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Iran's Gray Zone and Hybrid Operations: Strategic Development and Regional Impacts

Abstract

The aim of this essay is to provide an overview of the development of Iran's hybrid warfare methods and its regional strategic objectives. Iran is continuously refining its toolkit in asymmetric and gray zone operations. The publication analyses the role of proxy organisations such as Hezbollah and the Houthis, operations in cyberspace, as well as the modernisation of the Iranian military and the development of offensive capabilities, which pose a threat to regional stability. This includes a focus on Iran's presence in Syria and Iraq, and the escalation patterns of its conflicts with Israel and the United States, Israeli airstrikes, Iranian countermeasures, the military exercises of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the tensions surrounding the nuclear agreement. The presentation details the evolution of Iran's operational model, which integrates both asymmetric and conventional means. The study underlying this presentation illustrates how Iran combines various forms of warfare to strengthen its regional position and achieve its geopolitical objectives, and to demonstrate the effectivity of the methods in reaching Iran's strategic goals.

Keywords: hybrid operations, gray zone operations, asymmetric warfare, proxy warfare

Introduction

This paper attempts to demonstrate the evolution – and the partial collapse – of Iran's gray zone strategy, a method of indirect warfare that has long enabled the Islamic Republic to project influence across the Middle East without triggering full-scale war, showing how this strategy functioned at its peak, and why it appears to be unravelling in recent years.

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Defining "gray zone"

Gray zone warfare refers to coercive actions that fall between traditional diplomacy and open warfare. It is about ambiguity, deniability and psychological impact rather than large-scale force-on-force engagement.

Its definition is not uniform in the literature; however, experts highlight the most characteristic attributes of the concept. Analysts interviewed within the framework of the Atlantic Council's "Hybrid Conflict Project" emphasise the following key features:

Clementine G. Starling emphasises that such actions – disinformation campaigns, cyberattacks, or the use of mercenaries – are slow, gradual campaigns aimed at weakening the opponent, and new technologies make them more difficult to detect.

According to Arun Iyer, globalisation, capital flows and the spread of social media have created new opportunities for operations in the gray zone, particularly by exploiting the vulnerabilities of open societies. Similar strategies – such as influence operations and economic manipulation – already existed during the Cold War, but today their effectiveness and complexity have increased.

Robert J. Giesler believes that great power competition has traditionally relied on gray zone tactics, as the risks of open military conflict are too high in the nuclear age. Instead of launching conventional wars, states employ strategies that achieve geopolitical objectives through covert or hard-to-prove acts of aggression.

All three experts emphasise that gray zone strategies pose a significant challenge to the United States, its allies and the international order, as attribution and the legality of response actions often remain unclear. Such operations also threaten the political stability and internal cohesion of societies.[2]

Based on the views of the experts cited by the Atlantic Council, the following definition has been formulated: a gray zone is the realm of defensive and offensive activities that lies between peaceful cooperation and open armed conflict. Operations conducted in this space are often covert and officially unacknowledged actions aimed at undermining the target's security or advancing the initiator's interests without triggering open warfare. While it can also be interpreted chronologically (as the period between peace and conflict), the term "zone" is used to emphasise that such activities may also occur during active conflicts.[3]

The concepts of gray zone warfare, asymmetric warfare and hybrid warfare are often conflated, but they are not distinct forms of warfare and should not be used interchangeably, even though they frequently are. These terms refer to the ways in which states employ various methods and tools to achieve their national security objectives. The tools may be diplomatic, informational, military, economic, or cyber in nature, while the methods describe how these tools are employed. The term "hybrid" has a dual meaning, as it can refer to both the tools used and the methods of their application.[4]

[2] Starling et al. 2022.
[3] Atlantic Council s. a.
[4] Eisenstadt 2021.

Asymmetry in warfare

Iran's gray zone strategy is closely linked to the toolkit of asymmetric warfare, as both approaches aim to weaken the adversary without engaging in conventional military conflict. Iran employs methods designed to minimise the risk of escalation while striving to achieve maximum geopolitical advantage. These tools – such as supporting proxy militias, conducting cyberattacks, applying economic pressure and executing information operations – are classic forms of asymmetric warfare. The core principle of asymmetric warfare is that the weaker party seeks to counterbalance the superiority of a stronger opponent through unconventional methods. Iran's strategy is particularly well suited to its efforts to preserve the balance of power in the Middle East. Rather than striving for conventional military superiority over the United States and Israel, Iran enhances its regional influence primarily through asymmetric operations.

One of the most striking examples of this is Iran's longstanding support for Hezbollah in Lebanon, a relationship that dates back to the early 1980s and exemplifies Tehran's use of ideological and military proxies to extend its influence. Iran has provided Hezbollah with financial assistance, weapons and training, enabling the group to operate as both a political actor and a paramilitary force. Alongside other regional proxy networks and its involvement in the Syrian and Yemeni conflicts, this support allows Iran to exert political and military pressure on its adversaries without direct engagement.

As part of its asymmetric warfare strategy, Iran places significant emphasis on information and cyber warfare. These tools are used to disseminate narratives that undermine the international image of its adversaries while bolstering its own regional support. The destabilising effects of disinformation, propaganda and cyberattacks often remain hidden from public view, allowing Iran to avoid direct accountability – an essential element of gray zone strategies.

The evolution of Iran's cyber operations is clearly observable: while initially focused on controlling domestic information flows and suppressing dissent, they have since transformed into instruments of aggressive action against foreign targets. A turning point came in 2010 with the discovery of the Stuxnet incident, during which a U.S.–Israeli-developed computer worm disabled Iranian nuclear centrifuges. In response, Iran escalated its offensive cyber operations targeting U.S. assets.

Since then, the Iranian regime has invested substantial resources in developing its own cyber capabilities, including domestic cybersecurity software and defensive network architectures. Some of Iran's cyber organisations operate under direct government or military control, while others appear to act more independently, yet maintain close cooperation with state entities – particularly in offensive operations. This technological development enables Iran to deliver effective asymmetric responses in cyberspace, even against a conventionally superior adversary like the United States.[5] In the realm of cyberattacks, concealment of the perpetrator's identity is particularly easy to achieve. The Iranian regime frequently employs front groups to obscure its direct involvement in cyber operations. By presenting these entities as grassroots or independent actors, Iran creates plausible deniability and complicates attribution efforts.

[5] Theohary 2020.

One notable example is the hacking group Black Shadow,[6] which has claimed responsibility for multiple cyberattacks against Israel since December 2020. Despite its purported independence, the group is likely a front for an Iranian state actor, possibly the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Similarly, another group, Farigh al Tahereh, carried out a series of cyberattacks in 2022 targeting Israel, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Iranian opposition figures in Baghdad. Iranian state media has described Farigh al Tahereh as an "Iraqi resistance group" – language commonly used for Iranian proxies. It is highly probable that the group functions either as the cyber arm of an existing proxy militia or as another IRGC-controlled front organisation.[7] These cases highlight the strategic use of cyber proxies by Iran to mask state responsibility, making it even more difficult for international actors to confidently attribute malicious activities in the digital domain.

Iran's strategy also builds on exploiting economic and political asymmetries. Through oil exports and the circumvention of international sanctions, Iran uses its economic power not only to maintain internal stability but also to expand its regional influence. The aim of such asymmetric measures is not direct victory, but rather to restrict the adversary's freedom of action and deplete their resources.

In summary, Iran's gray zone warfare strategy is grounded in asymmetric warfare, enabling it to achieve political objectives through a low-intensity yet wide-ranging set of tools. This strategy spans not only the military domain but also political, economic and informational dimensions, thereby posing a complex threat to both regional and global powers.

The various dimensions of asymmetry

One of the most evident differences is quantitative asymmetry, which refers to disparities in manpower, equipment and resources. The stronger party typically possesses a larger army and more weapons, while the weaker side operates with smaller forces that are often more efficiently organised.

In contrast, qualitative asymmetry does not concern the quantity of resources but their quality – this includes differences in leadership, training, technological advancement and methods of warfare.

Conceptual asymmetry refers to the extent to which one party is able to understand and exploit battlefield conditions, recognise the adversary's strategies and develop effective responses. This is complemented by operational asymmetry, which points to differences in organisational structures and modes of combat – for instance, the use of covert, clandestine operations instead of open, conventional warfare, or a preference for indirect methods of engagement.

Geographical asymmetry refers to the exploitation of territorial advantages: one party may be closer to strategically important areas, bases, or its own defensive positions, which can have a decisive impact on military operations. In contrast, temporal

[6] Vicens 2021.
[7] Islamic Republic News Agency 2022.

asymmetry refers to differing approaches in the use of time – while one side may opt for rapid, decisive strikes, the other may pursue a long-term, gradually exhausting strategy.

Normative asymmetry highlights differences in legal and ethical constraints between the parties. One side may strictly adhere to international law, while the other is less bound by such norms, which can provide a tactical advantage in certain situations. Closely related to this is moral and motivational asymmetry, which examines the level of commitment each side has to the fight. One party may be driven by religious or ideological convictions, or simply fighting for survival, while the other is motivated more by political or economic interests.[8]

Finally, ontological asymmetry refers to differences based on distinct logics and motivations. While one actor may follow a rational, pragmatic approach, the other might act based on symbolic or emotional decisions, making the nature of the conflict more unpredictable.[9]

In sum, asymmetric warfare is a complex phenomenon that not only serves to counterbalance military superiority, but also represents a comprehensive strategy encompassing political, economic and psychological dimensions. As a result, the weaker party may exert significant influence on the outcome of a conflict over the long term.[10]

Iran's long-term objectives

Iran's gray zone strategy is not random or reactive – it is anchored in very clear long-term strategic goals that have remained largely consistent since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. These objectives help explain the logic behind Iran's asymmetric and indirect approach to conflict.[11]

First, Iran seeks to establish itself as a leading power in the Middle East. While aware of the ethnic and sectarian limitations of its influence – rooted in its Persian and Shiite identity – Iran nonetheless aims to shape regional political orders through allies, proxies and ideological outreach.

Second, Tehran wants to drive out the United States from the region entirely. From the perspective of Iranian leadership, the enduring U.S. military presence in countries like Iraq, Syria and the Gulf states – combined with decades of perceived regime-change rhetoric – represents both a direct threat and a symbol of Western dominance that must be countered.

And third, one of the enduring ideological drivers in Iranian foreign policy is its opposition to the Israeli state. In practice, this is reflected in sustained support for groups like Hezbollah and Palestinian factions that confront Israel militarily or politically.

All of Iran's regional activities – from supporting militias in Iraq and Syria to arming the Houthis in Yemen – can be interpreted as part of a broader effort to fulfil these three long-term strategic aims.

[8] Eisenstadt 2021.
[9] Haghshenass 2008.
[10] Mazzucco 2022.
[11] Goldenberg et al. 2020.

Core elements of Iran's gray zone strategy

We need to look at the core elements of its gray zone strategy. This approach is built on flexibility, patience and indirectness.

First, Iran is tactically flexible but strategically consistent. It is willing to change methods, partners, or intensity depending on the situation – but its long-term goals rarely change. Whether it supports Hezbollah in Lebanon or militias in Iraq, the end-game remains the same: expanding influence, deterring adversaries and reshaping the regional order.

Second, Iran relies heavily on proxies and plausible deniability. Instead of using its own army, it sponsors and coordinates with non-state actors – groups that can operate with local legitimacy but also give Iran a layer of distance from direct responsibility. This allows Tehran to apply pressure without triggering open retaliation.[12]

Third, Iran avoids escalation by responding in a calibrated, proportional way. It does not aim to start wars, but rather to test limits, probe vulnerabilities and impose costs – often in ways that are ambiguous enough to buy time or create doubt about attribution.

And finally, Iran plays the long game. It prefers protracted, low-intensity engagements where its adversaries grow weary over time. It exploits the political short-termism of Western democracies, betting that it can outlast their attention span or political will.

Together, these elements form a uniquely asymmetric strategy – one that allows Iran to project power far beyond its borders, without fighting on conventional terms.

Why it worked: 2000–2019

For nearly two decades, Iran's gray zone strategy worked remarkably well. Between the early 2000s and 2019, Tehran steadily expanded its regional influence – often without firing a shot directly through its own armed forces.

While Hezbollah's primary role remains within Lebanon, it also contributes to Iran's regional strategy by supporting operations in Syria,[13] maintaining links with other militias and promoting the broader ideological framework of the 'Axis of Resistance' – thereby reinforcing Iran's strategic influence beyond its borders.[14]

In Iraq, Iran established deep ties with Shiite militias, especially after the fall of Saddam Hussein. These groups – such as Kata'ib Hezbollah or Asaib Ahl al-Haq – served both as political actors and paramilitary forces aligned with Iranian interests, particularly in resisting U.S. presence and shaping governance structures.

In Syria, Iran (alongside with Russia) played a vital role in keeping Bashar al-Assad in power during the civil war. Through a mix of Iranian troops, Hezbollah fighters and other foreign proxies, Iran played a significant role in supporting the Assad regime and managed to secure a key strategic ally in the region – for a long period of time.

[12] Mazarr 2015.
[13] Sullivan 2014.
[14] Israel Defense Forces 2019.

And in Yemen, Iran's support for the Houthi movement allowed it to open a new front of pressure against Saudi Arabia – threatening Red Sea shipping routes and conducting drone and missile attacks deep into Saudi territory. Iran's involvement began as early as 2009 and intensified significantly following the outbreak of the Yemeni civil war in 2014, with the systematic provision of advanced weapons systems to the Houthis.[15] While Iran provides strategic and material support, the Houthis maintain operational independence and pursue objectives that align with – but are not dictated by – Iranian interests. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Quds Force has facilitated the transfer of missile and drone components, as well as critical technologies, into Yemen to enhance the Houthis' operational capabilities. These capabilities have been employed in repeated attacks against critical infrastructure and military and governmental targets in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), often using Iranian-origin platforms.[16]

By enabling such strikes, Iran has effectively opened an additional axis of military pressure on the Gulf states, thereby extending its strategic reach. While the prospect of the Houthis launching attacks on Israel from Yemen was previously considered improbable, Houthi missile and drone attacks targeting Israeli territory have since materialised, reflecting an expanded scope of confrontation. This dynamic situation positions the Houthis not only as a tool of Iranian regional influence but also as a potential vector for escalation beyond the Arabian Peninsula.

What made this strategy effective was its ability to deliver strategic gains without provoking overwhelming retaliation. By staying below the threshold of direct war, Iran forced its adversaries into difficult dilemmas – whether to respond and escalate, or to tolerate and contain.

This period marked the high point of Iran's gray zone approach: it gained influence, deterred enemies and projected power through carefully calibrated, indirect actions.

The turning point: Internal pressures

Iran's gray zone strategy began to falter both because of strategic missteps and external conditions that shifted against it.

In 2021, there were hopes that the Biden Administration would revive the nuclear deal. But after prolonged negotiations, no agreement was reached. Instead of diplomacy, Iran returned to pressure tactics – supporting drone attacks, maritime incidents and proxy operations. One early signal came with the 2021 drone strike on the Mercer Street tanker,[17] followed by Houthi attacks on UAE targets.

Iran's involvement in Russia's war in Ukraine – especially through drone exports[18] – further alienated the European Union, which had long served as mediator in the nuclear talks. When the EU presented a 'final text' in August 2022, Iran rejected it,

[15] Zimmerman 2022.
[16] The Times of Israel 2019.
[17] Gardner 2021.
[18] Iran International 2024.

hoping Europe's energy crisis would boost its leverage. But that backfired – leaving Iran more isolated diplomatically.

In the months that followed, Iran escalated attacks on commercial shipping in the Gulf and Red Sea – attempting to raise costs for the U.S. and its partners. But instead of forcing concessions, these actions triggered regional anxiety and disrupted global trade.

Countries like Israel, the UAE and Saudi Arabia – focused on attracting foreign investment and economic reform – saw Iran's destabilising role as a threat. Between 2011 and 2021, Israel's FDI grew by 238%, the UAE's by 189% and even Saudi Arabia tied its Vision 2030 plans to long-term stability. Iran's actions put it increasingly at odds with the region's economic future.[19]

On 7 October 2023, Hamas launched a significant attack on Israel, resulting in the deaths of approximately 1,200 Israelis, primarily civilians, and the taking of around 200 hostages. The extent of Iran's involvement in this attack has been a subject of considerable analysis and debate.[20]

Reports indicate that Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) collaborated with Hamas in planning the 7 October assault. The IRGC allegedly approved the operation during a meeting in Beirut on 2 October 2023. In the weeks leading up to the attack, approximately 500 fighters from Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad reportedly received specialised combat training in Iran under the guidance of the IRGC's Quds Force. However, some analyses suggest that while Iran has historically supported Hamas through funding, training and weapons supply, there is no definitive evidence of direct Iranian involvement in orchestrating the 7 October attack. U.S. intelligence assessments[21] have indicated that the Hamas attack surprised Iran, undermining the theory that Tehran played a direct role in its planning or execution.[22] In summary, while Iran has been a longstanding supporter of Hamas, providing financial aid, military training and weapons, the precise nature and extent of its involvement in the 7 October 2023 attack on Israel remain subjects of ongoing investigation and debate. Regardless of Iran's direct role, the timing placed Tehran in a strategic trap – now seen as part of a widening arc of confrontation, while already aligned with Russia in another active conflict.

At this point, Iran was no longer shaping the regional agenda. It was reacting to events, overstretched and facing consequences that its gray zone strategy was no longer built to absorb.

Another internal factor is popular discontent. Mass protests – like the Green Movement in 2009 or the Mahsa Amini uprising in 2022 – have exposed the regime's vulnerability at home.[23]

In short, the same domestic pressures that challenge the regime's survival are now also undermining its capacity to wage gray zone warfare. The once-coherent system of influence is fraying under the weight of internal crisis.

[19] Zandi 2025.
[20] Pletka 2023.
[21] Smyth 2023.
[22] Levitt 2023.
[23] Loft 2024.

Iran's gray zone strategy ultimately ran into a hard wall: the economy. Despite years of investment in regional influence – such as an estimated 20 to 30 billion dollars spent in Syria – Iran failed to convert that presence into lasting economic leverage. The country's economic model remains deeply dysfunctional, marked by corruption, poor governance and ideological rigidity. Between 2012 and 2022, Iran averaged only $2.4 billion in annual foreign direct investment – just $1.5 billion in 2022 alone – while neighbouring states attracted exponentially more. Sanctions have also taken a major toll. Iran's crude oil exports dropped by over 600,000 barrels per day between 2016 and 2024, slashing revenues that once funded its proxies and external operations. By 2020, Iran's GDP fell to about $262 billion – its lowest point since 2006 – and its share in global trade dropped to just 0.2%. On global indexes, it consistently ranks among the least economically free and most corrupt countries: 170th out of 177 in economic freedom, and 149th out of 180 in corruption perception.[24]

In short, without economic power to sustain it, Iran's regional strategy became increasingly hollow. Influence without a viable economic basis simply was not sustainable.

External adaptation

As Iran faced growing internal dysfunction and economic decline, its regional adversaries adapted rapidly – militarily, diplomatically and economically. Israel intensified its preemptive strikes on Iranian targets in Syria, degrading supply lines and command infrastructure with minimal response. These attacks exposed the weakening of Iran's deterrence. Meanwhile, Gulf states like Saudi Arabia and the UAE shifted focus to stability. In response to years of Iranian-backed Houthi attacks, they invested in air defence, maritime security and long-term development strategies like Saudi Vision 2030.[25]

This created a contrast: While Iran's economy contracted and foreign investment collapsed, rivals like Israel and the UAE experienced rapid growth. These states countered regional instability not only through military means, but also by prioritising long-term economic resilience and development.

Iran's drone support to Russia further isolated it diplomatically from Europe and the broader West – sinking any realistic hope of reviving the nuclear deal. However, this did not significantly affect Iran's relations within the region, where many actors continue to engage with Moscow.[26]

Altogether, these shifts left Iran with fewer options, eroded its regional leverage and strengthened its opponents – without triggering direct war.

Eroding deterrence

One of the pillars of Iran's gray zone strategy has always been deterrence – creating just enough fear of retaliation to prevent adversaries from striking back forcefully. This

[24] Zandi 2025.
[25] Government of Saudi Arabia s. a.
[26] Wintour–Rankin 2022.

deterrence was not based on conventional military superiority, but rather on the idea that Iran – or one of its proxies – would respond to any attack with calibrated but painful consequences. It was a psychological strategy as much as a military one.

But in recent years, this deterrence has started to erode. We have seen more and more examples where Iranian threats go unheeded, or where retaliation fails to materialise – or simply does not have the desired effect.

Israel has carried out hundreds of strikes on Iranian-linked targets in Syria, often without significant Iranian response. Israel has conducted numerous airstrikes targeting Iranian-linked positions in Syria. For instance, in September 2024, Israeli special forces executed a raid on an underground missile production facility in Masyaf, Syria, aiming to disrupt the manufacture of precision missiles intended for Hezbollah. This complex operation involved dozens of aircraft and approximately 100 helicopter-borne troops, resulting in the dismantling of the facility.[27]

After years of absorbing Houthi missile and drone attacks – many of which targeted critical infrastructure, including oil facilities – Saudi Arabia has increasingly moved toward a strategy of regional de-escalation. This change is largely driven by domestic priorities, especially the ambitions laid out in the Vision 2030 program, as well as by military fatigue and the high costs associated with protracted conflict in Yemen. Rather than respond with force to the latest provocations, Riyadh has opted for diplomatic engagement, supporting ceasefire efforts and backchannel negotiations. The article suggests that Saudi Arabia is exercising strategic restraint, avoiding actions that could undermine fragile diplomatic progress or provoke broader regional escalation. Ultimately, the Kingdom's current posture reflects a calculated shift from military confrontation to a more politically driven effort to stabilise the region and safeguard its long-term national interests. Saudi Arabia, after years of Houthi drone attacks, has begun to push for regional de-escalation[28] – but not because of fear, rather because it sees Iranian leverage declining.

When deterrence fails, the strategic equation changes. Opponents become emboldened and they test red lines. They take risks. And suddenly, Iran finds itself reacting instead of shaping events – a dangerous position for a state that built its strategy on controlling the tempo of conflict.

Strategic limits

Iran's gray zone strategy is no longer expanding – it is contracting. What we see today is not a dramatic collapse, but a slow rollback driven by strategic fatigue, economic weakness and internal fragmentation.

Across the region, Iran is struggling to sustain its influence. Proxies like Hezbollah are weakened by local crises, militias in Iraq are more autonomous and long-time partners like Assad was removed from power and disappeared suddenly. The Houthis have consistently acted based on their own agenda, even as they maintain close ties

[27] Reuters 2025.
[28] Jalal 2023.

with Iran and benefit from its support. The system has long suffered from declining domestic support, and now also faces diminishing resources to maintain its networks. Sanctions, financial constraints and brain drain have all reduced Iran's ability to fund operations and supply proxies effectively. Logistical challenges – like tightened border controls and surveillance – further complicate its reach.

Without economic power, political unity, or operational capacity, Iran's regional project is losing momentum. It now faces a choice: continue resisting and overextending – or pivot toward internal development and renewal.

Analysis – Losing the way of war

Iran's gray zone strategy allowed it to project power far beyond its borders without conventional war. For years, it used proxies, pressure and ambiguity in the attempt to reshape the regional balance in its favour. But over time, the strategy began to overreach. Internally, Iran lacked the economic foundation and political cohesion to sustain it. Externally, its rivals adapted – militarily, economically and diplomatically – eroding Iran's advantage step by step. We are not seeing a dramatic collapse, but a strategic unravelling: weakening proxies, diplomatic isolation, financial strain and a loss of deterrence. Iran is no longer shaping the events[29] as it once tried to – it is reacting to setbacks it can no longer absorb.

What we are witnessing now is not a dramatic defeat, but a strategic unravelling. The tools still exist – missiles, drones, proxies – but the political and economic foundations that made them effective are no longer reliable.

Conclusion

The Islamic Republic now stands at a crossroads. It can continue resisting change at growing cost, or pivot toward internal development and regional pragmatism. In that sense, Iran may be experiencing what one might call a preemptive loss: not the result of battlefield defeat, but of a strategy outpacing the state's capacity to sustain it.

And that, ultimately, is the paradox of Iran's gray zone strategy. Its greatest strength has always been that it allowed Tehran to fight without fighting. But once it became too costly to maintain, it started to collapse. As a conclusion, my deduction can be summarised with this statement: Iran did not lose a war. It may be losing its way of war.

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