

The Proxy Paradox: Attacking a Sponsor Mobilizes Its Proxies

Luwei Ying*

Abstract

Why do military attacks on a sponsor so rarely eliminate its proxies? I argue that a foreign rival's attack can give proxies an opportunity to mobilize their own supporters. The attack reinforces existing claims about a common enemy, and proxies use their media networks to translate this grievance into calls to action. I test this argument using an original multilingual corpus of websites, broadcasts, videos, and Telegram posts from five Iranian proxies in Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, and Palestine from 2016 to 2026. A supervised classifier identifies calls to action and their intended audiences. Attacks on Iran by the United States and Israel are followed by increased mobilizing rhetoric in the proxies' domestic channels. Insurgent attacks inside Iran and Iran's own attacks produce no comparable increase. The response persists when Iranian support is held at its uninterrupted level. Within the same Telegram channel and day, mobilizing posts are forwarded more often, especially during weeks when Iran is attacked. These findings suggest that pressure on a sponsor can create mobilization opportunities for the organizations it is intended to weaken.

Keywords: proxy war, state sponsorship, coercion, militant communication, mobilization, Iran, Hezbollah, Houthis

*Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, University of California, Los Angeles. Email: ying@ss.ucla.edu. Working draft, October 2026. Comments welcome; please do not cite or circulate without permission.

Introduction

In a June 2022 interview with *The Economist*, Prime Minister Naftali Bennett explained that Israel had changed its approach to Iran: “We no longer play with the tentacles, with Iran’s proxies: we’ve created a new equation by going for the head.”¹ His “octopus doctrine” treated Iran as the center of a network that included Hezbollah, the Iraqi factions, the Houthis, and Hamas. Its premise was that attacking the sponsor would weaken the groups it supported.

This premise also informed the American policy of “maximum pressure,” including the twelve demands issued in May 2018 (Pompeo, 2018). The State Department later reported that Hezbollah and Hamas had “enacted unprecedented austerity plans” following the return of sanctions (Hook, 2019). The same logic guided the killing of Qassem Soleimani in January 2020, Israel’s campaign against Iranian personnel and weapons in Syria, the strike on Iran’s consulate in Damascus in April 2024, the strikes on Iranian territory that October, the twelve-day war of June 2025, and the war that began on February 28, 2026, in which the Supreme Leader was killed and Iran’s ports were blockaded. These episodes repeatedly prompted predictions that Iran’s proxy network would decline. The killing of Soleimani was described as bringing “perilous times” for Iraq’s Shi’a militias and “a hard blow to Iran’s regional clout.” Following the June 2025 strikes, the network was called an “axis of the weak.” In March 2026, Iran’s proxies were described as “out for themselves” and its axis as “in disarray.”²

Despite these attacks, Hezbollah, the Iraqi factions, the Houthis, and Hamas remain active. During the 2026 war, the Iraqi factions alone claimed more than a thousand attacks, with an operational tempo an order of magnitude above earlier campaigns (Knights et al., 2026). Their persistence raises the question motivating this paper: why do military attacks on a sponsor so rarely eliminate its proxies?

Existing research offers two explanations, both centered on the sponsor. The first emphasizes resources. External support is consistently associated with insurgent success and longer civil wars (Record, 2007; Regan, 2002; Cunningham, 2010; Kalyvas and Balcells, 2010). From this perspective, proxies persist because sponsors continue to supply them, and they should weaken when support ends (Connable and Libicki, 2010). The second emphasizes delegation. Sponsors

¹*The Economist*, “Israel’s prime minister explains his new approach to Iran,” June 8, 2022. <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2022/06/08/israels-prime-minister-explains-his-new-approach-to-iran>.

²Al Jazeera, January 22, 2020; Gulf News, December 16, 2020; The Jerusalem Post, June 24, 2025; Foreign Policy, March 2, 2026; Al Jazeera, March 2, 2026.

use proxies to extend their reach and maintain deniability, but they have limited control over the organizations they support (Salehyan, 2010; Byman and Kreps, 2010; Berman and Lake, 2019). Proxies have interests of their own, and a weakened sponsor may be less able to restrain them. Both explanations focus on the relationship between sponsor and proxy. They give less attention to the proxy's relationship with its own public.

I argue that this domestic relationship helps explain how proxies respond to attacks on their sponsors. Proxies are autonomous political organizations that use their own media to mobilize their constituencies. An attack by a foreign rival reinforces the proxy's longstanding claims about a common enemy and provides new grievances, commemorations of fallen commanders, and religious justifications for action. These appeals reach publics that already regard the attacker as an adversary. The resulting rally is organized by the proxy and directed toward its own supporters. An attack on Iran can therefore generate mobilization in Lebanon, Iraq, or Yemen. I call this the proxy paradox: attacks intended to weaken a sponsor's proxies can give those organizations an opportunity to mobilize.³

This argument differs from resource substitution in two respects. In the resource-substitution account, external funding reduces a group's reliance on its population, while the loss of that funding forces it to seek local support (Weinstein, 2007; Salehyan et al., 2014). The mechanism proposed here concerns an opportunity created by the attack itself, rather than a need created by resource losses. It therefore does not require an interruption in external support. Pressure on sponsors rarely ends sponsorship (Karlén, 2019; Early, 2015), and Tehran reportedly transferred about a billion dollars to Hezbollah in the year after its 2024 losses (Ghaddar, 2026). If increased mobilization occurred only after support ended, resource substitution would account for it. I show that the response also occurs when support continues.

I test the argument using Iran's proxy network from 2016 to 2026. The design includes one sponsor and five proxies in four countries, allowing me to examine how organizations with different constituencies respond to the same attacks. I measure mobilization through the proxies' published communications, which record both calls to action and their intended audiences. The original corpus includes 143,000 archived website pages, 4.1 million Telegram posts, 1,455 television and radio transcripts, and 337 video transcripts from Hezbollah, Kata'ib Hezbollah, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, the Houthis, and Hamas. A supervised classifier trained on passages coded according to a written

³The phrase has previously described the difficulty sponsors face in controlling the groups they arm (Plana, 2021; Şimşek, 2025). Here it refers to an unintended consequence of pressure on the sponsor: an increased opportunity for proxies to mobilize their own publics.

codebook identifies calls to action and the publics they address in Arabic, Farsi, and English. I measure attacks on the sponsor using event data, rather than selecting only prominent episodes. The Uppsala Conflict Data Program records 367 attacks on Iranian territory, personnel, and assets by the United States and Israel, including Israeli strikes on Iranian assets in Syria from 2017 and the war of 2026.

Three studies examine the proposed mechanism. Study 1 shows that proxies increase their mobilizing rhetoric after attacks on their sponsor. Each additional month with an attack on Iran in the preceding half year is associated with about a six percent increase in the rate of calls to the proxies' core publics. The response is larger following deadlier attacks. During major episodes, three to six months in the treatment window contain attacks, implying an increase of roughly one fifth to two fifths. Insurgent attacks inside Iran and Iran's own attacks on others do not produce a comparable increase, while rival and state media in the same four countries reduce their calls to action. Study 2 uses sequential g-estimation to examine whether interruptions in Iranian support account for the response. Holding transfers to each proxy at their uninterrupted level leaves the attack effect intact, and reported reductions in support are not associated with additional mobilization. Study 3 examines audience engagement. Within the same Telegram channel and day, mobilizing posts are forwarded seven to eight percent more often than other posts, with a larger sharing advantage during weeks when Iran is attacked.

This paper contributes to three areas of research. First, it connects the study of interstate competition with the domestic politics of non-state armed groups. Pressure on a sponsor can improve its proxies' ability to mobilize, complicating the expectation that weakening a sponsor will weaken the groups it supports. This unintended consequence relates to the broader problems of coercion and insecurity examined in research on the security dilemma and sanctions (Jervis, 1978; Drezner, 1999). Second, the paper adds the sponsor's circumstances to explanations of militant communication. Existing research emphasizes a group's own military strength, its rivals, and the loss of its leaders (Ying, 2026; Tokdemir et al., 2021; Winkler et al., 2021). The findings show how pressure on an external partner also shapes what movements ask of their audiences. Third, the paper develops a way to study the mobilization efforts of clandestine organizations through their communications. Multilingual text analysis and audience engagement data allow me to observe five armed movements monthly over a decade without relying on surveys of their supporters.

Proxy Wars and the Prescription to Hit the Sponsor

A proxy war involves a sponsor state, an armed group that fights on its behalf, and the group's target (Mumford, 2013; Rauta, 2018). The sponsor provides money, weapons, training, and protection. The group conducts operations and gives the sponsor some deniability, allowing states to compete at lower cost and below the threshold of open war (Carson, 2018). The United States and the Soviet Union relied on such relationships in Korea and Afghanistan. Since the early 1980s, the United States and Iran have also competed through regional partners, with the United States supporting Israel and Iran supporting Hezbollah, the Iraqi factions, the Houthis, and Hamas. The direct attacks of June 2025 and February 2026 escalated this competition beyond the indirect confrontation that these arrangements were designed to sustain.

Research on proxy war and external support has developed three main findings. First, external support sustains insurgencies and prolongs civil wars. Record's comparative study identifies outside assistance as the most consistent correlate of insurgent success (Record, 2007). Superpower sponsorship supported irregular warfare during the Cold War, and its withdrawal contributed to the subsequent decline of that form of rebellion (Kalyvas and Balcells, 2010). Third-party intervention can prolong civil wars by introducing additional veto players and by obscuring rebel strength through fungible support (Regan, 2002; Cunningham, 2010; Sawyer et al., 2017). Second, sponsors select militant partners based on shared ideology (San-Akca, 2016), ethnic ties (Saideman, 2001; Salehyan et al., 2011), and strategic rivalry (Byman, 2005; Maoz and San-Akca, 2012). Once established, these relationships create principal-agent problems that affect delegation, control, and the course of conflict (Salehyan, 2010; Byman and Kreps, 2010; Berman and Lake, 2019; Karlén and Rauta, 2026). Third, armed groups often struggle after losing external resources. A survey of 89 insurgencies finds that the withdrawal of state support significantly weakens insurgents and typically leads to their defeat (Connable and Libicki, 2010). The experience of groups abandoned by superpower sponsors at the end of the Cold War is consistent with this finding (Kalyvas and Balcells, 2010). Some groups nevertheless adapt by finding alternative resources or adjusting their organizations (Byman et al., 2001; Radtke and Jo, 2018; Hazen, 2013).

These findings suggest a policy of weakening proxies by cutting off their sponsors' support. Pompeo's twelve demands in 2018 and Bennett's octopus doctrine in 2022 reflect this logic. Yet the same literature identifies substantial obstacles to ending sponsorship. Coercing a sponsor to abandon its partners is often difficult (Byman, 2005), particularly when support can be provided covertly

and compliance is hard to verify (Schultz, 2010). Foreign threats and sanctions rarely terminate sponsorship (Karlén, 2019), and sanctioned states can redirect supply through neighboring countries and sanctions-busting networks (Early, 2015). More fundamentally, the resource account does not explain how a proxy engages its domestic public when the sponsor is attacked. The delegation account also focuses primarily on the sponsor's control problem, treating the proxy's domestic relationships as a means of influencing the agent (Berman and Lake, 2019). A weakened principal may lose control, but this alone does not explain why its agents would increase their efforts to mobilize for a shared cause.

Research on Iran's network highlights the importance of these domestic relationships. Iran and Hezbollah have been described as an "interdependent symbiosis between close allies," rooted in shared doctrine rather than a contractual exchange (Saad, 2019; Bakir, 2023). Iran's ties to its clients are strongest where those clients share its interpretation of Shi'a Islam and accept its regional objectives (Ostovar, 2018). These groups also maintain distinct constituencies and institutions at home. Hezbollah provides welfare to Lebanon's Shi'a community through a network organized around mobilization (Cammatt, 2014; Berman, 2009). The Iraqi factions hold political office and receive salaries from the Iraqi state (Mansour, 2021; Smith and Knights, 2025). The Houthis govern and tax northern Yemen (Brandt, 2017; Juneau, 2024), while Hamas uses social services to build political support among Palestinians (Szekely, 2015; Baconi, 2018). These domestic activities are accompanied by media networks designed to engage and mobilize each movement's public (Khatib et al., 2014; Harb, 2011; Matar and Dakhilallah, 2006).

A separate literature examines the consequences of military pressure on armed groups themselves, with mixed findings. Leadership killings do not consistently eliminate organizations, and groups with strong communal support are more likely to survive them (Jordan, 2009, 2014). Other studies find that leadership targeting shortens campaigns (Johnston, 2012; Price, 2012), while weakened internal control can increase attacks (Rigterink, 2021). Indiscriminate shelling reduced insurgent attacks in Chechnya (Lyall, 2009), but bombing in Vietnam increased insurgent activity and control (Kocher et al., 2011; Dell and Querubín, 2018). Harm inflicted by foreign forces can increase support for local insurgents (Lyall et al., 2013). In Pakistan, American drone strikes were followed by anti-American protests and increased online searches for radical Islamist concepts (Mahmood and Jetter, 2023). These studies examine pressure on a group or on the state governing its population. This paper examines a different relationship: how attacks on an external sponsor affect a proxy's efforts to mobilize its own public.

The Proxy Paradox

The argument begins by treating proxies as autonomous political organizations that make strategic decisions about their communications (Kydd and Walter, 2006; Saad, 2019). They address their constituencies through media networks of their own. Hezbollah's al-Manar helped build an "imagined community of resistance" among Lebanon's Shi'a (Matar and Dakhlallah, 2006). The Houthis' al-Masirah broadcasts weekly marches and statements from the movement's religious authorities. Hamas's outlets promote the movement in Gaza, the West Bank, and the diaspora (Mozes and Weimann, 2010). These communications respond to changing political and military circumstances. Jihadi organizations adjust religious and secular appeals as their military strength changes (Ying, 2026). The Islamic State's media output varied with its territorial control and the loss of its media leaders (Kaczkowski et al., 2021; Winter, 2018; Winkler et al., 2021), while rebel groups adjust their stated ideologies in response to rivals (Tokdemir et al., 2021). Pressure on a sponsor is another circumstance to which a proxy can respond, and its media provide a record of that response.

An attack on the sponsor by a foreign rival provides material for mobilization. It reinforces the proxy's existing claims about an aggressive common enemy and creates new grievances, images, and commemorations of fallen commanders. The logic relates to the "propaganda of the deed." Repression and economic harm can affect mobilization (Bueno de Mesquita, 2005), while damaging crackdowns can alter beliefs about a government's motives and radicalize the affected population (Bueno de Mesquita and Dickson, 2007). In the mechanism proposed here, the sponsor is attacked, while the proxy uses the attack to make appeals to its own public. Lyall et al. (2013) show that harm inflicted by ISAF increased support for the Taliban in Afghanistan. I extend this logic across borders: an attack on Iran can strengthen the mobilizing appeals of a movement in Lebanon or Yemen. Existing attitudes toward foreign intervention make this response plausible. Approval of attacks on the United States is associated with grievances against American policy, rather than religiosity or poverty (Tessler and Robbins, 2007). Elites can promote anti-American sentiment when it serves their interests (Blaydes and Linzer, 2012), and Arabic online discourse directs hostility toward American intervention more than American society (Jamal et al., 2015). Proxies can draw on these attitudes when explaining an attack on their sponsor.

This process can produce a rally around the proxy's own cause. Research on rally effects examines increased support for American presidents during international crises (Mueller, 1970) and mobilization in favor of authoritarian regimes under foreign pressure (Hellmeier, 2021). Here, the

proxy interprets an attack on its sponsor as a threat to its own community and uses that interpretation to mobilize its domestic public. Conflict with an external enemy can strengthen group boundaries and internal cohesion (Coser, 1956), while foreign pressure can consolidate rather than fragment the target (Galtung, 1967). The proxy organizes this response through its existing institutions. Mobilization can also signal commitment to the sponsor. Silence after an attack could raise doubts about the relationship, particularly when allies fear abandonment as well as entrapment (Snyder, 1984). Public appeals offer a relatively inexpensive way to demonstrate solidarity. An ally concerned that its patron's protection is weakening also has reason to build its own strength (Waltz, 1979); for a non-state organization, this includes strengthening its domestic support.

The proposed mechanism differs from resource substitution. In that account, external funding reduces the need to cultivate local support, and losing it creates pressure to seek resources from the population (Weinstein, 2007; Salehyan et al., 2014). The proxy paradox instead describes an opportunity arising from the attack. This distinction yields different expectations: resource substitution predicts increased mobilization when support declines, whereas the mechanism proposed here predicts an increase following rival attacks even if support continues. An attack does not immediately remove money already transferred, weapons already stored, or institutions already built. Iran's support for its proxies was seldom interrupted during the period studied. Soleimani's killing disrupted deliveries to the Iraqi factions, while Tehran authorized an additional Quds Force allocation in January 2020.⁴ There were no reported changes in transfers following the killing of Mohsen Fakhrizadeh in 2020, the Damascus consulate strike in April 2024, or the October 2024 strikes. After its losses in 2024, Hezbollah received about a billion dollars from Tehran (Ghaddar, 2026). The April 2026 naval blockade, the one episode in the decade that reduced Iran's capacity to pay, followed years of attacks that had not done so.⁵ Continued support therefore allows me to examine whether attacks create mobilization opportunities independently of resource losses.

⁴An April 2020 visit without cash assistance was reported by AP, republished by *Al Jazeera*, June 11, 2020: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/6/11/cash-strapped-iran-struggles-to-maintain-sway-over-iraq-militias>. The additional 200 million euro allocation was reported by *Radio Farda*, January 7, 2020: <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/iran-khamenei-orders-additional-200m-euros-to-qods-in-next-two-months/30364067.html>.

⁵The project's funding record, compiled from official, press, and research sources, documents each episode. UANI's tanker trackers report that Iran's oil exports fell from about 2.2 million barrels a day in February 2026 to about 65,000 in May. These totals include petroleum products; the May tracker reports that no crude oil passed the blockade. See the February tracker and the May tracker. Hezbollah reduced cash payments to constituents in May. By August 2026, reports described halted compensation and rent support reduced from twelve to six months. See Reuters, June 17, 2026, republished by *Al-Monitor*; *The New York Times*, "Inside the War on Hezbollah's Finances," August 9, 2026; and *The National*, August 13, 2026. Study 2 uses this record to code the sponsor's supply by month.

The argument links a rival's attack on the sponsor to the proxy's mobilization efforts and then to audience response. A reduction in external support may accompany the attack, but it is not necessary for this sequence. Three hypotheses and one corollary follow.

H1. After a foreign rival's attack on its sponsor, a proxy raises its mobilization effort toward its public.

Corollary 1. An attack by a non-rival has no similar effect.

H2. The effect does not depend on whether the supply ties are cut.

H3. When a proxy mobilizes, its support base responds.

H1 concerns attacks by a foreign rival because these attacks reinforce the proxy's claims about a common enemy. Insurgent violence inside Iran and Iran's attacks on others involve the sponsor but do not provide the same basis for an appeal. Corollary 1 therefore predicts that these events will not generate a similar response. H2 distinguishes the proxy paradox from resource substitution: the attack effect should persist when transfers are held at their uninterrupted level, while reductions in transfers should not account for additional mobilization. H3 concerns audience response. Calls to action that receive no response impose costs on an organization (McCarthy and Zald, 1977; Lichbach, 1995). The proposed mechanism therefore also requires evidence that audiences engage with the proxy's appeals.

The argument also suggests that proxies' ties to their sponsor may shape the audiences they address. With only five groups, I examine this implication descriptively rather than treating it as a separate hypothesis test. Hezbollah and Kata'ib Hezbollah accept the guardianship of the jurist and Iran's Supreme Leader as a religious authority. Attacks on the sponsor therefore carry particular meaning for their core supporters (Bakir, 2023; Mansour, 2021). Hamas is a Sunni movement focused on Palestinian national liberation, while the Houthis are a Zaydi movement rooted in northern Yemen's politics. Their relationships with Iran depend more on a common adversary than on shared doctrine (Baconi, 2018; Brandt, 2017; Juneau, 2016). More closely integrated proxies should direct their appeals toward their core constituencies, while groups with greater distance from the sponsor should make broader appeals to their domestic publics (Ostovar, 2018; Tabatabai et al., 2021).

The theory applies to proxies that have developed domestic political organizations and constituencies. Groups that depend entirely on external transfers may decline when those transfers end,

as the resource account predicts. The argument also concerns mobilization efforts and audience response, rather than military capability. Israel’s campaign in autumn 2024 left Hezbollah militarily weaker than it had been in a generation. Such losses can coexist with increased efforts to mobilize supporters. The analyses below measure those efforts and their reception, rather than changes in weapons or battlefield strength.

Research Design: Iran’s Proxy Network

Iran has an extensive proxy network that has developed over the past two decades (Ostovar, 2019; Watts et al., 2023). It offers two advantages for this study. Iran experienced repeated attacks by the United States and Israel, and its proxies encountered these shocks at the same time. The groups nevertheless operated in different political settings: Lebanon’s Shi’a community, Iraq’s Shi’a parties and state payroll, the Zaydi highlands of northern Yemen, and Gaza and the West Bank. This combination allows me to examine responses to common attacks among organizations with different constituencies. I study five proxies with domestic media records spanning the decade (Figure 1): Hezbollah in Lebanon; Kata’ib Hezbollah and Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq in Iraq; the Houthis (Ansar Allah) in Yemen; and Hamas in Palestine. I analyze the Iraqi factions separately because their ties to Iran and the Iraqi state differ (Mansour, 2021; Knights, 2019). The panel covers April 2016, the first month with the required lagged controls, through August 2026, six months into the war on Iran.

The treatment: attacks on the sponsor

I identify attacks on Iran using the Uppsala Conflict Data Program’s Georeferenced Event Dataset (version 26.1) and its candidate event files for 2026 (Sundberg and Melander, 2013; Davies et al., 2026; Hegre et al., 2020).⁶ I retain records naming Iran and classify an event as an attack on the sponsor when the dyad pairs the government of Iran with Israel or the United States and the event occurs on Iranian territory, abroad with Iranian deaths, or in Syria against Iranian military assets. The data contain 367 such events from 2015 to August 2026. Most are Israeli strikes on Revolutionary Guard personnel and assets in Syria between 2017 and 2024. Strikes on Iranian territory occurred in November 2020, October 2024, June 2025 (34 events and 1,188 deaths during the twelve-day war), and from February 2026 (9 events and 3,269 deaths in the first month). At least

⁶Dataset versions and codebooks are available at <https://ucdp.uu.se/downloads/>. The 2026 candidate files are preliminary monthly releases.



Figure 1: Iran’s proxy network in the study. One sponsor and five proxies in four countries, 2016 to 2026.

one attack occurred in 78 of the 125 panel months, and strikes on Iranian soil occurred in eleven. UCDP records lethal events, so attacks without fatalities are absent and the death toll does not fully capture material damage.

The main treatment measures the number of months with at least one attack on Iran between $t - 6$ and $t - 1$. This half-year window allows the response to develop over several months. I also use the death toll in the attacks, entered as monthly lags, as a second measure. To examine Corollary 1, I apply the same procedure to two other types of violence involving Iran. The first consists of insurgent attacks inside Iran by Jaish al-Adl, PJAK, the Islamic State, and other groups (126 events). The second consists of Iran’s attacks on others, identified as Iran-Israel and Iran-United States events with no Iranian deaths. These measures distinguish rival attacks on the sponsor from insurgent violence inside it and from its own attacks.

The outcome: mobilization in the proxies’ own media

I collected the proxies’ communications from four sources. Because their websites are frequently removed or relocated, I recovered 143,000 pages from sites such as al-Masirah, al-Qassam, and

Table 1: The proxies' home-audience Telegram channels and their output, April 2016 to August 2026

Proxy	Outlets	Passages scored	Mobilization per 1,000	Calls to the wider home public per 1,000
Hezbollah	al-Manar (news, breaking, live), al-Ahed, the War Media	495,048	115	76
Kata'ib Hezbollah	Sabereen News, the movement's channel, the Kaf center, al-Etejah	256,403	28	26
Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq	al-Ahad TV, the movement's channel, Qais al-Khazali's media office	490,923	18	45
Houthis	al-Masirah (news, videos, live, Yemen), Ansarollah	410,115	118	34
Hamas	Shehab, Palinfo, Quds News	1,632,213	47	16

Note: Passages scored by the classifier over the 125 panel months (Kata'ib Hezbollah's channels begin in September 2017). Mobilization is the mean monthly number of passages that call the movement's core public to act, per 1,000 scored passages; the last column counts the calls addressed to fellow citizens beyond the base.

al-Manar through the Wayback Machine. The Telegram collection includes 4.1 million posts from 28 channels, including Sabereen News, al-Manar, al-Masirah, and Palinfo. Television and radio coverage consists of 1,455 transcripts and summaries from BBC Monitoring. I also collected 337 YouTube captions and video transcripts. Together, these sources cover ten years of communication in Arabic, Farsi, and English.⁷ The panel analysis uses the five proxies' domestic Telegram channels (Table 1). I exclude international and Farsi-language channels because they address other publics. I also exclude the Houthis' live-stream channel, where nearly every post contains a slogan.

I measure mobilization in four steps. First, I draw a random sample of 10,000 passages, stratified by group, channel type, language, and period to represent the different sources and years.⁸ Second, two large language models, Anthropic's Claude Opus 4.5 and OpenAI's GPT-5.1, independently code each passage in its original Arabic, Farsi, or English using the same written codebook. Neither model sees the other's output. Channel names, dates, and intended audience metadata are withheld so that coding depends on the passage itself.⁹ Each passage receives an audience code and an action code. The audience categories are the movement's *core public* (its base, fighters and their families, community, and outlet audiences); the *wider home public* (fellow citizens beyond the base,

⁷I collected rival and state media from the same four countries and pro-Iran outlets outside the proxies' own channels using the same procedures. Study 1 uses these outlets for comparison. Telegram posts include view counts and, where recorded, forward counts, which provide the engagement measures in Study 3.

⁸The codebook (version 2.1), coding instructions, and twelve worked examples are included in the replication materials.

⁹The models are instructed to quote at most 25 words from the passage as evidence for each code, to code the absence of a request, and to resolve ambiguous cases conservatively.

including other communities, parties, and the state); the sponsor’s public; a transnational public; a neglected segment of domestic society; or none. The action categories identify requests to join or fight; donate or fund; vote or register; rally or protest; boycott or report; follow, subscribe, share, or watch; pray or mourn as a movement activity; or take no action. Coding concerns explicit or clearly implied requests rather than topics. A hashtag campaign is coded according to the action it requests, while a report of a past funeral without a request receives no action code.

Third, I assess agreement between the two model coders. They agree on 91 percent of passages for the call to act and 86 percent for the audience addressed. Fourth, I train a supervised classifier on the coded passages and apply it to the full corpus. The classifier is a logistic regression using multilingual sentence embeddings (multilingual-e5-base). In five-fold cross-validation, classification of the call to act has an accuracy of 0.91 and a macro-F1 of 0.47. The latter reflects the small proportion of calls to action and the difficulty of identifying rare action categories. Audience classification has an accuracy of 0.72 and a macro-F1 of 0.65, with F1 scores of 0.70 for the core public and 0.68 for the wider home public. Requests to donate, vote, or pray are too rare in the training sample to classify. The final action measure therefore covers four categories: join or fight; rally or protest; boycott or report; and follow, subscribe, share, or watch. The last category is the most common.

I combine the audience and action codes to construct the outcome. For each proxy and month, I count passages calling the proxy’s core public to act and use the total number of scored passages as the exposure. The resulting rate measures how often the group’s channels ask their own supporters to take action. The core public is the main audience for H1 because all five proxies have established support bases. Calls to the wider home public provide a second outcome for the group-specific analysis. Measuring a rate accounts for changes in posting volume as news coverage varies. A month with more war reports but no additional requests produces a lower mobilization rate. The outcome therefore captures the prevalence of appeals in the channels’ output, rather than the amount of output.

Estimation

The main analysis uses a proxy-group by month panel covering five groups from April 2016 to August 2026. For group g in month t , I estimate a Poisson quasi-likelihood model

$$E[Y_{gt}] = N_{gt} \exp(\beta \text{Attack}_{gt} + \gamma' X_{gt} + \alpha_g + \lambda_{m(t)} + \delta t), \quad (1)$$

where Y_{gt} is the number of passages calling the proxy's core public to act, N_{gt} is the number of scored passages, and Attack_{gt} counts months with an attack on Iran between $t - 6$ and $t - 1$. The coefficient β measures the change in the log mobilization rate for each additional attack month. The controls X_{gt} include the proxy's own war, coded weekly from news reports as 0 (quiet), 1 (sporadic strikes), or 2 (full war), and averaged within each month. This control accounts for the tendency of groups at war to publish communiqués rather than calls to action. I also include the three-month change in the Brent oil price, which affects economies across the region, and pre-existing economic hardship among the proxy's population, measured before the treatment window. The hardship index combines the World Bank's Real Time Prices, the World Food Programme's market monitoring, and IMF consumer prices. It incorporates twelve-month log changes in currency depreciation and the prices of fuel, housing and utilities, and food.

Group effects α_g account for differences in the overall level of each proxy's rhetoric. Month-of-year effects $\lambda_{m(t)}$ account for recurring calendar-month variation, and a linear trend δt accounts for the growth of the corpus over the decade. Poisson quasi-maximum likelihood can estimate rates with an exposure term and requires a correctly specified conditional mean rather than a Poisson outcome distribution (Wooldridge, 1999; Santos Silva and Tenreiro, 2006). Because attacks occur in the same months for every proxy, the effective sample for the common treatment is the number of months. I use Driscoll-Kraay standard errors to account for dependence across groups within months and over time (Driscoll and Kraay, 1998). The estimation sample contains 579 group-months with all required lagged measures.

Study 1: Proxies Mobilize after Attacks on the Sponsor

Before turning to the regressions, I examine how the proxies' language changes after an attack on the sponsor. I focus on six major episodes in the decade of attacks on Iran: the killing of Soleimani in January 2020, the killing of Fakhri-zadeh that November, the strike on the Damascus consulate in April 2024, the strikes on Iranian territory that October, the twelve-day war of June 2025, and the war that began on February 28, 2026. For each episode, I collect passages from each proxy's home channels in the 45 days before and the 45 days after the attack. Figure 2 presents these passages

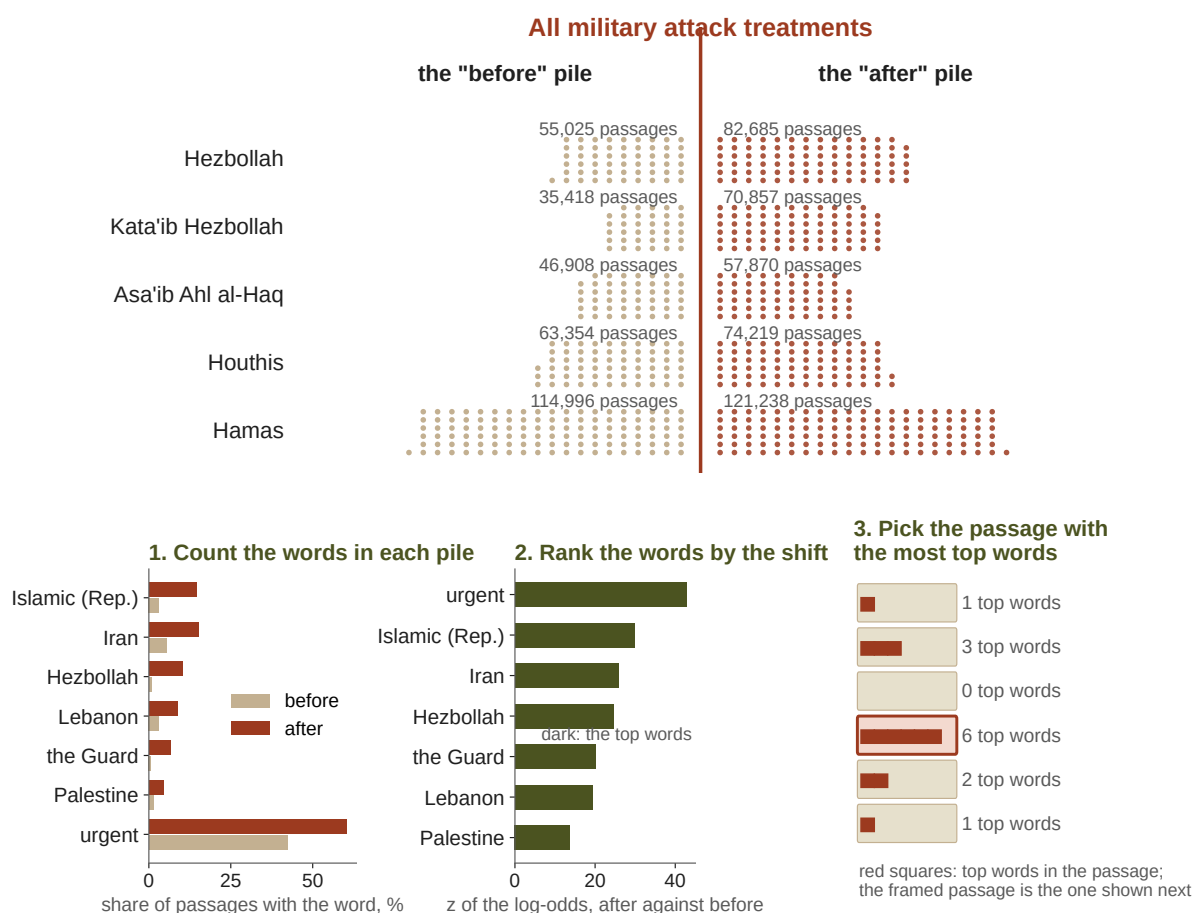


Figure 2: Changes in the proxies' language around attacks on Iran. Top: passages from the proxies' home channels in the 45 days before (left) and after (right) six major attacks, pooled across episodes, with one dot per thousand passages. Bottom: words are counted in the before and after collections (the shares shown are for the Houthis' al-Masirah channels around the war of February 2026) and ranked by the weighted log-odds of their use after versus before (Monroe et al., 2008). The passage after the attack containing the most of the top-ranked words is then selected. The second and third panels are schematic.

pooled across episodes. The before and after collections contain, respectively, 55,000 and 83,000 passages for Hezbollah, 63,000 and 74,000 for the Houthis, and 115,000 and 121,000 for Hamas. I compare the language before and after attacks within each group. This comparison accounts for differences in linguistic register across groups, including differences between Hezbollah's Arabic and the Houthis' Arabic.

I identify distinctive words using weighted log-odds with an informative Dirichlet prior, an unsupervised method introduced by Monroe et al. (2008) to distinguish the speech of two parties. The method requires neither a codebook nor labeled passages. Here, I apply it to each group's

passages before and after attacks.¹⁰ I then use the highest-ranked words to select a passage that illustrates the change in language. This passage is not intended to represent the average post; it shows what is most distinctive about the language after the attack (Grimmer et al., 2022). The procedure has three steps. First, I count each word in the before and after collections. In the Houthis’ channels around the 2026 war, for example, “the Islamic Republic” rises from three percent of passages to fourteen, “Iran” from five to fifteen, “Hezbollah” from under one percent to ten, “Lebanon” from three to nine, and “the Guard” from under one to six. Second, I rank words by the extent of their change. Third, I select the passage after the attack that contains the most of the top thirty words.

The selected Houthi passages illustrate the difference between routine support for the sponsor and mobilization during war. On February 10, 2026, before the war, al-Masirah carried a greeting: “The Resistance Committees in Palestine, on the 47th anniversary of the victory of the Islamic Revolution in Iran: we extend greetings, congratulations and blessings to the Iranian people and its mujahid leadership on this anniversary, foremost among them the Leader of the Revolution Sayyed Ali Khamenei.” The passage marks a scheduled anniversary without identifying an enemy or asking its audience to act. On March 25, 2026, four weeks into the war, the channel carried a statement of the Yemen Scholars Association, the movement’s religious authority: “We renew our sincere position, our stand of faith and our brotherly solidarity with the Islamic Republic of Iran in the face of the American-Israeli aggression. [...] We affirm the legitimacy of targeting and pounding the American bases and interests in the region and of closing the Strait of Hormuz in the face of the enemies. [...] We salute Hezbollah’s heroism, steadfastness and valor, and call on the Lebanese people and the Islamic nation to support and back it.” This passage provides religious justification for war and calls on other publics to support it. The panel analysis measures this shift across four million passages.

Table 2 reports the main results. Each additional month with an attack on Iran in the previous half year raises the rate of calls to the proxies’ core public by about six percent (0.053, standard error 0.021; 0.058, s.e. 0.022, when both placebo treatments are included). Attacks often occurred in consecutive months, so the half-year windows frequently contain several attack months. During

¹⁰For word w , with a the after collection and b the before collection, $\hat{\delta}_w = \log \frac{y_w^a + \alpha_w}{n^a + \alpha_0 - y_w^a - \alpha_w} - \log \frac{y_w^b + \alpha_w}{n^b + \alpha_0 - y_w^b - \alpha_w}$ and $z_w = \hat{\delta}_w / \sqrt{1/(y_w^a + \alpha_w) + 1/(y_w^b + \alpha_w)}$, where y_w counts the passages containing w , n the tokens, and α_w is the prior, the group’s own word counts over all windows scaled to $\alpha_0 = 500$. Tokens are words of three or more letters after Arabic normalization, with stop words removed and each word counted once per passage; a word enters the ranking with at least five uses after the attack.

Table 2: Rival attacks on Iran raise the proxies' mobilization; violence in Iran and by Iran does not

	Mobilization	
	(1)	(2)
<i>Panel A: the half-year window</i>		
Attacks on Iran by the United States or Israel (months with an attack, $t - 6$ to $t - 1$)	0.053** (0.021)	0.058** (0.022)
Placebo: insurgent attacks inside Iran		0.025 (0.021)
Placebo: Iran's attacks on others		-0.036 (0.021)
The proxy's own war	-0.212** (0.056)	-0.228** (0.058)
Oil price, three-month change ($t - 1$)	-0.059 (0.127)	-0.091 (0.113)
Pre-existing hardship ($t - 7$)	0.466** (0.148)	0.463** (0.160)
<i>Panel B: six monthly lags, summed</i>		
Attacks on Iran (months with an attack, $t - 1$ to $t - 6$)	0.237** (0.086)	
Log deaths in attacks on Iran ($t - 1$ to $t - 6$)	0.066** (0.025)	
Group and month-of-year effects, linear trend	Yes	Yes
Group-months	579	579

Note: Poisson quasi-likelihood estimates of equation (1). Mobilization is the count of passages that call the proxy's core public to act, with the scored passages as exposure, so coefficients are changes in the log rate. Column (2) enters the three half-year windows together. Panel B reports, from separate models with the same controls, the sum of the coefficients on six monthly lags of the attack indicator and of the log death toll. Driscoll-Kraay standard errors in parentheses. ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$, $\cdot$ $p < 0.10$.

the twelve-day war and the war of 2026, these windows contain three to six attack months, implying an increase of a fifth to two fifths in the rate of calls to act. The death toll yields a similar result: the coefficients on six monthly lags of log fatalities in attacks on Iran sum to 0.066 (s.e. 0.025). Thus, more lethal attacks on the sponsor are followed by more mobilization by its proxies. This response can occur even when the attack targets Iran rather than the proxy's own country: Hezbollah's channels call on their Lebanese public to act after Iran is attacked.

The response develops over several months, which motivates the half-year treatment window. In the distributed-lag models in Panel B, the coefficients at five and six months are the largest (0.082 and 0.119, both significant). There is no increase in the first month after an attack, when channels

tend to publish communiqués and casualty counts during open escalation rather than requests to act. The proxy's own war likewise lowers the rate of calls by about 0.2 log points in every model. I therefore control for the proxy's own war to distinguish its response to pressure on the sponsor from changes in communication during its own conflict.

The placebo treatments distinguish rival pressure on the sponsor from other violence involving Iran. Neither produces the same positive response. Insurgent attacks inside Iran by Jaish al-Adl, PJAK and the Islamic State involve violence within Iran but not attacks by its rivals. Their coefficient is 0.025 (s.e. 0.021), which is not distinguishable from zero. Iran's own attacks on others have a negative coefficient (-0.036 , s.e. 0.021). These results support Corollary 1: the proxies' mobilization responds specifically to attacks on Iran by its rivals, rather than to violence inside Iran or violence initiated by Iran.

I further assess whether the response reflects a common news cycle by comparing the proxies' media with other outlets in the same countries. The corpus includes rival and state media in Lebanon (LBCI, MTV and NBN), Iraq (al-Sharqiya, al-Sumaria, Dijlah, the Iraqi Media Network, INA and the prime minister's office), Yemen (al-Sahwa and the government's Saba), and Palestine (Ma'an and Palestine TV). It also includes pro-Iran outlets that are not the proxies' own channels: al-Mayadeen, the Houthi-run Saba and Yemen TV. In a channel-set by month panel with set fixed effects and role-specific trends, the proxies' calls to their core public increase by six percent per attack month (0.060, s.e. 0.020), while other media's calls to their core audiences decline by sixteen percent (-0.173 , s.e. 0.048). The difference is 0.233 (s.e. 0.053). This comparison is particularly useful because the outlets face the same attacks and news events. Pro-Iran outlets outside the proxies' own channels fall between the two sets (0.055, s.e. 0.035). The increase in requests to act is therefore concentrated in organizations tied to Iran, rather than shared by all outlets covering the same events.

The result is consistent across alternative specifications. With year fixed effects, which account for changes over the period in both attacks and the corpus, the estimate is 0.040 (s.e. 0.018). Excluding every month from June 2025 onward, so that neither war on Iranian territory identifies the effect, gives 0.041 (s.e. 0.017). Excluding Hamas, whose own war dominates the later years and whose channels are the largest in the corpus, gives 0.082 (s.e. 0.021). These estimates suggest that the proxies' media respond to sustained campaigns against the sponsor, which characterized pressure on Iran for much of the decade. Most attack months involved Israeli strikes on Revolutionary Guard personnel and assets in Syria. The two wars on Iranian territory contribute to the response as

Table 3: Which proxies respond, and toward which public

	Mobilization of the core public	Mobilization of the wider home public
Hezbollah	0.152** (0.028)	0.108** (0.032)
Kata'ib Hezbollah	0.077 [·] (0.043)	0.136** (0.040)
Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq	−0.014 (0.042)	0.016 (0.033)
Houthis	0.101** (0.019)	0.157** (0.053)
Hamas	0.003 (0.019)	−0.013 (0.035)

Note: The coefficient on the half-year attack window from separate Poisson models for each group and public, with month-of-year effects, the proxy's own war, the oil price, pre-existing hardship, hardship at $t - 1$ and a trend; the outcome is the count of calls addressed to the core public or to the wider home public, with the scored passages as exposure. Driscoll-Kraay standard errors in parentheses. ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$, [·] $p < 0.10$.

additional attack months accumulate, but they do not account for the result on their own.

The pooled estimate also conceals differences among the five organizations. Table 3 examines the argument's implication about the direction of mobilization by estimating the response separately for each group. I distinguish calls to the core public from calls to the wider home public beyond the group's base. Three proxies respond to attacks on Iran: Hezbollah, the Houthis and Kata'ib Hezbollah. Hezbollah's calls to its core public increase by about sixteen percent per attack month (0.152, s.e. 0.028), more than its calls to the wider Lebanese public (0.108, s.e. 0.032). The Houthis and Kata'ib Hezbollah show the opposite pattern, with a larger increase in calls to the wider home public than to the core public (0.157 versus 0.101 for the Houthis, and 0.136 versus 0.077 for Kata'ib Hezbollah). Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and Hamas show no detectable response to attacks on Iran. These differences partly support the proposed role of integration with the sponsor. Hezbollah, the most integrated proxy, directs more of its added effort toward its core, while the Houthis, whose relationship with Iran is more distant, reach beyond their base. However, Kata'ib Hezbollah, the Iraqi faction most closely tied to the Revolutionary Guard, also reaches more broadly, and Hamas, the proxy most distant from Iran's doctrine, shows no response. With only five groups, the evidence supports variation in the direction of mobilization but does not establish a simple ordering by integration. Each responding proxy increases its effort, with Hezbollah illustrating greater mobilization of the core and the Houthis greater mobilization of the wider public. The main result also extends beyond a single organization: it survives the exclusion of Hamas, the largest channel set, and the three responding groups operate in three different countries.

Study 2: The Effect Does Not Depend on Cutting the Supply

H2 predicts that attacks on the sponsor increase proxy mobilization even when they do not interrupt the sponsor's support. The supply account attributes the proxies' response to the loss of resources after an attack. In Study 2, I distinguish these explanations by estimating whether the attack effect remains when the sponsor's supply is held fixed.

No dataset tracks the sponsor's transfers to each proxy month by month. These transfers are secret, and the public record consists of episodes in which support was reportedly reduced, stopped or rerouted. I hand-code these episodes from the project's funding record and four reports covering the earlier years. For each proxy-month, the indicator takes a value of 0 when the flow continued, 1 for a reduction or delivery disruption, 2 for a cut that led the proxy to curtail payments to its constituents because of insufficient sponsor funding, and 3 for a deeper cut. For Hezbollah, the episodes include the sanctions pressure from October 2018 to December 2019, when fighters' salaries were reportedly halved and offices closed; the disruption of the supply corridor through Syria and the ban on flights from Tehran to Beirut from December 2024 to March 2025; the freeze of compensation payments from June to August 2025; and the cut coded from May 2026 after the blockade, with the indicator assigning a deeper cut from August 2026. For the Iraqi factions, the episodes are the 2018 to 2019 reduction and the disruption in 2020, when Soleimani and al-Muhandis were killed and the Quds Force's new commander told the factions to rely on Iraqi state funding. For Hamas, the episode is the rift over Syria, which ended with Sinwar's declaration in August 2017 that Iran was again the largest financial and military backer of the movement's military wing. No reduction in support for the Houthis was reported. Each entry records its source, date and strength. The indicator is nonzero in 67 of the 559 group-months in the estimation sample: 25 for Hezbollah and 21 for each Iraqi faction. As a continuous alternative, I use the twelve-month change in Iran's crude exports to measure the sponsor's capacity to pay. The funding record identifies crude exports as the only channel reduced by the 2026 blockade.

I use sequential g-estimation (Acharya et al., 2016) to estimate the average controlled direct effect of attacks while holding the mediator at a reference value. This approach addresses the bias that can arise from conditioning on post-treatment confounders in a single regression. The panel, treatment and outcome are the same as in Study 1. Pre-treatment covariates are measured before the attack window opens: hardship, the proxy's own war and the oil price seven months earlier, together with a trend, group effects and month-of-year effects. The intermediate confounders are

Step 1 $Mobilization = \gamma \cdot \text{Supply cut} + \gamma' \cdot \text{Attacks} \times \text{Supply cut} + \text{Attacks} + \text{controls}$
Step 2 $Mobilization^* = Mobilization \times \exp[-(\gamma + \gamma' \cdot \text{Attacks}) \cdot \text{Supply cut}]$
Step 3 $Mobilization^* = \text{direct} \cdot \text{Attacks} + \text{controls}$

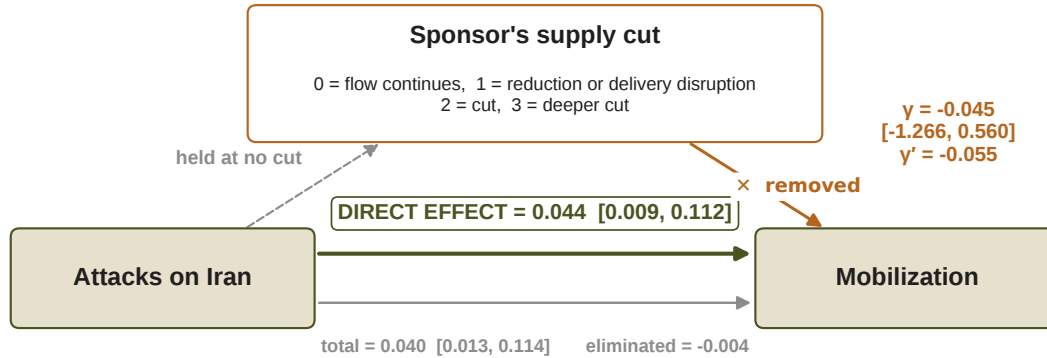


Figure 3: Sequential g-estimation of the direct effect of attacks on Iran on the proxies' mobilization, with Iran's supply to the proxy held at its uninterrupted level. Poisson quasi-likelihood on the log-rate scale; 95 percent moving-block bootstrap intervals.

the proxy's own war, designation actions, the oil price and the sponsor's economic stress during the window. These variables can be affected by attacks and can influence both supply and rhetoric. In the first stage, I regress mobilization on attacks, the supply indicator, their interaction, the intermediate confounders and the pre-treatment covariates. This model estimates the supply's effect on mobilization. I then remove the estimated supply effect from the outcome, a procedure known as blipping down, and set supply to its reference value of uninterrupted support. In the second stage, I regress this adjusted outcome on attacks and the pre-treatment covariates to estimate the direct effect. I estimate the total effect by regressing the original outcome on attacks and the pre-treatment covariates alone. The eliminated effect is the difference between the total and direct effects. Confidence intervals come from a moving-block bootstrap using blocks of twelve consecutive months, with all groups resampled together and both stages re-estimated in each of 400 draws. Figure 3 presents the three steps, and Table 4 reports the estimates.

The direct effect remains positive when supply is held fixed. With Iran's support to each proxy held at its uninterrupted level, the estimated effect of an attack month on mobilization is 0.044 (interval 0.009 to 0.112), compared with a total effect of 0.040 (0.013 to 0.114). The eliminated effect provides no evidence that reduced supply accounts for the response. The binary version of the supply indicator gives a direct effect of 0.042 (0.008 to 0.117), and holding Iran's exports unchanged gives 0.033 (0.008 to 0.090). The supply measures also show no detectable effect on

Table 4: The direct effect of attacks on Iran with the sponsor’s supply held fixed

Supply held at	Total effect	Direct effect	Eliminated	Supply’s own effect
No cut (indicator, 0 to 3)	0.040 [0.013, 0.114]	0.044 [0.009, 0.112]	−0.004 [−0.008, 0.015]	−0.045 [−1.266, 0.560]
No disruption (binary indicator)	0.040 [0.010, 0.116]	0.042 [0.008, 0.117]	−0.002 [−0.006, 0.014]	−0.038 [−1.409, 0.577]
No change in Iran’s exports	0.040 [0.013, 0.101]	0.033 [0.008, 0.090]	0.007 [−0.007, 0.026]	−0.344 [−0.581, 0.115]

Note: Treatment: months with an attack on Iran in $t - 6$ to $t - 1$. Outcome: mobilization of the core public at t , Poisson quasi-likelihood on the log-rate scale. Total: the outcome on the treatment and the pre-treatment covariates (hardship, own war and the oil price at $t - 7$, a trend, group and month-of-year effects). Direct: the second-stage coefficient after removing the supply’s effect, estimated in the first stage with the intermediate confounders (own war, designation actions, the oil price and the sponsor’s stress over the window) and the treatment-supply interaction. Eliminated: total minus direct. Supply’s own effect: the first-stage coefficient on the supply measure at zero attacks. Brackets: 95 percent intervals from a moving-block bootstrap over months (12-month blocks, 400 draws). Five groups, 559 group-months, February 2017 to August 2026.

mobilization. The coefficient on the supply indicator is -0.045 (interval -1.27 to 0.56), indicating no observed increase in mobilization in months when support to a group was reportedly reduced. Falling exports are associated with slightly more mobilization, but this estimate is also uncertain (-0.34 , interval -0.58 to 0.12).¹¹

These results support H2 and distinguish the proposed paradox from resource substitution. Attacks on Iran increase the proxies’ mobilizing rhetoric even when the sponsor’s transfers are held fixed. The substitution account predicts greater mobilization when resources decline, yet the data show no increase in mobilization across the 67 group-months with reported reductions, disruptions or cuts in support. The observed response instead follows attacks by the sponsor’s rivals. The evidence therefore supports a direct mobilization response to rival pressure on Iran, rather than a response mediated by reduced supply.

¹¹ Applying the same procedure with the cost of living in the proxies’ countries as the mediator, measured from the parallel exchange rate and fuel prices, gives a direct effect of 0.039 compared with a total effect of 0.040 . Thus, the economic hardship that pressure on Iran may transmit to the proxies’ economies does not account for the attack effect either. The analytic Driscoll-Kraay standard errors from the second stage place the direct effects two and a half to three standard errors from zero. The table reports the more conservative inference from the two-stage bootstrap, with five groups and twelve-month blocks.

Study 3: The Support Base Follows

Study 3 examines whether the proxies' audiences respond to their calls to act, as H3 predicts. Surveying the support base of an armed movement during war is difficult, particularly in the settings examined here. I therefore measure audience responses through engagement with the proxies' own media. The Telegram data contain views and, where recorded, forwards for 3.17 million posts over a decade. Views measure the reach of a post, while forwards record how often readers share it. These post-level observations also allow comparisons that account for the news events faced by the channel and its audience.

A central concern is that attacks on Iran can affect both the proxies' rhetoric and their audiences' attention. A regression of engagement on mobilization across weeks could therefore attribute the attack's direct effect on attention to the rhetoric. Using attacks as an instrument would face the same problem because audiences also learn about attacks through channels other than the proxy's own messages.¹² To account for this shared exposure to news, I compare posts with and without a call to act within the same channel on the same day. Such posts reach the same subscriber base, face the same daily news environment and have similar time to accumulate views before collection. Matching exactly on channel and date allows me to estimate differences in engagement associated with the call to act while controlling for other observed post features. The unit of analysis is the post: 3.17 million scored posts with engagement counts in the 21 home-audience Telegram channels of the five proxies, covering 40,883 channel-days from 2015 to 2026. Twelve percent of posts contain a call to act, and 64 percent of the variance in the classifier's call probability occurs within channel-day. The fixed effects therefore retain most of the variation in mobilizing content.

For post i in channel c on day t , I estimate

$$E[y_{ict}] = \exp(\beta \text{Mobilization}_{ict} + \gamma' x_{ict} + \alpha_{ct} + h_{\text{hour}(i)} + m_{\text{media}(i)}), \quad (2)$$

where y_{ict} is the post's views, forwards, or forwards per view, with log views used as the offset for the last outcome. $\text{Mobilization}_{ict}$ is the classifier's probability that the post contains a call to act. Thus, β is the log difference in engagement between a post with a call probability of one and a post

¹²The channel by week aggregate illustrates this problem. Within a channel, weeks with a higher share of posts containing a call to act have fewer views per post (-0.82 log points per unit of share, s.e. 0.37). The lead and lag of this share have the same coefficient as the current week's share, suggesting a slow-moving association between the type of week and audience attention rather than a response to that week's calls. A two-stage least squares model using attacks as an instrument for the weekly call share yields a first-stage F of 0.2 .

Table 5: Audience engagement with mobilizing posts within the same channel and day

	Views (1)	Views (2)	Forwards (3)	Forwards per view (4)
Mobilization (classifier's probability)	0.009** (0.003)		0.076** (0.025)	0.065** (0.023)
Mobilization (binary indicator)		0.007** (0.003)		
Log text length	0.012** (0.002)	0.012** (0.002)	0.258** (0.018)	0.243** (0.016)
Forwarded post	-0.098** (0.009)	-0.098** (0.009)	-0.181** (0.046)	-0.053 (0.046)
Push cue	0.001 (0.011)	0.002 (0.011)	-0.409** (0.054)	-0.447** (0.048)
Channel by day, hour and media-type effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Posts	3,169,078	3,169,078	2,947,115	2,947,115

Note: Poisson quasi-likelihood estimates of equation (2) on the proxies' home-audience Telegram channels, 2015 to 2026; the number of links is included. Forwards per view uses log views as the offset. Forwards were not recorded for the earliest posts. Standard errors clustered by channel by month in parentheses. ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$, · $p < 0.10$.

with a call probability of zero. I also estimate the model using the binary predicted class as a check. The controls x_{ict} include log text length, the number of links, whether the post was forwarded, and a push cue indicating that it asks readers to follow, subscribe, join or watch live. Such cues can attract clicks independently of the post's other content. Channel by day effects α_{ct} implement the exact matching, while hour-of-day and media-type effects account for differences in posting time and format, such as a video posted at eight in the evening compared with a text post at three in the morning. I again use a Poisson model because views and forwards are counts and forwards per view is a rate. Standard errors are clustered by channel and month.

Table 5 shows that, within the same channel on the same day, posts calling on the audience to act receive about one percent more views than other posts (0.009, s.e. 0.003; 0.007 with the binary indicator), eight percent more forwards (0.076, s.e. 0.025), and seven percent more forwards per view (0.065, s.e. 0.023). The difference in views is small, consistent with reach largely depending on the channel's subscriber base. The larger difference in forwards indicates that audiences respond primarily by sharing mobilizing content. A forward allows readers to distribute a post beyond the channel's immediate audience. These results suggest that the proxies' calls are associated with more active circulation of their messages, even though they have little additional reach within the channel.

The positive association is consistent across alternative specifications. The views coefficient

is 0.016 without controls, 0.008 for text-only posts, 0.019 when forwarded posts are excluded, and 0.007 when clear calls (probability above 0.5) are compared with clear non-calls (below 0.1). Replacing channel by day effects with channel by week or channel by month effects gives coefficients of 0.010 and 0.016, respectively. Clustering by channel, with 21 clusters, doubles the standard error on views to 0.007, while the estimated association remains positive across the specifications. Sharing also varies with attacks on the sponsor. During weeks when Iran is attacked, the difference in views between mobilizing and other posts is unchanged (interaction 0.004, s.e. 0.006), but the difference in forwards is 0.116 higher (s.e. 0.051). Thus, calls to act are shared more during attacks on the sponsor than in other weeks. During the proxy's own war, the difference is unchanged. The same comparison in rival and state outlets in the same countries yields a similarly small difference in views, of a few percent, but no increase in sharing. Calls to act in rival outlets are forwarded seventeen percent less often than their other posts (-0.182 , s.e. 0.027). The greater circulation of mobilizing posts is therefore specific to the proxies' audiences in this comparison.

Taken together, the results support H3 at the level of audience engagement. Mobilizing posts have reach similar to the channels' other output, but readers share them more often, particularly during weeks when the sponsor is attacked. These comparisons indicate that the audience helps circulate the proxies' calls to act, while leaving the consequences for recruitment, funding and other forms of participation to future research.

Conclusion

Research on proxy wars has largely focused on the sponsor's resources, objectives and control over the organizations it supports. The octopus doctrine follows this view in expecting attacks on a sponsor to weaken its proxies. This paper argues that proxies' relationships with their own publics can produce a different response. A proxy is a political organization with a domestic audience, and attacks on its sponsor can give it an opportunity to mobilize that audience. From 2016 to 2026, more frequent and more lethal attacks on Iran by the United States and Israel were followed by more calls to act from Hezbollah, the Houthis and Kata'ib Hezbollah. Insurgent violence inside Iran and Iran's own attacks did not produce the same response, while rival and state media in the proxies' countries made fewer calls to their audiences after attacks on Iran. The mobilization response remained when the sponsor's supply was held at its uninterrupted level, whereas reported reductions in supply showed no detectable association with increased mobilization. Comparisons within the

same channel and day further indicate that audiences shared mobilizing posts more often.

These findings concern mobilization efforts and audience engagement. They do not establish whether attacks on the sponsor make proxies more popular or leave their military capabilities intact. The evidence shows that proxies make more requests to their core publics after attacks on the sponsor and that audiences help circulate these requests. Whether this response produces recruits, money or votes remains a question for the next stage of the research. One reported episode suggests that these consequences merit further study: by early 2024, the Houthis had reportedly recruited as many as 167,000 new fighters since the conflict began in October 2023, drawing on sympathy for Gaza (Knights, 2024). Once an audience has been mobilized, a movement may ask it for further support.

The analyses address three alternative explanations. First, a shared news cycle would increase discussion of Iran across outlets, but the outcome here is the rate of requests to act, which declines during war, and other media in the same countries show the opposite response to attacks on Iran. Second, the proxies' own wars often coincide with attacks on the sponsor. I control for these wars, which lower the rate of calls in every model, and the result remains when Hamas is excluded and when all months from June 2025 onward are excluded. Third, instructions from Tehran are more difficult to rule out. The argument allows for such instructions: whether the Revolutionary Guard directs Hezbollah to mobilize or Hezbollah chooses to do so, attacks on the sponsor increase mobilization in a way the supply account does not predict. Several patterns suggest that direct instruction is unlikely to be the entire explanation. Farsi channels addressing Iran's own public are excluded from the sample, two proxies with close ties to the Guard respond differently, and the added calls address the proxies' own home publics in the language those publics use.

The findings contribute to three areas of research. The supply and delegation traditions explain proxy persistence through the sponsor. This paper adds the proxy's own public and identifies a mechanism linking pressure on the sponsor to domestic mobilization. It also qualifies the resource-substitution argument that external funding reduces the need to cultivate popular support (Weinstein, 2007; Salehyan et al., 2014). External support helps sustain welfare organizations (Huang and Sullivan, 2021; Cammett, 2014). Alongside their own media networks (Khatib et al., 2014; Harb, 2011), these institutions give proxies a means to mobilize their publics after an attack on the sponsor. Research on rally effects has largely examined publics responding to threats against their own governments (Mueller, 1970; Hellmeier, 2021). Here, the rally crosses national borders through the organized communication of the sponsor's clients. Finally, for research on militant

communication, the sponsor's fortunes are an additional circumstance shaping what movements ask of their audiences, alongside the group's own military strength, its rivals and the loss of its leaders (Ying, 2026; Tokdemir et al., 2021; Winkler et al., 2021).

The policy implication is that military attacks on a rival may provide its proxies with an unintended opportunity to mobilize, potentially increasing the threat they pose to the attacker. This consequence should enter assessments of the costs of military strikes. The findings suggest caution in expecting attacks on a sponsor to weaken its proxies, even when those attacks serve other purposes beyond the scope of this paper. They also suggest that, when force is used, it should be accompanied by communication in the media and online spaces where proxies regularly engage their audiences and their adversaries often have little presence. Because the mobilization response crosses borders, such communication must reach audiences beyond the sponsor's own country.

The research design can also be applied to clients of Russia, Turkey and the Gulf states, whose sponsors face pressure and whose movements publish messages to their own publics. Measuring what these organizations ask in the languages their audiences use, together with how those audiences respond, provides a way to study their mobilization across cases. Their regular public communication offers evidence of how they adapt to changes in the sponsor's position.

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