region.

But geographical reach does not equate to complete control. Iran worked in cooperation with the Syrian regime, Russia, local armed groups, and other groups that had their own interests (Chowdhury, 2026; Küpeli, 2026). By the involvement of Tehran, its strategic access also made it more difficult for Tehran to have complete authority over the operational environment. Tehran's involvement gave it more strategic access but did not give it full control of the operational environment. The Syrian example is the fact that strategic depth can increase the options of the states, but it can also make them subject to influence and decisions of other actors.

Syria also highlights the regional power projection resource needs. To sustain influence in various theatres, a constant military, financial and organizational supply of resources is needed (Chowdhury, 2026; Gémesi, 2025). Asymmetric strategy does not obviate the need for conventional parity, but it does not rule out material costs associated with a prolonged regional presence. The Syrian case thus calls into question what was widely assumed to be a truism in relation to asymmetric power projection: that it is a cheaper form of military competition than a match between evenly matched nations.

5.5 Yemen: Geographical Extension and Maritime Leverage.

Yemen is a prime example of Iran's asymmetric approach spreading across the geographies. Gémesi (2025) reports that Iranian engagement with the Houthis had begun in 2009 and increased after the onset of the Yemeni civil war in 2014, such as the provision of missile, drone parts, and technology. Küpeli (2026) sees Yemen as part of Iran's forward defense and regional power projection. The conflict in Yemen also showed that the superiority of conventional military force does not necessarily lead to political and strategic goals. Although GCC states have been investing heavily in the purchase of advanced Western military hardware and have been building the capacity to conduct joint military operations, the Saudi- and UAE-led intervention launched in 2015, did not show how these investments could

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lead to effective results on the ground in Yemen (Hokayem & Roberts, 2023).

One of the advantages of the strategic importance of Yemen is that it is far from Iran. In addition to a direct military presence from Iranian territory, there are also Iranian associated capabilities in Yemen that can use this geographical location to exert military pressure as well (Gémesi, 2025; Küpeli, 2026). Yemen thus expands the Iranian asymmetric "playbook" to include a new front.

Yemen additionally has an obvious sea component. Distributed operations, small craft, mines and coastal missiles, and sea denial are the focus of the IRGC Navy's broader strategy, rather than the conventional naval parity (Abbas, 2026; Zafar & Shahzad, 2026). Located in a region that has been highly relevant for Iran's interests adds another pressure point to its regional strategy, and links land-based partner activities to broader maritime security issues (Küpeli, 2026).

The evidence is more compelling with regards to assistance or influence by Iran than in the case of centralized operational command, however. While Iranian involvement is more direct in other contexts, Kupeli (2026) points out that there is no publicly recorded permanent presence of commanders of the Quds Force and the IRGC. Yemen is thus a good example of the analytical separation between support and influence and command. The case illustrates geographic scope and the power to apply pressure via a regional partner, but not central Iranian control.

5.6 Comparative Analysis

There are significant differences among the four cases in the strategies that Iran employs in its asymmetric approach. Lebanon is representative of a well-developed and institutionalized partnership. There are substantial U.S. interests in Iraq in addition to Iranian-aligned organizations operating there. There is direct involvement of Iranian forces, along with cooperation between local and allied actors in Syria. The case of Yemen gives an example of the spread of Iranian-related capabilities to a more distant theatre, including important maritime aspects (Gémesi, 2025; Küpeli, 2026; Tariq et al., 2025).

Though these differences exist, a consistent pattern of strategy is apparent. Iran does not target the military response just within their own geographic area but rather by strategic pressure in several areas. This is in line with the logic of forward defense, countering threats to Iran's security outside its borders as well as building strategic depth and regional influence (Küpeli, 2026; Gémesi, 2025). The cases show that geographical dispersion is not a side-effect of Iran's regional engagements, but rather a tool to diminish direct conventional confrontation.

The comparison also emphasizes a pattern of balancing strategic reach and central control. Regional partners allow Iran to extend its reach and put greater pressure on its foes without having to maintain large conventional forces. The autonomy of these partners, however, brings uncertainty about the process of escalation, the process of attribution, and the decision-making process. (Pokorny, 2026; Gémesi, 2025) This balance is particularly clear in Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen, where Iranian influence is great, but in which there is no evidence of a complete Iranian monopoly on the actions of partners.

The four cases are not considered as the same case of the same model proxy. The political roles they play vary depending on region, degree of Iranian participation, local political institutions, and the distance from U.S. interests. They share their commonality in their contribution to wider strategic portfolio, which allows Iran to expand its strategic depth, create multiple pressure points and have alternatives to direct conventional confrontation (Küpeli, 2026; Gémesi, 2025). A comparative analysis of the development of the different forms of asymmetric reach, then, shows that Iran has not been able to maintain consistent control over its regional network, but rather each has operated at varying levels of constraint and served different strategic ends.

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5.7 The 2026 Conflict: Operational Resilience Under Direct Pressure

The 2026 war would be a challenge for Iran's ability to hold on to its asymmetric arsenal in the face of conventional military threats. Iran's efforts to defend itself against coordinated U.S.-Israeli attacks on its territory with asymmetric means, have proven to be ineffective against a materially superior enemy. Iran's attempts to stop major coordinated U.S.-Israeli operations on Iranian soil using asymmetric means have proven unsuccessful against a materially superior enemy. However, the initial strikes did not neutralize Iran's military capability, leaving it with the power to launch counterattack (Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, 2026; Sari, 2026).

These results are achieved on various aspects of strategic performance. Why these attacks were not prevented on a large scale reveals a weakness in denial; and, of course, in deterrence is based on preventing adversary action, there is an issue about whether Iran's deterrent capacity is weak. Continuing retaliatory operations, on the other hand, are a sign of operational resilience and maintenance of retaliatory options. It is important to note that an attack on a site and a response to the attack are different from the initial attack deterrence (Sari, 2026; Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, 2026). Because the information from the U.S., allied, Iranian and Israeli sources is not consistent, reports of damage to Iranian missile-launch infrastructure and changes in launch rates should be viewed with caution. These differences make it difficult to accurately evaluate a country's military capability numerically and should not be taken as definitive evidence of Iranian military decline during the war. However, it can be assumed that the overall trend indicates that Iran's asymmetric capabilities can still be hit by sophisticated intelligence, surveillance, targeting, and precision-strike systems, even though some operational capabilities still exist (Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, 2026; Sari, 2026).

The conflict therefore provides a good demonstration of the key analytical difference between the study, namely that asymmetric capabilities can maintain an adversary's operational resilience and provide an option for retaliation, but do not automatically make it impossible to launch and hold on to direct military action by a more powerful adversary. The 2026 case thus reinforces the difference between capability, resilience, cost imposition, and deterrence, and does not blur the lines between these outcomes and equate them with equivalent measures of strategic effectiveness.

6. DISCUSSION

6.1 Strategic Compensation and Institutional Adaptation

The results suggest that the IRGC's asymmetric strategy is a strategic compensation policy rather than a more traditional substitution strategy. Iran has not done away with the material benefits that the U.S. possesses. Rather, it has evolved capabilities which allow operations in conventional disadvantage, impose costs, maintain operational flexibility, and make it possible for military action outside national boundaries. In this context, missiles, drones, maritime denial, and regional partnerships are alternative means to fill this enduring capability gap (Katzman, 2017; McInnis, 2017; Abbas, 2026).

The first research question is addressed, and Proposition 1 is supported by this finding. Offensive Realism explains the structural pressure generated by the imbalance in military power and Neoclassical Realism aims to understand how the pressure is translated into specific responses according to the Iranian threat assessments and institutions, and resource limitations (Mearsheimer, 2001; Rose, 1998; Taliaferro et al., 2009). The IRGC has a pivotal institutional position, connecting strategic goals and missile and drone development, maritime capabilities, and external operations.

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As a result, the findings indicate that Iran's asymmetric approach is more than just a series of separate military instruments. It is a structurally disadvantaged adaptation, whereby different IRGC components execute complementary functions in an institutionalized way. The link between the two underpinned the fact that the asymmetric capabilities remained at the heart of Iranian strategy, even in the face of persistent restrictions on conventional forces.

6.2 Regional Power Projection and Cost Imposition

The Quds Force is the main instrument that the IRGC has used to spread its influence beyond the country's borders. These are the four types of regional power projection, as illustrated in the four cases. Lebanon is a mature and institutionalized partnership; Iraq offers access to a theatre with significant U.S. interests; Syria is a theatre where Iran is directly involved and also has regional connectivity and maritime implications; and Yemen is a geographically distant theatre with maritime implications, where Iran's influence is extended (Gémesi, 2025; Küpeli, 2026).

The cases illustrate that regional power projection is not based on a common framework of Iranian domination. Through their relationship-building efforts, the Quds Force builds links that allow Iran to provide them with support, expertise, weapons, training, and coordination, although the degree of partner autonomy is different across different theatres. This strategy can result in strategic depth and geographical dispersion, which in turn limits Tehran's ability to control the attitude of its partners (Şimşek, 2025; Seyam, 2026).

These networks also allow the imposition of costs through creating extra operational pressures on other theatres. There are also stand-off capabilities provided by missiles and drones, threats to adversaries operating near Iranian waters posed by maritime forces and geographical scope of implementing pressure extended by regional partners (Katzman, 2017; Zafar & Shahzad, 2026). Such impacts are not necessarily linked to effective deterrence, however. Imposing costs shows that the adversary can be made to feel the effects of the action, but deterrence requires that the adversary's decision-making processes have been affected by the effects of the action.

The results therefore provide an appropriate answer to the third research questions. The Quds Force has done much to extend Iran's regional influence and proxy networks have provided new ways of adding costs and generating uncertainty. Their role in deterrence is still dependent on credibility, ability to survive, influence, gathering intelligence, and calculations of adversaries.

6.3 Constraints, Trade-Offs, and the 2026 Conflict

There are still plenty of restrictions on the strategy. Other factors can limit Tehran's ability to control over external factors, such as partner autonomy, economic constraints on sustaining military growth and regional engagement, adversary adaptation to Tehran's operations, and superior intelligence and precision capabilities that could enable detection of dispersed forces and infrastructure (McInnis, 2017; Şimşek, 2025; Seyam, 2026).

These restrictions create a balance between strategic reach and control. Geographical opportunities and places of Strategic depth are provided by regional partnerships but come with their own interests and uncertainties of operation. Similarly, assets that are distributed and asymmetric do not provide for complete flexibility but are vulnerable to the better intelligence, technology, and conventional strikes. This results in Iran's flexibility in its operations increasing but not removing the structural factors that urged it to pursue the strategy.

In the 2026 conflict, these limitations were put to the test as the IRGC has directly attacked and tested to see if they can sustain their asymmetric capabilities and maintain their operational capability. While the Iranian missiles and drones

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did not deter the attacks on Iranian territory from being conducted on a massive scale, Iran still had the capability to retaliate after such attacks. This result indicates that asymmetric capabilities maintained their operational capacity and strategic options in the face of extreme stress, and uncovered their need for survivability, resources, intelligence, and adaptability. The conflict thus further supports the last research question of this study: The IRGC's asymmetric strategy has a great operational value; however, it is not always effective. The erosion of regional strengths and weakness of strategic linkages in 2024-2026 is yet another indicator that strategic depth is not fixed and can be significantly reduced by the changes in regional environment.

The findings collectively provide an interrelated construct between structure of pressure, institutional adaptation, regional power projection, and operational performance. The reason for Iran's conventional inferiority is the asymmetric balancing approach which is institutionalized by the IRGC in its military and operational capabilities. The regional relations are another aspect of the Quds Force's work, which is an extension of this approach. These processes create what are deemed "strategic reach and cost-imposition opportunities" but are limited by resources, partner actions, adversary adaptation, and military power distribution.

The comparative results also show that the asymmetric strategy impacts the various theatres differently. Lebanon is a good example of the benefits of long-term institutionalized partnership; Iraq is a good example of the cost imposed on U.S. interests; Syria is a good example of both its benefits and costs; and Yemen is the case of the extension of Iranian influence, albeit in a distant sea context. Thus, it is possible to make a distinction among these cases, and to argue a differentiated understanding of Iranian asymmetric strategy.

Overall, the study reveals that the IRGC has proven to be effective and capable in the four areas of regional power projection, cost imposition, strategic depth, and operational resilience. But in terms of deterrence its effect is more dependent on the nature of the capabilities, and that just having one set of capabilities that is asymmetric does not necessarily mean the other side has reacted to it in any way. To understand the usefulness, and limitations, of Iran's 'asymmetric' method, this difference must be identified.

7. CONCLUSION

In this study, the reasons behind Iran's dependence on asymmetric strategy, how the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) transforms the asymmetric strategy to the military and operational level, the role of the Quds Force in propagating these mechanisms through regional relationships and the effect of these mechanisms on Iran's strategic position vis-à-vis the United States are analyzed. The results show that Iran's focus on asymmetric capabilities is mainly because of its conventional and technological hindrances. Whereas the U.S. Army would be trying to match its military capabilities, the IRGC has institutionalized other avenues for competition, such as missile, drone, maritime and external operational development.

The Quds Force has taken this tactic outside the confines of Iran, developing ties with groups that give them regional influence and strategic depth. Based on the analysis of the four cases, the character of these relationships is found to vary in several ways, such as: the degree of Iranian involvement, the independence, and strategic roles of their partners. The strategic impact of proxy networks depends on how much influence they have, how resilient they are, how smart they are, how their partners act, and how they are responded to by their opponents, among other things. The mere fact that these networks operate is thus not a sign of successful deterrence.

The study also pinpoints unique drawbacks of that approach. There are various limitations that affect the sustainability and controllability of asymmetric

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operations: economic constraints; partner autonomy; adversary adaptation; attribution issues; escalation risks; and conventional inferiority. These shortcomings were highlighted in the 2026 war: While Iran was able to hold on and respond in the event of direct attacks, their asymmetric forces were not sufficient to stop large-scale attacks on Iranian soil. The subsequent downfall of some of Iran's regional network is another example of the changing and ephemeral nature of strategic depth.

The IRGC thus is primarily important because it has institutionalized Iran's adaptation to the conventional military inferiority. Though the asymmetric strategy has given Iran more reach, cost imposing power, strategic depth, and operational resilience, it has not resulted in conventional parity with the United States. Consequently, the IRGC has been strengthening Iran's strategic position in several vital areas, without any material changes to the overall military landscape. These gains, however, will not be sustainable unless partner behavior changes, if they survive, unless they are intelligent, and unless Iran adapts to the tactics of its adversaries.

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