Implausible Deniability of Covert Actions in the Middle East

Causes, implications, and outcomes of recognized covert operations on the Middle Eastern regional dynamic

Eleonora Tosin

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Glasgow Student Number: 2608675

Dublin City Student Number: 20109938

Charles Student Number: 2596907

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CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

Covert action is a popular and fruitful tactic employed in the Middle East, yet it has little common grounds with covert operations that were popularised by the United States or the Soviet Union. This dissertation offers a new perspective on covert action and attached plausible deniability, by taking into consideration the Middle Eastern region today and its specific characteristics. The need for secrecy, a key aspect of the traditional portrayal of covert actions, is replaced by the urge to assert and project power over this contested region, while all parties involved carefully seek to avoid engaging in conventional armed conflict. Middle Eastern countries are characterised by the ability to navigate conflict through grey zone tactics, covert action being a prominent one, due to the strong imbalance of military capabilities and due to the intricate, yet fragile, network of alliances and partnerships. This study explores the reasons why implausible deniability is a more appropriate term to describe the modern covert actions in the Middle East are carried out, rather than plausible deniability. Namely, implausible deniability, which is described as the more open acknowledgment of sponsorship in covert actions, is not merely imposed by a technologically interconnected society, which in the last two decades significantly impacted states' relationship with transparency, but it is a product of an intense power struggle that dictates the entire behaviour of this region. Moreover, the role of state-sponsored terrorism and its blatantly unconcealed tactics systematically impacts covert operations, either suffered or carried out, thus making it necessary to reframe plausible deniability. In addition to these premises, this study comes to the conclusion that implausible deniability has attached a specific set of implications and consequences, as it ultimately adds the possibility to implicitly intimidate the adversaries with a not-so-secret show of strength.

INTRODUCTION

The topic of covert actions has always been a suggestive and mysterious one, gathering the attention of scholars and politicians as well as filmmakers and novelists. The tunnel vision caused by the romanticisation of the world of covert and clandestine operations takes away from the fact these incredibly useful political tools have several layers and can be employed in a variety of different circumstances. This study presents an original framing of covert actions and of the associated concept of plausible deniability. Plausible deniability has been a long contested notion, which lacks consistent academic understanding, while being widely recognised and exploited in the political field. Covert actions are argued to be relying on plausible deniability, meaning that the sponsor of the action can credibly deny their involvement, and that this very aspect is crucial to the success of the operation itself. This study examines the possibility that not only this statement is often false, but also that plausible deniability in its strictest sense does not belong to all covert operations. More importantly, traditional research of plausible deniability does not take into consideration regional realities, while this study will focus on how the Middle East context significantly changes our understanding of plausible deniability and covert action. The founding argument here presented is that implausible deniability, meaning that the sponsor of the operation is acknowledged, better describes covert action in the Middle East, and this re-framing implies different objectives, challenges, and ultimately different outcomes of the operations themselves.

This study is outlined as follows. Initially, the *Design and Methodology* is presented, and it describes how the research is carried out, the type of sources on which it relies, and the benefits and challenges of using case studies as method to test the initial hypothesis. Next, there is the *Theoretical Framework* chapter, where the broad literature on plausible deniability is outlined, in order to give an account of pre-existing research and

clearly frame this study within it. This chapter divides the wider literature on plausible deniability in two: the traditional conceptualisation and the non-traditional one. The latter will be the literature of reference of this research. Following *Theoretical Framework*, the chapter *Supporting Theory* introduces the factors that suggested a necessity to change plausible deniability into implausible deniability. The Middle East is characterised by a unique set of elements that impact the strategical employment of covert actions, and this section highlights them. Specifically, three factors emerged: the precarious stability of the region and the intricate network that binds all actors together, the interconnection and transparency that is allowed by technology, and the existence of terrorism and state-sponsored terrorism.

The second half of the dissertation is comprised of the *Presentation of the Data* and the *Findings*. In the *Presentation of the Data*, three different case studies will be analysed and the elements that relate to the research purpose will emerge. The case studies, in chronological order, are the 2007 "Operation Orchard", an Israeli attack on a nuclear facility in Syria, the 2017 Houthis attack, allegedly orchestrated by Iran on Riyadh airport, and, finally, the 2022 assassination of IRGC official Khodayari. The section that follows, *Findings*, connects the empirical evidence collected in the case study analysis to the initial theory and then leads into the final *Conclusions*.

DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Researching the topic of covert action in the Middle East requires a wide range of sources, both primary and secondary, in order to present a comprehensive qualitative analysis of covert action and plausible deniability, how it fits in the wider literature framework and how this study can expand our knowledge on the topic. Scholars have long studied the case of covert operations from a theoretical point of view, often with the historical example of covert actions which occurred in the Cold War era. These, while still relevant today, lack application to a different context, in terms of region and of time period, such as the one that is offered in this research. In fact, this study seeks to bridge a gap left by the existing literature by analysing the relevance of plausible deniability in covert operations, as well as exploring its implications, when the setting changes to modern time Middle East.

For the purpose of researching covert action, this dissertation relies on secondary open sources such as scholarly articles, books and archived sources to outline my aim and to provide a solid foundation of literature concerning my topic. For instance, Taylor & Francis Online and Routledge has been used as it is a service that offers a variety of peer-reviewed scholarly open sources online. Most of the secondary sources are used to reconstruct a literature framework and also to build original hypothesis on the basis of the gaps left by the existing academic work.

Moving away from the literature overview, most of this research draws on primary sources such as newspaper articles, interviews and speeches. Unless for referring back to the initial theory, the chapters concerning the analysis were almost exclusively based on primary sources, mostly newspaper articles, investigative journalistic reports, opinion pieces and such. These were open sources and available online, mostly from newspapers that are easily accessible and trustworthy, such as The New York Times, Al-Jazeera, BBC, CNN, and Der Spiegel.

The central chapter of the research is the analysis of three case studies about covert operations that acted under the premise of implausible deniability. Case study design is a type of research design that is used often due to its versatility and applicability to many kinds of research. In fact, case studies enable this study to focus on only one event (or operation, in this instance) and therefore there is greater depth to the topic in the study (Burnham *et al*, 2008). Case study can generate both quantitative and qualitative data, depending on the needs and wants of the researcher. However, the approach itself lends slightly more towards qualitative analysis because it collects a large amount of information about one specific case (Burnham *et al*, 2008). Case studies are not limited to numbers or statistics, although they can include such information, but they explore every aspect of a single case because they are circumscribed only to that one example. In this research, the case studies under analysis produced qualitative outcomes, as expected. As the objective is to highlight the issue with plausible deniability in covert action carried out in the Middle East, it was a purposeful choice not to select case studies that produced quantitative outcomes. At the same time, case studies should then be discussed in relation to other cases in order to reach a common theory framework or solution (Bradshaw and Wallace, 1991; Passeron and Revel, 2005: 10–11).

Three case studies compose this research with the goal of painting a complete picture of the situation: the 2007 operation led by Israel at the damage of a Syrian nuclear reactor, the 2017 attack on Riyadh by the Houthis, with the possible support of Iran, and the 2022 assassination of an IRGC member, allegedly orchestrated by Israel. These case studies provide for a variety of examples of covert action in the Middle East where there is a display of power struggle and implausible deniability. In these operations there has also been an extensive media coverage, which allows for cross-referencing and a more comprehensive supply of empirical evidence that could support or confute the hypothesis of this work.

From an ontological point of view, the case study method allows this research to narrow down a specific operation and explore it. Doing so, the underlying common thread that can link the case to other similar cases could be uncovered. This becomes, as Vennesson (2008) reported, a challenge where the researcher should seek to extract "generalizable knowledge" from the case in order to then apply it to other cases and potentially either construct a new theory or support an already existing theory. In this research, the three case studies chosen can theoretically expose the common characteristics of operations that act under implausible deniability and the implications of it. On the other hand, concerning the epistemological aspect, case studies require a focus on data collection and on theory testing (Vennesson, 2008). Data collection is needed in order to have the full picture of the case, and because case studies discuss a limited topic, all data available is encouraged. Moreover, case studies need to be subject to theory testing because their principal scope is to fit in a larger theory. It is not enough to study a single case, instead it should be framed in a wider context and used as a single example in support of a theory.

Case studies have many advantages, as well as disadvantages. They bring concrete examples, which are most useful in the support of a theory, and they can highlight certain occurrences that can be cross-checked later in order to understand whether the case study is an exception or normalcy. Conversely, there are some challenges to this method (Vennesson, 2008). First of all, case studies rely on pre-existing theories as they would provide little to no use in the creation of one. While it can be an excellent support, a case study is not fit to build a new case on its own. However, this research aims at relaxing the notion of plausible deniability according to a more suitable regional framing, not at building a new theory. Secondly, case study can be heavily subject to cognitive biases.

The challenges of the particular case studies that I chose were that they were indeed subject to cognitive biases and media manipulation. Moreover, availability of information was often unreliable and varied substantially according to the primary source used. However, media exposure and different perspective on the cases was used as an advantage and an aid in supporting the theory that the shift from plausible to implausible deniability changes significantly the implications for covert actions and their ability to obtain their objectives. The focus on the Middle East, moreover, allowed me to give a precise direction on my research, without falling into the trap of repeating known concepts about a more researched field which could have been covert operations between Russia and the United States. The Middle East and the power dynamic of the region allows for a large playground for covert action and a different perspective on plausible deniability.

Biased information was impossible to avoid due the nature of the topic. The bias encountered were mostly dictated by regional and political interests, meaning that some information was delivered while some was omitted in order to highlight successes, encourage animosity against certain actors or hint at an operational superiority. As previously stated, my focus was on these different perspectives, and I found the subtext to be sometimes more valuable that the text itself for my research. The primary sources used were retrieved from public online archives of local and international newspapers and different sources were compared in order to have the closest version of the truth possible.

Beyond the issues of accessibility of information and of bias that were encountered from external sources, myself as a research might perpetuate these bias due to the inseparable nature between researcher and individual, grown and educated in the West. The ethical issue of discussing covert operations in a region where there are still many unresolved tensions means that the wording of the research had to be carefully chosen. However, this

research does not implicate any conflict of interests from the researcher or the institution that they represent, thus no major ethical issues have been encountered.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptualization of covert actions has always been a debated topic among academics, governments, international institutions, and intelligence services of various countries. Covert actions, at least in the understanding that we have of them today, is a relatively new concept and it originates from the Cold War era, when the threat of nuclear weapons of mass destruction made it imperative to avoid triggering a direct confrontation while still engaging in activities that would undermine the adversary. In order to avoid such confrontation, the United States, as well as the Soviet Union, relied on the main benefit provided by the use of covert action, namely, plausible deniability. Contrarily to clandestine operations, covert operations only aim at hiding the sponsor, not the operation itself, which allows states to plausibly deny their interference in the affairs of the adversary. Unsurprisingly, the traditional literature surrounding covert actions stresses the importance to maintain secrecy indefinitely and to escape accountability, which is arguably what prevents the escalation into conflict, one of the main objectives of covert actions. However, as covert actions have evolved over time, moving away from their original context of the Cold War and adapting to new dynamics in a not-so-polarized world, the literature on cover action increasingly challenged the role of secrecy and plausible deniability.

This section of the study will frame the role of plausible deniability, secrecy and exposure within the wider literature available on covert action. This is necessary in order to recognize the objectives of these operations as well as the instances in which they fail to reach those objectives. Firstly, existing definitions of covert actions will be discussed to identify their position in the traditional understanding of covert operations, particularly regarding secrecy. Second, the traditional literature supporting the claim that plausible deniability, alongside with maintaining the sponsor secret indefinitely from the public both within the sponsoring country as well as outside, will be presented.

The most common narrative in the literature on covert action highlights the importance of maintaining the cover of secrecy to be effectively able to succeed in avoiding any escalation of animosity. The counterargument to this type of literature, which will be discussed in the latter part of this section, claims that success or failure is not necessarily characterised by the maintenance of secrecy. Rather, the argument is that in modern times it has become increasingly difficult to avoid a certain degree of exposure, which also affects covert actions. Several scholars, such as Dorril (2000) and especially Cormac and Aldrich (2018), have identified plausible deniability to be a problematic concept in covert operations, since it does not take into account the implications of aspects such as technological advances and the unique regional situation of the Middle East. It is indeed more accurate to talk about implausible deniability, since the element of secrecy in the strictest sense is not the forefront in covert operations in the context that will be analysed in this research. Finally, conclusions will be drawn from the literature on the topic of covert action and will frame this research within this more untraditional narrative that casts doubts on plausible deniability and expands on the grayer concepts of implausible deniability.

Definitions

There is no final and universally agreed-upon definition of covert action, and definitions vary according to the time period in which it was coined and the place, agency, or country that they refer to. Having a clear understanding of the terminology commonly used for the definitions is crucial in order to identify the main characteristics and priorities of covert operations. Covert actions and covert operations, which will be used as synonyms throughout the research, are best described by definitions of American scholars, which can date as far back as 1948. In fact, in that year, the National Security Directive (1948) states that the CIA can perform the following activities: propaganda; economic warfare; preventive direct action, including

sabotage, anti-sabotage, demolition and evacuation measures; subversion against hostile states, including assistance to underground resistance movements, guerrillas and refugee liberation groups, and support of indigenous anti-Communist elements in threatened countries of the free world (National Security Directive, 1948). While this is not a clear definition, but rather a list of activities that the CIA can perform to affect another adversary state, there is no mention of secrecy. The operations that the DSN mentions as belonging to the covert action sphere are all activities that fall short of direct conflict, however, they are what we today often refer to as irregular warfare, such as "lesser form of conflict below the threshold of warfare" (Department of Defense, 2007). While the definition of irregular warfare is just as ambiguous and contested as the one for covert action, one significant difference is that irregular warfare does not require the sponsor to be hidden and it is the activity itself that remains under the threshold of armed conflict.

Other more recent definitions have not strayed dramatically from the 1948 CIA definition, covering most of the activities mentioned above but, for instance, losing the term 'subversion' (Scott, 2004). US law defines covert action as: "an activity or activities of the United States Government to influence political, economic, or military conditions abroad, where it is intended that the role of the [government] will not be apparent or acknowledged publicly, but does not include […] traditional counter-intelligence [...] diplomatic [...] military [...] [or] law enforcement activities" (Intelligence Authorisation Act, 1991). This definition takes a clearer stance on the secrecy aspect, highlighting that the role of the government is intended to remain hidden. 'Intended' is a key word in this definition, suggesting that failure to comply with secrecy in later stages does not necessarily translate into failure of the operation itself. Traditional counterintelligence as well as diplomatic, military or law enforcement activities cannot be employed in

covert action, as they would defy the scope of maintaining plausible deniability of the state's involvement in the operation.

On the other hand, the definition of the CIA states that covert action is "an operation designed to influence governments, events, organizations, or persons in support of foreign policy in a manner that is not necessarily attributable to the sponsoring power; it may include political, economic, propaganda, or paramilitary activities" (CIA, 1995). The CIA uses the words "necessarily attributable" which, compared to the Intelligence Authorisation Act definition, gets closer to the concept of plausible deniability. The potential exposure of the covert action, again, is not considered to be causing failure by itself, as long as the sponsor of the operation does not declare its involvement.

US-based definitions are clearly the most prominent ones in this field, and the ones most referenced and accepted, despite still being unsatisfactory in fully defining the concept of covert actions. Definitions of covert actions that are applied to non-U.S. national intelligence services, when they refer to one, tend to be vaguer. For instance, the Soviet Union as well as today's Russia use the term "aktivnyye meropriyatiya" or "active measures" to refer to a variety of covert and overt activities belonging deep-rooted policy which dates back to Leninist thinking (Abrams, 2016). A notable factor in covert action definitions adopted by U.S. agencies that differentiates other countries is that, in the U.S., definitions refer to actions taking place abroad, thus excluding the possibility of covert operations taking place within the country, at least from a technical standpoint. Nevertheless, definitions adopted in other countries have not been as clear in differentiating home and abroad in terms, such as Russia, who, notoriously, carries out covert operations internally as well as abroad (Scott, 2004). The Israeli Secret Intelligence Service, the MOSSAD, does not provide for a specific definition of covert action, however on their official website it is heavily implied that such operations only take place abroad, and not at home (MOSSAD, 2022). In fact, it is stated that "the Mossad was and is a key factor

in the war against terror directed at Jewish and Israeli targets abroad"
(MOSSAD, 2022).

Traditional Literature: Covert Action and Plausible Deniability

A large share of literature discussing covert action has mostly focused on its purpose and appeal, which goes back to the concept of plausible deniability. Plausible deniability has been interpreted in several ways, lacking much grounding in the literature as it has been taken as face value. This concept, even in traditional literature if not mostly in traditional literature, is received wisdom. It was described in several different manners, from "buzzword" (Eyth, 2002) with an informal connotation, other scholars considered it a doctrine, such as Radsan (2009) and Johnson (2017). For Radsan, a former assistant counsel for the CIA, plausible deniability has a domestic connotation (Radsan, 2009). This means that the president of the US can plausibly deny knowledge, since plausible deniability relies on restricted congressional notice (Radsan, 2009). In Radsan's interpretation, plausible deniability must come from the inside: it is unlikely that a state can project their unawareness of covert action outwards while acknowledging it on the inside. Plausible deniability from the inside also has the scope of protecting senior officials and the premier from an accusation of having knowledge of these covert operations in the eventuality the action is discovered, thus allowing them to use scapegoats to punish for transgression if needs be. On the other hand, Daugherty (2004) extends this theory to the international sphere, arguing that presidents (or state leaders) have been seeking to limit their own knowledge of the operations in order to be able to deny in a believable manner that the government was involved in the eventuality of public exposure or of the compromise of the secrecy of the operation.

To retain their rights to claim plausible deniability, states must be able to coherently deny knowledge of the action both inside and outside, which is

why plausible deniability often has both a domestic as well as international dimension. The aim of plausible deniability is to be able to prevent other states from being aware that covert action has been ordered by their adversary or competitor with certainty, so that there are no grounds for recriminations and therefore justifications for retaliation and, thus, avoid escalation into conflict.

Len Scott reports that "by definition the most successful covert actions are those that no-one knows has ever been conducted: the analogy with the perfect crime" (Scott, 2004). Shulsky and Schmitt (2002) also advance the idea of "silent warfare", and Mazzetti (2014) speaks about "secret armies," putting the stress on the secret aspect of covert operations which, in their opinion, is necessary to claim plausible deniability. In their book *Silent Warfare: Understanding the World of Intelligence* (2002), Shulsky and Schmitt advance their key thesis that intelligence in its wider sense is strictly connected to the state of competition that regulates the world, and that secret activities occupy a crucial role within democratic statecraft. According to their high regard of secrecy, they state that detailed information about secret intelligence operations should not be disclosed and that publicly available information about intelligence is a reflection of the openness of political systems that disclose it (Shulsky and Schmitt, 2002). Mazzetti, in his account about America's special operations forces *The Way of the Knife* (2014), describes the shadow war that the CIA and American military engage in though covert special operations that allows them to infiltrate areas where traditional armies cannot go. Again, secrecy has a crucial role in the storytelling of Mazzetti, which is rich of examples about assassinations through drones or trained soldiers and clandestine spying networks. On the contrary Mazzetti (2014) frames other countries' intelligence services as being unreliable and deceitful. However, this narrative is an exclusively American perspective, and other countries have different interpretations and approaches to secrecy. Instead, Cormac (2018) reports an account of British covert actions

as a way to advance their Foreign Policy, which he states to pre-dates the US existence and it is a tactic that has been employed since Elizabeth I's times. Cormac suggests that the United Kingdom is "just better at keeping it covert" (Cormac, 2018), hinting that the British circumvent plausible deniability by exploiting the secrecy aspect.

Additionally, Johnson and Wirtz (2011) argue that the role of the sponsor is to be neither apparent nor acknowledged. In other words, the orchestrator of a covert operation needs to remain secret as much as possible, and it cannot be acknowledged in order to successfully use plausible deniability. The utopic idea presented by Johnson and Wirtz (2011) is indeed the safe-proof way to claim plausible deniability: if the sponsor is not acknowledged, protecting the State objective to interfere in foreign affairs with minimal risks of retaliation – or at least not a justifiable retaliation – is an easy task. These claims, however, stand in stark contrast with the reality we are presented today, where covert actions are indeed often exposed and made known, therefore the expectation that covert action is to be maintained secret is exactly just that: an expectation, but often an unrealistic one.

Many other scholars agree that the secrecy component is one key ingredient to covert actions, such as Woodward (2001), who states that the actors behind the operation must act in a hidden or at least disguised manner, so that, in the case that the action is discovered, they can deny their responsibility based on the lack of evidence that proves their involvement. In other words, states who engage in covert action must be prepared to provide plausible deniability if the action surfaces. This statement suggests that complete secrecy is to be preferred to plausible deniability, as the latter leaves a margin of risk of exposure compared to the former. Nevertheless, complete secrecy is again a difficult if not impossible status to achieve, especially considering various factors that characterise the geopolitical world, such as the

degree of exposure and instant exchange of information allowed by modern ICT or the timeless desire to project power and influence.

Finally, Joseph and Poznansky (2018) presented a study in which they argue that risk of exposure of the covert action usually deters states to engage in covert action all together. They write: "when factors that increase the chances of exposure during covert operations are present, leaders may be less likely to pursue the quiet option and instead select the next best alternative. Sometimes this means refraining from intervention entirely" (Joseph and Poznansky, 2018). Their research also took into consideration the role of technology, and how it affects secrecy and plausible deniability. However, Cormac and Aldrich (2018) point out that this research "considers secrecy/transparency in a more or less binary manner, sees exposure as negative, and offers little consideration of the paradoxical nature of covert action—or indeed of covert action at all" (Cormac and Aldrich, 2018).

Non-Traditional Literature: Covert Action and Implausible Deniability

Treverton (1987), Dorril (2000), and especially Cormac and Aldrich (2018) challenge the concept of plausible deniability and instead argue that covert actions often have to rely on 'implausible deniability.' In fact, they move away from the orthodox understanding of actions that require the plausible denial of about. Definitions of covert actions that we discussed previously remain fuzzy surrounding the timeframe in which secrecy must be maintained to be considered a successful covert operation, which is a flaw that was reported by Treverton (1987). The author writes that secret operations act within an open society, which is a paradox that eventually will lead to the unveiling of the action (Treverton, 1987). In fact, he argues that most covert actions were open secrets in the immediate aftermath, as more than half of the forty operations that were carried out in the mid-1980s underwent some level

of press coverage (Treverton, 1987). However not many operations became continuing stories in the news due to lack of controversy and, therefore, public interest (Treverton, 1987). This aspect of media, its inconstance in reporting stories due to the appeal that the operation has to the interest of news consumers, is particularly fitting to the literature of implausible deniability. There is some degree of openness even in covert actions, but simply there is a lack of demand from the public. Treverton concludes that these operations remained "more unacknowledged than unknown" (Treverton, 1987). Similarly, Stephen Dorril argued that "secrets are increasingly difficult to protect, and it would not be a great exaggeration to suggest that there are no real secrets any more" (Dorril, 2000). He referred to the British context, reporting that a lot of information, including government so-called secrets, are already in the public domain. This, however, applies to the majority of the developed and underdeveloped world, particularly due to globalization and wide coverage of media at a global level. The concept of secrecy, therefore, is highly contested by scholars, who claim that the assumption that covert actions can remain hidden indefinitely is unrealistic.

Covert operations, according to the CIA (1962), are "planned and executed as to conceal the identity of or permit plausible denial by the sponsor". This version has been adopted as the most traditionally and most commonly used definition both in the scholarly and academic world. At the same time, the framework of plausible deniability and secrecy "creates a conceptually neat but mono-dimensional understanding of covert action, in which secrecy is both binary and assumed" (Cormac and Aldrich, 2018). Many covert operations have become known, alongside to their sponsor, and therefore fall into the implausible deniable category. Cormac and Aldrich remark that these operations still classify as covert and the lack of secrecy alone does not make them a failed covert action either (Cormac and Aldrich, 2018). The success or failure is instead measured by whether the operation did

in fact fulfil its intended purpose, or lead to the desired outcomes. The objective of covert action, which is ultimately to interfere and influence foreign affairs without involving official governmental instruments, can be achieved even if the sponsor is being acknowledged as long as it does not provide enough grounds for justifying retaliation from the foreign entity that has been affected. Instead, Cormac and Aldrich question the concept of plausible deniability in the practice of covert actions, making consideration on how the exposure of the operation itself can have a coercive value and on the relation between implausible deniability and hybrid threats (Cormac and Aldrich, 2018). Notably, they argue that "a spectrum of attribution and exposure exists since covert action has multiple audiences, both internal and external" (Cormac and Aldrich, 2018) and that paramilitary covert operations especially suffer from the fragility of the concept of plausible deniability. Moreover, special forces and private military entities "have further increased the grey space between secrecy and visibility" (Cormac and Aldrich, 2018).

With regard to exposure, the modern age is characterised by heavy use of mass media as well as electronic whistleblowing, which significantly hinder any attempt to maintain secrecy (Cormac and Aldrich, 2018). The final argument of Cormac and Aldrich (2018) is that covert action has been moving away from a problematic idea of plausible deniability towards a concept of unacknowledged activity (Cormac and Aldrich, 2018). The authors' perspective is a more updated take on plausible deniability, taking into consideration the factors that influence increased visibility of the world in this day and age. The almost impossibility to maintain secrecy today does not decrease the relevance of covert action as a tool for countries to interfere in foreign affairs, nor its efficiency to do so. The concept of plausible deniability, or, more accurately, 'implausible deniability', needs to undergo a conceptual adjustment to better fit today's framework. 'Implausible deniability', in this sense, indicates a more realistically attainable version of plausible deniability:

the sponsor of covert action may officially avoid claiming responsibility, however, it is known and acknowledged.

A counterargument to implausible deniability is provided by Roy Godson, who remarks that our understanding and knowledge of covert action and related counter intelligence is "sketchy at best" (Godson, 1995). He suggests that we only see the tip of the iceberg when it comes to covert action. His argument highlights the fact that examples of visibility do not affect the success rate of covert actions are mostly exceptions. Most actions are not visible because they are, naturally, hidden (Godson, 1995). However, his book drew heavily on the pre-Cold War situation, and particularly the U.S. context, which is problematic considering that the world approach to secrecy and transparency has changed since then and regionally unique characteristics also affect the objectives of a covert actions and the need for anonymity. Not only is visibility more easily encountered due Cormac and Aldrich (2018)'s reasons reported above, but democratic thinking, especially both in the US and in the Western world, encourages transparent approaches to foreign as well as internal affairs.

The Cold War marked a shift in perspective regarding secrecy and plausible deniability. Namely, states wished to intervene in the affairs of other countries while avoiding escalating into a conflict that, with the advent of nuclear weapons, would lead to disastrous consequences. Yet, the concept of covert action and how it is related to secrecy needs to be further reframed in a modern context. Newer factors such as technology and media as well as deterrence systems that States can count on to minimise the threat of escalation which need to be considered in relation to a conceptual reframing.

In his work on covert intervention in the Korean War, Austin Carson (2016) writes about exposure and secrecy. He discusses how leaders approach reputation, information management and the visibility of their action in the

context of modern diplomacy as well as contributing to the "contrasting narrative about the origins of endemic secrecy and uncertainty in the international system" (Carson, 2016). His view on secrecy is non-binary at least in the field of covert warfare, which is the main focus of his research. In regard to violent covert warfare, especially paramilitary, the concept of plausible deniability represents a challenge.

Plausible deniability is even more contested in a context such as the Middle East where states often use terrorist groups as proxies. Proxy warfare is an example of covert action and implausible deniability, although some authors argue that proxy wars and covert actions are not related (Mumford, 2013). In fact, proxy actors take responsibility for the operations that they carry out, while the sponsor of the proxy maintains its involvement hidden. Moreover, proxy warfare faces a "sponsor's dilemma,", where the principle of non-interference challenges the openness of sponsoring proxies (Cormac and Aldrich, 2018). In other words, plausible deniability is even more unlikely to be reached in a contested context such as the Middle East, due to the heavy use of proxy warfare as well as paramilitary covert operations.

Regarding violence and plausible deniability, Lowenthal (2000) argues that the effectiveness of plausible deniability is related to the level of violence involved. He claims that when covert actions require a high level of violence, such as in paramilitary operations, the potential for successfully maintaining plausible deniability decreases. On the other hand, in covert operations that do not require violence, or where violence is kept at a minimum, such as in the case of propaganda and disinformation operations, plausible deniability becomes easier (Lowenthal, 2000). According to his thesis, the less violence involved in covert actions, the more likely that they can successfully be plausibly denied. A high degree of violence inevitably causes greater exposure due to ethical and moral cost, especially if it involves the loss of human lives. It is therefore more difficult to hide violent operations, while non-violent

covert actions have the benefit of not attracting as much attention and exposure while still being able to advance a state's agenda.

Conclusions

The theoretical literature regarding secrecy and plausible deniability is widely contradictory and many authors attempted to frame these concepts in a satisfactory manner. The majority of the research is focused either on the historical context of the Cold War or on US-led covert operations. Taking into consideration the literature, this research places within the framework of the non-traditional literature supporting the possibility that implausible deniability and successful covert action co-exist. In this study, 'implausible deniability' will be treated as the more realistically obtainable version of plausible deniability, meaning that the sponsor of covert operation is regionally and internationally acknowledged in the aftermath of the operation, despite official denials and rejections to responsibility. At the same time, implausible deniability remains in the grey zone between covert and overt operations: not too secret, yet not exposed. The prominent reasoning behind this framing is that Middle Eastern tactics, particularly Israeli and Iranian, cannot be explained by the traditional understanding of covert actions found in the literature. Covert operation by these countries are regularly exposed, sometimes deliberately, however, their "Cold War" continues. Iran's support of proxy groups is well known and even acknowledged, but the country still manages to prevent escalation into armed conflict with Israel and, while aggravating hostilities with other actors such as the U.S. and Saudi Arabia, Iran was able to continue to engage in a more convenient shadow war.

From this theoretical framework, it emerged that a common conceptual understanding of covert actions is missing, thus creating a gap in our wider understanding of the role of covert action in the efforts of states to gain influence in the international system. The traditional literature fails to

contextualise covert operations and plausible deniability outside of a U.S. or Soviet perspective, while the Middle East setting is disregarded. The distinctive characteristics of the region, namely the constant power struggle and the pervasiveness of terrorism, combined with the modern information and communication technology that the whole world has access to requires a widely different approach. The Middle East context, therefore, showcases new challenges and implications to covert operations that are not explored in the literature concerning covert action. The original research here presented bridges the gap concerning covert actions that take place in the Middle East and how plausible deniability ineffectively describes the approach to secret sponsorship in the region, while implausible deniability fits the context better.

SUPPORTING THEORY

This section will further explore the founding theories that support the argument that covert actions nowadays in the Middle East are characterised by implausible deniability rather than plausible deniability. However, the fact that the sponsor of covert operation is acknowledged despite official denials, does not hinder the operational successes but rather can be beneficial to the scope of rewriting power dynamics in the Middle East. Plausible deniability is still holding great appeal when engaging in covert operations in this contested region, especially due to the fragile and tense relations among Middle Eastern and Arab countries, and the involvement of the United States.

The first section of this chapter will focus on the factors that explain why secrecy and a level of plausible deniability are still necessary to maintain the precarious stability of the region. The relations among countries in the Middle East play a crucial role in the power dynamic game of the region, which has been dominated by Israel and Saudi Arabia, with the support of the United States. The United States' involvement, in fact, has been causing countries in the Middle East, allies and foes alike, to carefully plan their operations. In many instances, covert operations need the protection of plausible deniability because of the United States' stance – for instance, regarding the nuclear talks and continuous interference and covert operations on Iranian nuclear facilities by Israel. Iran has made considerable overt and covert efforts to overturn the regional dynamic, projecting power through a carefully constructed network and asymmetrical strategies. The section "'*Maintaining 'peace' in the Middle East*' begins to unravel the possibility that plausible deniability in the traditional sense does not reflect the needs and objectives of covert actions in this specific context.

While it can sound counter-intuitive, there are several reasons why covert actions was forced to embrace a watered-down version of plausible deniability in modern intelligence operations. This will be the second aspect

that I will cover in this section, namely, how the technological factor explains the increased exposure of covert operations to the public and, therefore, how state actors have had to come to terms to the concept of implausible deniability and use that to their advantage. Technological developments have dramatically changed the world of information and media, transforming the world in a giant panopticon: smartphones and the Internet especially have forced states to become more transparent with their actions. The ultimate research focus that will be introduced in this section is if and how technological advances, in particular unconventional Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), effectively compromise the maintenance of the anonymity of the sponsor of covert actions.

The third section, finally, delves in the topic of non-state terrorist groups that act as proxies for Iran in the Middle East, which is an aspect strictly connected to our understanding of Iran's behaviour and respective responses of its opponents. There are two sides to the argument that will be developed in this section. The first side is that the threatening presence of terrorism, and the even more menacing prospect that terrorist groups could be controlled by an adversary has significantly increased the tolerance level for ambiguous actions that damage this network, with little regard to other negative outcomes. This arguably means that implausible deniability sufficiently justifies lack of international repercussions. The second side is that, at the same time, Iran and its proxy network benefits from an asymmetrical strategy that includes covert operation and the use of terrorism, therefore implausible deniability is an acceptable excuse to continue to act in a shadow war instead of an overt one.

Maintaining 'Peace' in the Middle East

The Middle East is a region where power has been long contested, relations are historically tense, and alliances are fragile and susceptible to the ever-changing dynamics. There is an intricate network of relations upon which

peace and stability relies on, and any shift in this dynamic has potential repercussions on the entire systems and thus exposes the region to renewed conflicts. However, that is not to say that, due to the fragility of this network, the Middle East is stagnating. On the contrary, the power struggle is still very present in the region and influencing foreign affairs to tilt the scale in one direction or the other remains a central point on the agenda of every country involved. At the same time, states are aware that pushing this agenda too far can have a domino effect and they recognize the importance of being able to interfere in another country without being held accountable. This is where countries see the appeal of covert actions and plausible deniability, although on several occasions they must deal with implausible deniability instead. Furthermore, the literature and the wider theory fails to grasp why implausible deniability, where a covert action is carried out by a very apparent sponsor, provides sufficient grounds to avoid escalation in armed conflict. Intuitively, the instability of the region is usually linked to an increased readiness to engage in open armed conflict, or at least an increased willingness (Dupuy *et al.,* 2016; OECD, 2020). In contrast, the empirical evidence regarding the specific case of the Middle East suggests that, while hostilities are open, there is a reticence to step out of the shadow war context on all sides. This suggests that the regional condition fosters a favourable approach to implausible deniability and in some instance encourages it: through implausible deniability it is possible to more efficiently project power, intimidation and warnings, making it arguably more appealing to plausible deniability in the most traditional sense.

Iran perceives the West, and particularly the United States, as their main threat: this perception extends to Israel due to their tight relations with the US. Iran believes that the very existence of Israel is an insult as it is an agent of American imperialism in the Middle East (Takeyh, 2006). The relationship between Iran and Israel is tense and aggressive, filled with negative political rhetoric and strategic alliances that are made accordingly.

For instance, through the use of terrorist proxy, Iran has extended its influence over the countries that host their proxies, such as Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen, and discouraged them from acting against Iran's agenda, exploiting the passive deterrence quality of their proxies (McInnis, 2016). Naturally, these strategic alliances are not only held up by fear but also through ideology and carefully woven narratives that identify Israel, as well as Saudi Arabia, as malevolent Western-influenced forces that dominate the area. Namely, Iran and Saudi Arabia compete not only on geopolitics but also on ideology (Lambaré, Jozić and Tzemprin, 2015).

The ideological rivalry between Sunni and Shia Islam is a catalyst for the narrative that both sides push, and that is reflected on the fight for the dominating position of their state and respective Islamic offshoot. Saudi Arabia and Iran signed a security agreement in April 2001, which states that they will not interfere in each other's internal affairs (Dean, 2004). However, by collaborating with the Houthis from Yemen, Iran has been interfering in Saudi's internal affairs covertly. Iran's strategy aims at interfering in other countries' affairs, and covert operations allow it to circumvent diplomatic agreements such as the case with Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, Iran seeks to project power, promote a favourable narrative against the dominant forces, and more generally to place itself as a strong contestant to the regional power struggle. Implausible deniability, therefore, might have the scope to unofficially showcase successful covert operation that are carried out by Iran in order to be acknowledged by its allies and adversaries.

In return, Israel is aware of Iran's actions and rhetoric against them, therefore it has grown to see nearly all regional challenges as threats coming from Iran (Kaye, Nader, Roshan, 2011), similarly to Saudi Arabia. At the same time, they have been seeking to strengthen diplomatic bond through arms trading first (Guzansky and Marshall, 2020) which then led to the signing of the Abraham Accords alongside with UAE, facilitated by the United States in

an attempt to give official face to their unsteady diplomacy. Moreover, the Accords sought to establish a "tacit security regime" (Jones and Guzansky, 2017) to face the threats coming from Iran and Islamic extremism, as well as coming from the uncertain strategy of the United States in the Middle East. Israel is seeking to promote stability and mitigation potentials against these dangers through trade, accords and through diplomacy with countries whose interests align to theirs. It is a beneficial situation for both Israel and the Gulf Countries, but it also highlights the close relationship between Israel and the United States, while the European Union and Great Britain relationship is mostly characterised by ups and downs, particularly due to Israel handling of Palestine (Crosson, 2020).

Furthermore, alliances are still not black and white, considering that some Gulf States like Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait have been siding with Palestine on some core issues and, for Qatar and Kuwait, objecting a potential unilateral Israeli annexation of territory in the West Bank (Guzansky and Marshall, 2020). It is less so the case with the relations between Israel and Egypt and Jordan, as there are not territorial disputes or political grievances among the parties, and there is a common threat to be faced in the shape of Ankara and Tehran ambitions (Guzansky and Marshall, 2020). In particular, Israel and Egypt have been deepening their relationship through economic cooperation, and Egypt has been a mediation point between Israel and Palestine, central to maintaining Gaza relatively calm (Sabry, 2022). In other words, Israel has tied several alliances with powerful actors in order to secure itself from threats coming from the region. However, these alliances are a double-edged sword as they also keep Israel accountable of their actions. Covert operations become crucial in Israel strategy because they push their agenda forward while keeping their foreign affairs separate. For instance, Israel has been behind a number of operations that significantly affected Iran's nuclear programme during the nuclear talks between Iran and the United States (The New York Times, 2021). This research will explore whether the

fact that Israel has managed to maintain good rapports with the US while still sending a message to Iran regarding their nuclear endeavours can be attributed to the fact that covert operations were carried out under the premise of implausible deniability.

Additionally, The United States has been slowly backing out of the Middle East, or at least trying to lessen its involvement, in order to focus time and resources on Asia. To do so, the Obama administration sought to target Iran's nuclear program with a nuclear deal, which would appease Israel as well as the surrounding Gulf Countries which perceive Iran to be the highest threat in the region (CFR, 2022). Without their nuclear program, the risk of war with Iran would become less imminent, thus leaving room for the US to shift their focus on Asia. However, Trump administration reversed this process by applying more pressure on Iran and withdrew from the nuclear deal in the hope that Iran would capitulate. Iran in turn became more dangerous, tightening their hold on Syria, Lebanon and Yemen, engaging in more daring actions against the US such as the attack on a US air base in Iraq (Singh *et al.*, 2020). Now, Biden administration has been engaging in an attempt to revive the nuclear deal, but talks have yet to reach a conclusion. In summary, the hot-and-cold strategy that the US has shown during its past three presidential mandates has not been successful in distancing themselves from the Middle East situation. On the contrary, Iran has been returning the pressure, using their proxies to push the United States. (CFR, 2022)

This overview of the present dynamic in the Middle East merely scratches the surface of a complex set of relations that seem to be inches away from bubbling up into open conflict. Iran's looming threat and their asymmetrical warfare worries Israel, the Gulf Countries, and the United States, which have in turn forged an alliance mostly pushed by this common enemy. However, each of the player has their own strategies and agendas, and have relied on covert actions in order to influence the power dynamic of the region

without blatantly compromising these fragile alliances. Simultaneously, to advance their agendas, this research argues that countries have been unknowingly exploiting implausible deniability in covert action to also send a message.

Technology, Transparency, and Public Exposure

This section will explore the implication of the newest technological advancements, of transparency and of public opinion on secrecy and implausible deniability that come with covert actions. The underlying argument is that States have had to face an increasingly difficulty in maintaining secrecy due to the advent of technology in the field of information, such as the Internet and smartphones. Due to this exposure, and the democratic trend of increasing transparency towards the general public to sway public opinion, plausible deniability has become more difficult to achieve. States still consider plausible deniability a desirable factor in covert actions, but implausible deniability is more likely to be achievable compared to its more secretive counterpart. Joseph and Poznansky (2017) support the theory that technology has seriously hindered the ability for states to achieve plausible deniability and have argued that this development has significant implications for understanding secrecy nowadays. My argument, however, pushes this theory further, meaning that since implausible deniability is more likely to be achieved, states have had to make peace with this fact and indeed it is possible to use this aspect to the advantage of the covert operation itself. With implausible deniability, states are able to send a message to the adversary – like it was suggested in the previous section – but also it has implications on public opinion and exposure of the operation. The following section explores the impact of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), and sets the foundation to the argument that ICT compromises secrecy in covert operations and increases the likelihood of exposure in the short term.

Firstly, Information and Communication Technology (or ICT) networks have significantly increased the ease of communication between parties. As Joseph and Poznansky (2017) report, there are three actors in the target country that have the power to expose covert actions: reporters, civilians and the military or intelligence. In other circumstances, free of the modern information technology, these three actors each face issues such as the inability to recognize covert actions – in the case of civilians – or the inability to expose the operations due to a lack of information – namely, reporters or intelligence agents cannot see everything. ICT circumvents this issue by providing the means for all these three actors to communicate more efficiently, thus allowing for reported and even unreported suspicious information to spread (Joseph and Poznansky, 2017). In this way, the presence of civilians all around the country and the knowledge of both reporters and intelligence and military agents are combined, meaning that "access to technologies that reduce the time and expense of the diffusion of information should increase the chance that evidence of foreign involvement will be transmitted and, as a result, plausible deniability destroyed" (Joseph and Poznansky, 2017).

In this regard, communication technology has also enabled governments to effectively spy or eavesdrop on reporters and citizens by infiltrating local networks, thus enhancing the reach of intelligence collection capabilities (Daugherty, 2004). Moreover, news outlets allow for citizens to access political information, which in turn makes them more aware of foreign threats (Warren, 2014). As citizens become more politically aware, they also become more able to identify suspicious operations and link it to potential foreign intervention, rather than to normal low-level criminal activities (Joseph and Poznansky, 2017).

At the same time, through ICT network governments can more effectively make use of state messaging and propaganda, which influences citizens, inciting the fear that foreign actors are acting maliciously against

them (Warren, 2014). Iran is a clear example of this kind of use of ICT networks, as they have been frequently reporting how the United States is constantly trying to get involved in Iranian affairs in an attempt to damage them. In this way, citizens will be more careful about suspicious activity which is potentially foreign meddling (Joseph and Poznansky, 2017). Obviously, this type of propaganda can lead to an overload of whistleblowing of suspicious activity, fostering instead a sort of social paranoia that can create difficulties for the government and intelligence services to identify real threats amidst unrelated and unimportant information.

In summary, ICT networks severely impact the ability for a state to maintain secret their covert operations both in the country targeted and inside their own. International media and the internet allow the entire world on all levels to share and be exposed to communication, often without even necessarily seeking out to obtain this information. Additionally, increased transparency causes a better general awareness of international tensions thus allowing civilians to potentially identify when suspicious foreign operations are underway. Covert operations are, now more than ever, at risk of being exposed sooner rather than later, but states are still resorting to engaging in covert actions. Arguably, implausible deniability seems to be sufficiently beneficial for the purpose of covert operations.

Terrorism and Proxies

The existence of terrorist groups and their pervasiveness in the territory adds another key element in this study regarding covert actions and it hints at the unsuitability of the concept of plausible deniability in the traditional term in this context. In fact, it is possible that states are less concerned with the plausible deniability of sponsoring operations that damage terrorist networks due to increased international tolerance of pre-emptive operations. Furthermore, terrorist groups are deeply involved in the strategic network and actively participate in the regional power struggle, often becoming an ally and

a tool of state actors. States sponsor terrorism in order to advance political agendas and to destabilise the region to their potential advantage. This aspect further complicates our understanding of covert action and plausible deniability, because the secrecy that should surround sponsorship of operation is in stark contrast with the overt nature of terrorist acts. Implausible deniability seems to be a more fitting concept, as it would describe the precarious balance between the overt and overt aspects of this strategic marriage.

Terrorist organizations, such as those that are being supported by Iran in an attempt to expand its influence and power over the region, act in an overt manner. The act of claiming responsibility for an attack itself can advance the main objectives of the group: to cause attrition, to provoke and radicalise, to outbid an opponent, to intimidate, and to spoil the trustworthiness of the opponent (Kydd and Walter, 2006). For instance, ISIS has a history of claiming attacks, especially when it "calculates that it can reap a political benefit from doing so and the attack serves the group's objectives." (Cengiz *et al*., 2022). As a consequence, the presence of ISIS in Iraq and Syria has to some extent legitimised state terrorism, considering how effectively they can act and reach their objectives with their organizational structure, ideology, tactics, and targets (Cengiz *et al*., 2022). Iran followed suit, having sponsored groups such as the Lebanese Hezbollah, which has had a key role in the Syrian war, as Iran is interested in preserving the Assad regime against insurgent forces. More relevantly to the purpose of this research, Iran has been interested in developing an alliance with the Houthis from Yemen. Tehran cultivated the pre-existing grievances that the Houthis had against Saudi Arabia, a common adversary and a dominant force in the region, in order to cause instability and insecurity at its borders.

Reisman argues that "terrorism appears to be evolving into the preferred form of covert action of weaker state and, to an extent that cannot

yet be gauged, of groups that are not affiliated with any state" (Reisman, 1995). Naturally, this statement became more and more true in recent years, particularly for the Middle East. Covert operations have developed in a vastly different context than that of the Cold War, and so have proxy wars. As Scott (2004) reports, covert action then was considered to be the "quiet option, to be used where diplomacy was insufficient and force was inappropriate" (Scott, 2004). Now, however, not only diplomacy is insufficient and force is inappropriate, but also the complicated and deeply intertwined relations between countries, regional dynamics and political interests require much more careful planning of any course of action. Additionally, the Western world seems to consider itself in "semi-perpetual war against 'terrorism,' and preventive action in counter-proliferation and counter-terrorism (in overt and covert policy) becomes increasingly prevalent" (Scott, 2004), which has severe implications on covert actions as a whole. As a matter of fact, this research seeks to explore the empirical evidence that will either confirm or refute the assumption that this "semi-perpetual war against terrorism" (Scott, 2004) has directly affected how implausible deniability is perfectly sufficient to justify controversial covert actions that involve terrorism.

As it was already mentioned in the literature overview of implausible deniability, Lowenthal (2000) argues that plausible deniability is directly proportional to the level of violence that is involved. In other words, the more violent is the outcome of a covert operation, the less achievable is plausible deniability. Terrorism clearly falls in the category of operations that involve an extreme level of violence. Thus, the sponsor of a terrorist activity is likely to be uncovered. It remains difficult to avoid exposure of the sponsor of a terrorist attack, since the violence involved attracts a high degree of attention and worry from the target state's government, reporters, and civilians on every layer of society. Despite the fact that terrorist proxies mean that the state actor that lends its support and steers the group toward the advancement of their agenda is twice removed from the operation per se, the high risk of exposure

should in theory deter the engagement in such covert operation. In practice, Iran has been resorting to this type of proxy, asymmetrical operations to pursue their goals to influence and shake the power dynamic in the area. We could assume that the desirability and the potential benefits of an asymmetrical, shadow war greatly surpasses the drawback of weak plausible deniability.

Overall, terrorism significantly challenges the achievability of iron-clad plausible deniability, meaning that often covert operations in the Middle East can only reach implausible deniability. However, it is important to keep in mind that implausible deniability, allows the sponsor of the operation to implicitly and unofficially take credit for either fighting against the terrorist threat or for being a champion against the dominant and unfair forces of the Middle Easy.

Conclusions

Three main aspects have shaped the founding theory to my dissertation: the unstable regional dynamic and struggle for power, the exposure provoked by modern information and communication technologies, and the impact of terrorism and terrorist proxies to carry out operations aimed at influencing foreign affairs. These three factors highlight how plausible deniability in the traditional sense does not fit correctly in the context of the Middle East, while implausible deniability better explains the dynamics of covert operation. Implausible deniability is strictly linked to the fragile balance of the Middle East, and the covert operations that happen are constantly challenging this balance. At the same time, countries deeply desire to either subvert the regional power dynamic or defend themselves from such attempts, all with the looming presence of external actors like the United States, meaning that covert operations are needed to continue to exert their influence and interfere in foreign affairs while trying to avoid escalating in yet another conflict. As Berkowitz and Goodman (1998) write: "The fact that such

covertness is sometimes no more than a fig leaf does not necessarily alter the fact that it is a useful fig leaf." Covert actions remain a powerful political tool, and the decreased assurance of plausible deniability in its lesser stable form, implausible deniability, has not changed that states still resort to covert actions. The three aspects discussed above frame the argument for this research's aim. Firstly, what are the elements that required a reframing of plausible deniability for covert actions in the Middle East. Second, why, if at all, is implausible deniability more aligned with the implication of regional instability, of terrorism, and of technological advances in the communication and information field. Finally, this study explores which new elements did implausible deniability add to the objectives and outcomes of a covert operation.

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PRESENTATION OF DATA

Case Studies

In this chapter, three case studies that relate to covert actions carried out under the premise of implausible deniability will be explored, in order to further expand on the implications to security and power in the Middle East region. As a follow up to the theory previously outlined, each case study presented shows how implausible deniability challenges and adds a new aspect to the traditional understanding of covert operations to different extents. In particular, the impact and influence of the regional dynamic, information technology and terrorism are recurring topics, although some may result more or less relevant to the specific case. The case studies will be analysed chronologically. The first is the 2007 Israeli operation to damage a Syrian nuclear reactor, a case which will also reference other more recent operations that have targeted the Iranian nuclear program. The second is the 2017 missile attack on Riyadh led by the Houthis and allegedly backed by Iran. This case highlights the covert relationship between the Houthis and their state sponsor, Iran, and studies the implausible deniability of the involvement of the latter in operations that are carried out by its proxy. The final case is about the 2022 assassination of an IRGC member in Tehran, supposedly carried out by Israeli operatives, and showcases an instance of overstepping on the thin line between implausible deniability and exposure, what are the factors that led to exposure and what are the consequences.

"Operation Orchard"

The first case study under analysis is the so-called "Operation Orchard" (Follath and Stark, 2009) or "Operation Outside the Box" (Melman and Raviv, 2018). On the night of the 6th of September 2007, at around 1 o'clock, a bright flash was seen from the Syrian desert town of Deir el-Zor, around 130 kilometers from the Iraqi border. Later that day, the Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) reported that Syrian airspace was breached by Israeli

fighter jets during the night, but they were promptly confronted by air defence units who forced them to leave "after they dropped some ammunition in deserted areas without causing any human or material damage," in the words of a Syrian military spokesman (Follath and Stark, 2009). More accounts from both sides, the Syrian and the Israeli, denied the occurrence of the incident or downplayed it drastically, and the contradicting second-hand reports attracted the suspicions of civilians and other countries. For instance, after Syrian state news announced the incident on the following afternoon, Patience (2007) for the BBC News wrote that "It is not clear why it took the Syrian authorities almost 12 hours to make the reported incident public. The Israeli military, for its part, has made no public comment on the matter." In their article on the Spiegel International, Follath and Stark (2009) describe how "gradually it became clear that the fighter pilots did not drop some random ammunition over empty no-man's land on that night in 2007, but had in fact deliberately targeted and destroyed a secret Syrian complex."

The mission began as a routine emergency exercise for the Israeli pilots: they left from Ramat David Air Base towards the Mediterranean, and seven aircraft flew over the Syrian border, where a radar station was eliminated by their precision-guided weapons. The air strikes, filmed from the air as per usual, proved to be more destructive than necessary, but succeeded in destroying the Al-Kibar complex. Afterwards, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert explained the mission to Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan via phone call and asked him to relay the information to President Assad that Israel would not tolerate a nuclear programme and a nuclear plant in Syria, however it was not seeking to exacerbate animosity between the countries and was still interested in peace-building (Follath and Stark, 2009).

The nuclear reactor was most likely built with the clandestine aid of Iran and North Korea, as found out by IAEA experts who visited the site a year later, despite the reiterated declarations from Syria that the plant was in

fact a conventional weapons facility and that that there was no foreign involvement (Follath and Stark, 2009). As Israel fears an expanding nuclear program in the Middle Eastern region, especially if long-term rival and source of worry Iran is involved, they are seeking to eliminate nuclear threats in any possible way (Makovsky, 2012). The attack on the nuclear reactor in Syria was only one of many operations said to be led by Israel, targeting nuclear threats, such as the 2008 assassinations of Hezbollah leader Imad Mughniyah and of Brigadier General Mohammed Suleiman, head of Syria's nuclear programme. Evidence that Israel was involved in Operation Orchard, as well as in other operations that targeted key figures from Syria as well as Iran itself, has been disclosed and Israel itself has claimed responsibility in more recent years, almost a decade later (Melman and Raviv, 2018).

This operation occurred under the premises of implausible deniability for many reasons. Firstly, the tensions between Israel and Syria, and the respective supporting networks, gave clear suspicions over the sponsors of the operation. At that point in 2007, Israel as well as the United States, have frequently voiced their suspicions about the lack of transparency in regards of the existence of a nuclear program by Iran and Syria, and they made their stance clear that they were strongly against it. This position was further stressed in the following years, culminating with the diplomatic approach and the outlining of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), or Nuclear Deal, involving the United States. Operation Orchard was also followed by more assassinations of Syrian and Iranian personnel that were involved the nuclear program, and two explosions in the Iranian centrifuge assembly facility in Natanz, in 2020 and in 2021 (Bergman, Gladstone, Fassihi, 2021). Additionally, Iran has downplayed the extent of the damage that the Natanz facility suffered (Bergman, Gladstone, Fassihi, 2021), similarly to how the downplayed the incident in al-Kibar, likely to avoid triggering an investigation that could potentially uncover information

regarding their nuclear ambitions or to avoid letting on how successfully the adversaries are standing against their projects.

The covert operations in Natanz are similar to the one that affected Al-Kibar, because in all instances Israel felt threatened by a lack of control and transparency over nuclear proliferation in the region: Al-Kibar happened before the JCPOA, and Natanz happened during the unfruitful talks to reinstate the Nuclear Deal after Trump withdrew from it in 2018 (Landler, 2018). As Washington and Tehran continue to fail at reaching an understanding during the ongoing nuclear talks, Israel worries that Iran is buying time to continue to advance their program. In fact, Iran is already enriching uranium to 60 percent, and it has begun to install advanced centrifuges in a cluster at an underground enrichment plant, suggesting that, while a deal is not completely off the table, it is getting increasingly harder to reach a consensus over each of the involved parties' narrow interests and no-deal strategies (Golmohammadi, 2022).

In the immediate aftermath, it was important for Israel to still deny their involvement in order to avoid escalation and leave the door open for diplomatic talks between Syria and Israel, which were taking place at the time. The fragile regional dynamic makes it imperative that covert actions such as Operation Orchard could be downplayed by each party. However, Israel's sponsorship was difficult if not impossible to deny, considering that the fighter jets that caused the explosions were recognizably Israeli (Follath and Stark, 2009). They were not hidden, nor masked, and the international community quickly realised and accepted that Israel was the sponsor of the attack. However, "the international community's reaction was minimal" (Garwood-Gowers, 2011). It is likely that since Syria, nor Iran, were not protesting against Israel's attack and were not seeking to investigate further in an attempt to continue to deny that the site was being used for nuclear purposes, despite mounting evidence from the IAEA (Garwood-Gowers, 2011). In fact, it is

likely that both Syria and Iran were preoccupied with maintaining the implications of the existence of the al-Kibar nuclear facility as hidden as possible, and investigations would compromise Iran and Syria just as much as Israel. It is unsurprising, under these considerations, that all countries involved continue to fight this shadow war, in the shadows. This case therefore shows that implausible deniability is more than sufficient because it provides both sides the pretext to avoid escalating into more open conflict.

Despite efforts to minimise the importance of the incident, Operation Orchard naturally attracted the interest of media when it happened, and it also became a recurring story later, in 2018, when Israel openly admitted to sponsorship of the operation (Melman and Raviv, 2018). Treverton's (1987) argument that sometimes covert operations are known but simply not acknowledged by the wider public due to a lack of appeal does not describe this case. The degree of exposure of this operation was quite high due to its controversial implications for both sides: the doubtful legality of the operation (Garwood-Gowers, 2011) for Israel and the secret nuclear proliferation for Syria and, by implication, Iran. Since neither side, Israeli and Syrian, was willing to admit to their plans, for over a decade Operation Orchard remained a colourful story for the media and an implicit warning for those interested in pursuing nuclear proliferation. In this case, the exposure of the operation was predictable and traditional media largely covered the story in the immediate aftermath, yet Israel was not discouraged by the weak plausible deniability before engaging in the operation. Investigative articles, such as those of Follath and Stark (2009) and of Melman and Raviv (2018), significantly impact the level of plausible deniability of a covert operation, considering that reporters have a better and wider pool of sources from where they can draw information. Information and communication technology was already advanced in 2007 at the time of the Al-Kibar incident and, although not as sophisticated, accessible and widely used as it is now, it gave the opportunity

for journalists to have access to more comprehensive primary resources regardless of the evidence released by states.

From a different perspective, Garwood-Gowers (2011) examined the Al-Kibar incident, investigating the reasons behind the mild reactions of the international community, suggesting that the use of pre-emptive force is more tolerated due to Bush doctrine and the "war on terror" or even due to a "tacit endorsement of Israel's pre-emptive action" (Garwood-Gowers, 2011). The alliance between the United States and Israel and their aligned interest in slowing down nuclear proliferation in Syria and Iran potentially outweighed the risk brought by exposure, as Israel could expect the United States and the majority of the Western community to turn a blind eye to an operation that ultimately benefitted them. This claim, however, stands in stark contrast to the outcome of a very similar operation carried out by Israel in 1981 (D'Amato, 1981). Twenty-six years before Al-Kibar, Israel attacked Iraq's nuclear reactor in Osirak, and the Security Council firmly condemned it as a "clear violation of the Charter of the United Nations and the norms of international conduct" (UN Security Council, 1981). According to the example given by this event, Israel could not have been certain that the international community would have acted differently from the Osirak case before engaging in the Al-Kibar covert operation. Due to the similarity of the cases, in fact, Israel could have predicted similarity of reactions, too, and expected negative blowback from the international community. This should have been enough motivation for Israel to actively seek out to increase the plausible deniability of the covert operation, or even be altogether discouraged to carry it out. However, it is also true that the regional dynamics changed considerably, as well as the role that terrorism played in the Middle East.

The early 2000s were characterized by the insurgence of Islamic terrorist organizations, and more importantly, of state-sponsored terrorism. The United States felt like their interests in the Middle East, as well as their

own national security, were threatened, and especially the Bush administration broadened the right of pre-emptive self-defence in order to justify pre-emptive actions against rogue states and non-state terrorist groups that sought to develop weapons of mass destruction (Garwood-Gowers, 2011). This claim was highly controversial, and the majority of the international community did not fully embrace it, but it remains true that, especially since 9/11, "there has been a discernible shift towards greater explicit support among states and the United Nations itself for the narrower right of anticipatory self-defence" (Garwood-Gowers, 2011). In other words, the international community showed a greater tolerance on pre-emptive operation when it came to terrorism.

This shift, ultimately, leads to the assumption that Israel was less concerned with maintaining plausible deniability in Operation Orchard since it had good grounds for believing the international community, and the United States and the West in particular, was likely to accept the claim to pre-emptive defence in the case that their sponsorship of the covert action became known. In 2007, as well as today, Syria was already considered to be a state sponsoring terrorism from 1979 (US State Department, 2019). Namely, the Assad regime has had a permissive attitude towards terrorist groups as it was aware and actively encouraged that terrorist forces transit through the country into Iraq to fight against the US forces (US State Department, 2019). Moreover, Syria's affiliation to groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon (Byman, 2005) highlights the strong relationship and alliance with Iran, which was cause of worry for the US and Israel then as it is today. Syria's stance within the regional dynamic is in clear opposition to the Western influences and the dominant forces in the Middle East. The existence of terrorist groups whose interests align with those of Syria and Iran, and who naturally are not bound by international law contrarily to states, represents a significant threat for those who oppose them. Terrorism and in particular state-sponsored terrorism is drastically redesigning how states react to threats and, while resorting to

'dirty tricks' may not be an officially appropriate response, it has become more acceptable due to the perceived imminence of terrorist threats. In this scenario, implausible deniable covert operations can and are still successful, and there are little repercussions for the action's sponsor.

Carson and Yarhi-Milo (2017) reported two interpretations of the covert action against Syria's nuclear reactor, stating that "Israel is constrained from overt military action by concerns for regional stability but motivated to preemptively shut down Syrian nuclear development". One interpretation is that Israel's sole objective in this operation was to set back Syria's nuclear program. The second interpretation adds another element, which is that not only Israel sought to slow down the nuclear program, but also sought to send a message to other nuclear proliferators in the region, particularly Iran (Carson and Yahri-Milo, 2017). The operation, however covert, left many traces and it is arguable that Israel used the implausibility of their denial of sponsorship to their advantage, meaning that their aggressive stance against nuclear proliferation was made clear to all interested parties (Carson and Yahri-Milo, 2017). It could also explain why the al-Kibar attack was purposefully more forceful than it was necessary, considering that the higher the violence, the weaker the claim for plausible deniability gets (Lowenthal, 2000). This is true not only for the Al-Kibar case, but also for all operations that concerned Syrian and Iranian nuclear facilities and people involved in the program. During the current nuclear talks, this message-sending component is present, too, implicitly giving out a warning to Iran's authorities that Israel has the power to damage and set-back any attempts to further their nuclear ambitions. However, it is important to remember that Iran still has a significant head start in their nuclear program, and it is commonly believed that it has continued to advance since 2007 in spite of the nuclear deal. Operation Orchard succeeded in destroying a Syrian plant, which was probably a back-up plan for Iran, but it did not create substantial setbacks and Iran is closer than ever to becoming a nuclear power. This highlights the fact that the operations concerning nuclear

proliferations do have the objective to deter and warn as well as to create obstacles to the physical attempt to advance a nuclear program.

In summary, the argument is that Operation Orchard, as well as other similar operations regarding nuclear proliferation, was carried out under the premise of implausible deniability. In this case, technological advances did not significantly expose the covert operations, but it emerged that investigative journalism can be more thorough and efficient, considering that in 2007 the use of social media and unconventional media already starting to become popular, and traditional media like newspapers, radio and television covered the story, which held the attention of the public. On the other hand, maintaining relative peace in the region and keeping the option of peace building talks open was crucial: Israel still chose to engage in a covert operation and continued to deny its sponsorship for over a decade, despite the denials were unlikely to be believed by all parties involved and by the international community. The denials allowed both Syria and Israel to avoid facing the implications of having nuclear aspirations for the former, and of actively destroy facilities within another country for the latter. As the offended party, Syria, had interests in maintaining some level of secrecy and deniability regarding the Al-Kibar facility, it was encouraged to keep quiet about Israel's intrusion, thus, lowering the chances of legal repercussions for Israel even as implausible deniability rose. Lastly, the more pressing threats coming from state-sponsored terrorism drastically changed the reaction of the international community and in particular raised the tolerance level for pre-emptive strategies such as Operation Orchard. Israel could assume that the United States, as forerunners of this shift, would be more lenient if the operation became exposed and potentially rely on the fact that it could sway public opinion in the West.

Riyadh Airport Missile Attack

The second case study under analysis concerns a thwarted operation in which the Houthis, allegedly backed by Iran, launched a ballistic missile against Riyadh main airport in November 2017. The operation itself is treading the line between covert and overt operation, considering that the rebel group of the Houthis from Yemen claimed responsibility on the action, however, this section will mostly focus on the involvement of Iran, which is the covert element. In fact, Iran was suspected of supplying the group with the weapons and missiles that were used and of being the instigator of the pre-existing and still growing animosity between Yemen and Saudi Arabia, which in turn promotes their own regional agenda. Saudi Arabia charged Iran with an act of war due to its alleged contribution to the attack, but Iran denied its involvement to the press, which allows this research to explore this operation under the terms of covert action carried out by Iran. Moreover, the mounting evidence proving that close relationship and support between Iran and the Houthis, who can arguably be considered to be a proxy actor to Iran, lead to the assumption that this operation was carried out under the premise of implausible deniability in terms of Iran's involvement and sponsorship. Despite the operation itself failed, as the missile was intercepted before reaching the target, it led to significant repercussions on the regional dynamic.

On the 4th of November 2017, a Burkan H2 ballistic missile was fired by the Houthis, targeting King Khalid International Airport, located just 35 kilometres from the Saudi capital Riyadh, as reported by Houthi-Saleh-aligned media (Human Rights Watch, 2017). Within the airport compound there is a company that maintains military aircrafts as well, but the proximity of the densely inhabited areas of the capital angered Saudi authorities, who claimed that such attack violates the laws of war (Human Rights Watch, 2017). This claim is strengthened by the fact that the attack was carried out with an unguided ballistic missile, which is a technology that lacks the necessary

accuracy, therefore there was the possibility that it could indiscriminately target civilian areas rather than military objectives (Human Rights Watch, 2017). "We see this as an act of war. Iran cannot lob missiles at Saudi cities and towns and expect us not to take steps," stated Adel Jubair, Saudi Foreign Minister (Kirkpatrick, 2017). The missile, however, was promptly intercepted by the US-made Patriot Missile Defence System, which led to shrapnel falling over a deserted area east of the airport and causing no injuries (Lister *et al*., 2017). Witnesses reported that parts of the missile were found in the airport car park, while residents in the north of Riyad described hearing a loud blast followed by the sound of a low-flying aircraft on the evening of the incident (BBC, 2017). The Saudi capital was left pretty much unscathed by the attack; however, it shook the country to see how efficient Iran's support has been to the Houthis and how the Houthis are becoming an increasingly dangerous threat to national security of Saudi Arabia.

According to CNN, "the missile launch on King Khalid International Airport in Riyadh was the first time the heart of the Saudi capital has been attacked and represents a major escalation of the ongoing war in the region" (Lister *et al*., 2017). Moreover, the Houthis openly admitted to their responsibility behind the missile strike, as Mohammed Abdul Salam, a Houthi spokesman, stated that the attack was a response to the Saudi targeting and murdering of Yemeni civilians, and that they had previously warned about retaliation against countries that attack Yemen (Lister *et al*., 2017). This exchange hints at an escalation of tensions between Saudi Arabia and Yemen, as well as between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and it proves that the Houthis are a useful ally in the anti-Arab coalition led by Iran.

The support for the Houthis seems to be a particularly lucky longsighted strategy for Iran, which saw this alignment as an opportunity to destabilize long-term adversary Saudi Arabia, extend its influence on Yemen, expand their network opposing the dominant forces of the region, while

maintaining ideological coherence and a certain degree of deniability (Juneau, 2021b), however, implausible. Iran's involvement with the Houthis is barely hidden, which weakens their claim to plausibly deny that they are using the Houthis as a proxy to put forward their regional agenda. In 2014, when the Houthis took control over Sana'a, the capital of Yemen, Iran openly declared that it had control of four Arab capitals, Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut and Sana'a, which was a statement that deeply shocked other Gulf states (Nakhoul, 2015; Hokayem & Roberts, 2016). This assertion naturally framed the Houthis as pawns of Iran's strategy aiming at overturning the dominant forces of the region. Iran did not openly claim responsibility of any of the actions carried out by the Houthis, however their role behind the scenes can be seen in statements such as the one regarding Sana'a.

It is important to keep in mind that the Houthis are an independent actor, despite Iran's influence and economic and military support. Both parties believe that they can benefit from this alliance to carry out their opportunistic goals (Hokayem and Roberts, 2016). This aspect potentially undermines the relevance of this case study to the wider research topic, as it would not be an example of covert action, clashing with its definition, by challenging the level of proxy of the Houthis in relation to Iran. In fact, Mumford (2013) states that proxy wars are not to be considered within the realm of covert action. At the same time, most definitions of covert action neither include nor exclude using proxy actors, as long as the ultimate goal is to influence foreign affairs while maintaining the sponsor hidden. In the case of the 2017 missile strike, there has been mounting evidence of Iran's involvement in the operation and that it was enabling, if not outright encouraging, the Houthis to engage in actions that would challenge Saudi Arabia's stability and security, despite its firm denials. This supports the fact that the Houthis operation was most likely part of a larger strategy by Iran to influence the regional dynamic through the undermining of Saudi Arabia, without openly revealing its role in it.

Operations such as the attempted missile strike over Riyadh airport can be considered to be an operation where the real sponsor, Iran, is hidden or is invoking plausible deniability. In support of this argument, Glen (2015) reports that not only Saudi Arabia charged Iran with an act of war, and not Yemen, from where the missile was launched from, but also that the missiles used were build and developed by Iran itself. The technological support provided by Iran and Hezbollah means that the Houthis had access to advanced weapons such as the ballistic missiles, to which they were not likely to have access otherwise (Glen, 2015).

Moreover, authorities from both sides have spoken regarding the ballistic missile incident. Namely, the former Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif denied the allegations that his country supplied the missiles to the Houthis and "rejected Riyadh's dangerous allegations as a violation of the international laws and the UN Charter" (El Sirgany, 2017). Iran also stated that "the U.S. and Saudi allegations are baseless and unfounded" (Nichols, 2017). On the other hand, Lebanon's Prime Minister Saad Hariri, while resigning, publicly accused Iran and Hezbollah of "meddling in the internal affairs of Arab countries" (El Sirgany, 2017). These accusations are grounded in a common knowledge in the Middle East that Iran's strategy comprises of building this influential network using non-state terrorist actors, such as Hezbollah or Hamas. Iran's methods and objectives are widely known, and Iran itself is not particularly concerned with hiding its strategy and limits itself with officially and publicly deny accusation. There is a degree of purposefulness in the fact that Iran does not go to great lengths to support plausible deniability and it is instead content with implausible deniability, as it allows Iran to showcase its reach and influence over the region. This frames operations such as the Riyadh missile strike as implausibly deniable, because Iran's sponsorship is exactly on the line between covert and overt, using the Houthis as a shield behind which they could hide and officially assert that they were not directly involved. At the same time, the

Riyadh operation sends a specific message to Saudi Arabia, which is that Iran has the instruments and the willingness to threaten Saudi national security and regional stability through the Houthis.

International players, including the U.S. and more widely the U.N., were significantly involved in the investigation surrounding the missile operation against Saudi Arabia as well as regarding Iran's role. U.N. monitors gathered evidence, confirming that the missiles arrived in Yemen in pieces and only then were assembled by missile engineers with the Houthis, and they confirmed that design characteristics were consistent with those of Iranian Qiam-1 missile. However, despite the similarities, they did not possess enough evidence to pinpoint the identity of the supplier (Nichols, 2017). Saudi-led coalition used this attack to justify a blockade of Yemen that lasted several weeks, stating that it was a measure aimed at preventing more Iranian weapons to reach the Houthis (Nichols, 2017). This is an example of how Saudi Arabia's foreign policy started to shift, seeking to be less dependent on the West and the US regarding security from outside threats, and instead asserting its place within regional dynamics (Takeyh, 2015), especially due to the geographically closer threat represented by the Houthis which required Saudi Arabia to be more independent in its counterstrategies. However, the blockade caused a severe worsening of the humanitarian situation for the people in Yemen, who already struggled with famine, health issues and poverty due to the ongoing war. Naturally, such harsh approach did not benefit Saudi Arabia nor undermine the Houthis and Iran, whose alliance became tighter due to the additional grievances against Saudi Arabia's strategies.

Western countries, and in particular the U.S., were wary of taking any action against Iran not only on the basis of its implausibly deniable involvement in the Riyadh attack. Offensive action such as the attempted attack on Riyadh fuelled suspicions and animosity against Iran and its network. In fact, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley accused

Iran of supplying Houthi rebels with missiles that provoked multiple attacks on Saudi Arabia, and "called for the United Nations to hold Tehran accountable for violating two U.N. Security Council resolutions" (Nichols, 2017). However, in 2017 the JCPOA was still in place, before Trump administration would withdraw the following year, and U.S. actions had to reflect their commitment to the deal. In fact, the UN's official stance, as stated by Antonio Guterres, UN secretary general, was that the Nuclear Deal was "the best way to ensure the exclusively peaceful nature of Iran's nuclear programme" (The Guardian, 2017). Retaliation from Saudi Arabia backed by the U.S. was likely to compromise the Nuclear Deal, thus discouraging Saudi Arabia and its allies to intervene on Iran in regard to the Riyadh attack, leading then Saudi Arabia to resort to take measures, the blockade, against Yemen. Similarly to the previous case study discussed, both parties had interests to defend which, on one hand, discouraged the target country to insist on investigating the covert operation and, on the other hand, allowed the sponsor country to engage in covert actions in spite of the implausible deniability because it relied on the lack of willingness on the other part to step out of the shadow war, which would mobilise the entire regional and international network.

The operations that the Houthis engage, with the assumed support of Iran, are barely hidden and in line with the purpose of a terrorist group, which is increasing the friction between its ally and the pan-Arab coalition. The implausible deniability in this case does not act efficiently in de-escalating tension in the region, on the contrary, it is fuelling hostility, often at the expense of the Yemeni population. The question that arises is what is there to gain for Iran through implausibly deniable operations involving the Houthis, considering that escalation of conflict is not a desirable outcome for either Iran or Yemen, who have a considerably smaller military capacity combined compared to Saudi Arabia.

Firstly, Saudi Arabia and Iran are bound by a security agreement of the 90s in which they promise not to interfere in each other's internal affairs (Alhasan, Alghoozi, 2021). Therefore, the Houthis are an efficient way for Iran to circumvent this diplomatic commitment, which would inevitably trigger an open conflict otherwise. At the same time, Iran seeks to assert itself as a powerful actor in the Middle East and to do so it must find alternative methods to put pressure on the current dominant forces in the region, specifically, Israel and Saudi Arabia. The Houthis and their grievances caused by ongoing civil war and the Saudi-led intervention were the perfect tool to destabilise one key adversary to Iran and potentially disrupt the entire regional dynamic. Secondly, Iran's indiscriminate use of terrorist proxies such as the Houthis have proved to be successful in achieving its objective to tilt the power scale to its advantage. Saudi Arabia tended to respond to these provocations with hard power (Jones *et al.*, 2021), which was an arguably inefficient manner to respond as it increased distrust and hostility in the Iranian network, fuelled by propaganda.

Plausible or at the very least implausible deniability is necessary to claim for Iran to continue to put forward its narrative that the dominant forces in the Middle East and their Western influences are malicious and need to be overturned. Meanwhile, implausible deniability can be used to send a message not only to adversaries, but also to the wider population, who is subject to the narrative that Iran is acting in support of regional champions, like the Houthis, who defend and avenge Yemen from oppressing Saudi Arabia. Iran's authorities, while denying their involvement in any Houthis operation, have widely spoken in favour of the group through official media and unofficial media, like personal Twitter accounts. Lastly, the use of terrorist groups as proxies changed the approach to researching covert actions and the implausible deniability of those. Iran likely takes advantage of his power and influence over the Houthis to steer them towards engaging in actions that put forward Iran's regional agenda, while keeping Iran itself shielded from the

plain exposure of their involvement. However, Iran's strategy and influence network is publicly acknowledged, as Iran has been denying that it sponsors terrorism, yet it does not hide it. It is important for Iran to let the other regional forces know that its influential network is expanding in order to assert its growing power, while being careful to maintain itself just below the threshold that would trigger full mobilisation to its disadvantage. In other words, drawing from the analogy developed by Taber (1970) in his book *The War of the Flea*, Iran has been using fleas, in this case non-state terrorist groups but also covert actions that have a small impact such as the missile strike in Riyadh, in order to slowly undermine the big dog, Saudi Arabia, and eventually overcome it. For this strategy to succeed, Iran is creating a decentralised system that can damage the dominant forces in the Middle East, but implausible deniability plays a key role in effectively distributing the threats without exposing a vulnerable centre of gravity (Von Clausewitz, 1950).

Assassination of IRGC Officer Khodayari

The third case study under analysis is the recent case of IRGC Officer Khodayari, who was assassinated in Tehran, allegedly in an Israeli covert operation, in May 2022. The Khodayari assassination is a relevant case for this study overall because not only it represents a significant shift in the dynamic of the covert war between Israel and Iran but also because it is an example of the decreasing plausible deniability of covert operations in the Middle East. Moreover, it is useful in highlighting the element in this operation that made it less successful in maintaining hostility below a threshold of escalation, which is that the target country, Iran, has pressed into carrying out an investigation which could disclose certain aspects that emerged from this covert action. Namely, the involvement of Khodayari in Iran's clandestine military task force, Unit 840, which allegedly kidnaps and assassinates foreign targets, including Israeli.

On the 22nd of May in Tehran, at around 4 in the afternoon, Iran's IRGC senior officer Hassan Sayyed Khodayari was shot at least five times as he was approaching his house in the Iranian capital with his car. The shots were fired by two gunmen who were riding on motorcycles (AL Jazeera, 2022). Colonel Khodayari assassination was promptly reported by state news agency IRNA, who published images showing a man inside a vehicle, covered in blood around his shirt and on his upper right arm (AL Jazeera, 2022). The attack was quickly attributed to the 'global arrogance', a term that the Iranian use in reference to the West, the U.S. and its allies in the region, such as Israel (Politico, 2022).

Furthermore, Iran has previously suspected and accused Israel of carrying out assassinations in a similar style against Iranian's nuclear scientists, increasing the likelihood of Israel's hand behind the operation against Khodayari (Politico, 2022). In fact, the last high-profile killing that happened within Iran's borders was in November 2020 and nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh was targeted by an Israeli drone (Bergman and Fassihi, 2021). Including Fakhrizadeh, at least six other Iranian scientists and academics have been assassinated or targeted since 2010, many by gunmen who rode motorcycles like in Khodayari's case, and the incidents seems to have targeted Iran's nuclear programme, which the West fears is intended at producing nuclear weapons (Al-Jazeera, 2022). The first case study under analysis, the attack on Syrian nuclear reactor, highlights the fact that Israel has been interested in disrupting Iran's nuclear program for almost two decades, and has been resorting to doing so through covert actions. However, Khodayari has a different profile of those Iranians that were previously targeted by Israel, since he was not involved in the nuclear programme and was instead involved in terrorist acts against foreign citizens. As Fasshili and Bergman (2022) reported, "while previous attacks inside Iran were mainly focused on nuclear targets and military infrastructure, this assassination

appeared to be a rare instance of Israel targeting Guards members inside Iran in retaliation for plots against its citizens."

Khodayari was a prominent official for Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, and he was described as a 'defender of the sanctuary', as he reportedly worked in Syria on behalf of Iran. The Colonel was a member of the Quds Force, whose existence is denied by Iran, the IRGC's foreign operations branch, and he oversaw the liaison with Iran's global proxies such as Hezbollah and he is believed to have directed attacks and recruited civilians in other countries to carry out attacks, especially against Israelis (Counter Extremism Project, 2022). Khodayari worked closely with General Qassem Soleimani, head of the Quds Force and the mind behind its regional security apparatus, who was killed in air raid in Baghdad, led by the United States, in January 2020 (Al-Jazeera, 2022). Washington claimed responsibility for the operation against Soleimani, stating that the Trump administration sought to prevent future attacks allegedly planned by Iran (Al-Jazeera, 2022). The actions in which Khodayari was involved made him a target for both Israel and the U.S., and considering the alliance between the two countries, it is likely that there was a level of coordination or at least communication before and after.

In support of this, information that Israel was the sponsor of Khodayari's assassination quickly leaked from the U.S. intelligence services and was reported by The New York Times (Fasshili and Bergman, 2022). "A spokeswoman for the Israeli prime minister declined to comment on the killing. But according to an intelligence official briefed on the communications, Israel has informed American officials that it was behind the killing," reads the article. Additionally, the report states that "the Israelis told the Americans the killing was meant as a warning to Iran to halt the operations of a covert group within the Quds Force known as Unit 840" (Fasshili and

Bergman, 2022). The article implicitly states that the U.S. are not involved in the operation, which was organised and carried out by Israel alone.

It is not clear whether the information that was leaked was a purposeful action of the American authorities or the product of the reporters' investigations, however, in either case it shows how communication among parties, intelligence services and reporters, in this instance, has become more available and more efficient in uncovering covert operations and giving it exposure, as Joseph and Poznansky (2017) study on technology suggests. Technology, particularly communication technology, played an important part in the aftermath of the operation, significantly increasing the implausible deniability of Israel's hand behind Khodayari's assassination and decreasing the degree of control over the timing of the exposure. Arguably, the implausible deniability, which was already feeble, was ultimately compromised by the leaked information, which suggests that the communication channels between officials and journalist are more efficient than ever. Moreover, if the New York Times (2022) article was the consequence of an intentional action from the U.S., they were able to expose Israel simply by leaking information to one platform, which then instantly made its way to Tehran and Jerusalem. At this point, Tehran had tangible confirmation that Israel carried out the covert action from the adversary's ally, the U.S., and its retaliation threats had to be concretised. It became more difficult for Iran to rely on the implausible deniability of the operation as Israel was effectively exposed, despite the likelihood that Iran prefers to continue to engage in covert actions rather than overt operations because it allows them to play in an even field, or even have an upper hand, against the much more military capable Israel.

The New York Times (2022) article came out three days after the attack, when Tehran accusations and revenge threats were still fresh, such as President Ebrahim Raisi promise to avenge the killing, putting Israel in a

dangerous position and, which prompted its citizens to avoid Turkey, as Israel released a travel warning, for fear of Iranian's retaliation at the expense of Israeli civilians that are found it the neighbouring country (Reuters, 2022). In general, Israeli media and authorities, including security officials, expect "a more 'substantial' targeting of Israelis abroad as revenge for the killing" (The Jerusalem Post, 2022). Evidently, Israel was taken aback by the exposure caused by the leak, as they most likely counted on the fact that the operation would maintain a level of, at least, implausible deniability to avoid escalation (The Time of Israel, 2022). Israel does not usually claim responsibility for covert operations carried out on foreign soil, because it "facilitates deniability and makes it easier for the other party demonstrates restraint" (Linn, 2022).

Considering the intimate strategic relationship between Israel and the U.S., the former was caught by surprise by the report released by the New York Times (2022), and it is possible that an action such as this could harm the trust between the two countries. An article in the Israel Hayom reports that "It's possible the purpose of the leak was to warn Israel not to impede American efforts to quickly finalise a nuclear deal with the Islamic republic" (Linn, 2022). In fact, as Biden resumed the nuclear talks with Iran in an attempt to revive the 2015 JCPOA, Israel has been sceptical of Iran's claims that its nuclear program does not aim at building nuclear weapons, and it is entirely peaceful (Motamedi, 2022). It is likely that Israel is trying to act beyond the diplomatic efforts of the nuclear talks, in which the U.S. is engaged, if Israel does not believe that the deal will successfully eliminate the threat of the Iranian nuclear program. Israel previously engaged in operations such as the Natanz explosion in 2021 (Bergman, Gladstone, Fassihi, 2021) during the time in which Washington was putting the nuclear deal back to the table. However, Khodayari's assassination is widely different from covert action that directly targeted Iran's nuclear program. The most relevant factor that connects Khodayari to the nuclear talks is that Iran has been demanding that the IRGC is written off from the Foreign Terrorist Organization list as a

condition to conclude the Nuclear Deal (Harb, 2022). Moreover, the leak released by the U.S. could be a symptom of its growing impatience towards the continued setbacks that have been stalling the Nuclear Talks, including the fact that Israel continues to intervene in Iran's foreign affairs, fuelling its distrust and hostility towards the West and the Western allies in the Middle East.

The U.S. exposed the implausible deniability of the Khodayari's assassination prematurely, meaning that what Israel likely intended to be an operation that maintained their involvement more or less hidden, or in other words implausibly deniable, and not provoke an escalation. Iran has often accused Israel of carrying out covert operations against it, however, Khodayari's assassination and the leak regarding the involvement of Israel, as well as the fact that the U.S. media acknowledged its involvement, give potential grounds for Iran to retaliate. The operation was most likely intended to be a message to the Iranian authorities and the IRGC to stop their terrorist actions against foreign citizens. Instead, it seems to have backfired considering that Israeli are now more in danger, as proven by the plot uncovered where Iran authorised an operation to kill Israeli tourists visiting Turkey (Bob and Meitav, 2022). More dangerously, this operation seems to have significantly shaken the precarious equilibrium that characterises the current regional situation, especially as it deteriorates a diplomatic dispute between Iran and Turkey (The Soufan Center, 2022).

This operation indicates a shift and possibly a new phase in the so-called shadow war between Israel and Iran (Rosenthal, 2022), dangerously drawing closer to triggering and intensifying conflict, to the point that the implausible deniability of these covert actions is wearing increasingly thin. Israel moves on from targeting Iran indirectly through its allies and its proxies, and it is now appearing to be "sufficiently emboldened to directly strike Iran's strategic capabilities" (The Soufan Center, 2022). This operational change

hints that Israel does not believe that Iran has been weakened by U.S. sanctions and the multilateral nuclear deal will not contain the country's nuclear and strategic ambitions of dominium over the region (The Soufan Center, 2022). However, both sides so far engaged in low-intensity conflict mainly carried out in the shadows and covered by implausible deniability. As Israel changes its strategy, putting Iran under a considerable amount of pressure to respond accordingly, there is an increased "potential that a misperception or miscalculation on either side, could escalate the conflict and drag the region into outright war" (The Soufan Center, 2022).

The implausible deniability that both sides were relying on in covert action, which avoided further escalation of conflict, is not sufficient in the new framework of the regional dynamic. Iran has been subjected to increased pressure to uphold its promises of vengeance now that Israel has been stepping into a less covert field of action, and was not under the same pressure that it is now, which allowed Iran to continue to play in the shadows. Maintaining hostility in a covert realm was also beneficial to Iran, considering that the country's military capabilities are far inferior to those of its adversaries, namely, Israel, and the failed attempts at retaliation such as the kidnapping plot in Turkey (Bob and Meitav, 2022) are a display of the consequences of this pressure. Moreover, it "cast[s] doubt on Iran's ability to respond proportionately to Israeli operations against Iran" (The Soufan Center, 2022). The fragile regional dynamic of the Middle East that allowed for covert actions to act under the presumption of implausible deniability, since neither side was willing to escalate conflict, is characterised by a tightly intertwined network and Israel's diversion from their usual strategy can cause a domino effect and affect the entire regional system.

Finally, the assassination of Khodayari was intended to be a covert operation characterised by implausible deniability, not only because Iran suspects Israel to be behind most operations aimed at disrupting their national

security, but also because the regional context and the current events involving nuclear negotiations also point to the culpability of Israel. Similarly to other case studies here analysed, investigative journalism has played an important role in the exposure of the operation. Communication technology in the form of traditional and non-traditional media, allowed for the U.S. to leak information regarding the involvement of Israel, further challenging the implausible deniability of the operation and ultimately setting up the circumstances in which Iran feels pressured to react accordingly to the attack. However, stepping away from covert operations proves to be challenging for Iran, who has so far relied, arguably very successfully, on a shadow war, comprised of terrorist proxies and allies, and an overall asymmetrical strategy that is suitable to the considerable inferiority of their military capabilities compared to that of Israel.

FINDINGS

Following the analysis of three case studies concerning the implausible deniability of covert action, several trends were identified that confirm the claim that implausible deniability, instead of plausible deniability, is a more suitable concept when describing covert actions in the Middle East. Plausible deniability is especially difficult to obtain in the modern days in the context of the Middle East, however states are not discouraged to engage in such operations. In fact, implausible deniability, meaning that the sponsor of the covert action does not officially take responsibility, but it is highly implied, can serve to a higher purpose in certain occasions.

There are elements that are common to all three case studies which suggest how plausible deniability can be challenged and pushed to reframing the concept and considering it under the premise of implausible instead. In this sense, technology affected how easily and quickly covert actions can be exposed, and investigative journalism in particular played an important role in all case studies analysed. Additionally, there are factors that emerged which indicate why implausible deniability is adequate in fulfilling its scope of protecting the sponsor from repercussions from the target state and from the wider international community. Terrorism and efforts to continue to engage in a shadow war that favours asymmetrical tactics were aspects that arose in all case studies. Finally, the three case studies highlight how implausible deniability, more than plausible deniability, can be used as an effective strategy in itself to project power and influence over the target country and the wider regional context.

The findings of this original analysis about the impact of technology on the plausible deniability of covert action confirm the original theoretical suggestion that technology raises the difficulty in efficiently maintaining the identity of the sponsor hidden. The three entities that affect exposure and secrecy, intelligence services, reporters and civilians (Joseph and Poznansky,

2017), are highly interconnected thanks to modern ICT. The most interesting aspect that emerged from all three case studies is the relevance of investigative journalism. In Operation Orchard, articles such as Follath and Stark (2009) were released long before Israel officially took responsibility of the action in 2018. Yet, authors collected and provided exhaustive evidence of Israel's involvement, cross-referencing different accounts of the action from different countries. Information and communication technology significantly increased the richness and accessibility of the data available. More importantly, contradicting statements and information were more likely to emerge due to the fact that ICT does not bind news to one specific region and allows for comparisons. This holds true for the case of alleged involvement of Iran in the Houthis attack on Riyadh, where reporters took notice of the conflicting accounts from authorities.

Moreover, the U.S. took advantage of the investigative article in the New York Time (2022) to release the leaked information of Israel's hand behind the assassination of Khodayari, which leads to the conclusion that ICT is a tool that tightly bind intelligence services, journalists, and civilians together. It becomes increasingly difficult to moderate exposure and effectively maintain covert actions below the threshold that separates covert and overt action. The Khodayari case highlights the fragility of this balance as one piece of information is sufficient to push an action from covert to overt. At the same time, investigative journalism is not a new element in the realm of covert action. This research highlights how ICT can expand the pool of available information and facilitate investigations, considerably aiding journalism and, consequently, the exposure to the global public.

The ability for implausible deniability to function and effectively protect the identity of the sponsor in an official manner, thus avoiding negative consequences such as investigations and sanctions, is mostly caused by two unique characteristics of the regional dynamic in the Middle East: the

pervasiveness of terrorism and the prevalence of the shadow war. As for the first characteristic, the Middle East houses a number of extremist terror groups, who hold significant ideological power as well as regional and political influence. Crucially, they became part of the strategic network and have formed alliances with state actors when the interests align. It is the case with the Houthis, who can be considered proxy of Iran when it concerns their interventions at the damage of Saudi Arabia security, and it shows how terrorism has become a player within the Middle Eastern region.

Generally, terrorism changed the tolerance level of covert actions and, therefore, raises the bar on implausible deniability. Operation Orchard highlights how the Western approach against terrorism has dramatically changed how pre-emptive actions are treated, arguably by being more lenient and accepting of implausible deniability, especially when it comes to nuclear proliferation that could be exploited by terrorist actors. In the Houthis operation, with Iran's alleged covert support, we can see that the opposite happened, as an investigation took place but it was quickly dismissed. We can infer that this was done in order to avoid deteriorating relations with Iran in a time where the West and Iran's neighbours in the Middle East relied on the Nuclear Deal to curb the most significant threat represented by Iran, its nuclear ambitions. Iran's involvement with the Houthis was implausible to deny, however it was sufficient, and it allowed Iran to carry on with its agenda while also avoiding direct repercussions, considering that Yemen suffered most of the consequences of the Houthis attack. Terrorist proxy challenges the relation between covert sponsorship and overt operation, making implausible deniability an additional grey element in a situation in which the lines between secrecy and exposure are increasingly blurred. In the last case study, the assassination of Khodayari, the involvement of terrorism is relevant as the IRGC allegedly engages in terror operations and it is in fact classified as a terrorist organisation. Israel's implausible deniability concerning their operation could have been successful before the U.S. leak. The leak had the

unintended consequence to put pressure on Iran to uphold their vengeance promises and thus overstep on Israel implausible deniability claims.

This leads the argument into the next finding that emerged from the case study analysis presented. Namely, the Middle East dynamic, so far, has been characterised by a shadow war, and Iran especially has been invested in continuing to act through covert operations rather than overt. The asymmetrical warfare that covert action represents is especially convenient for Iran, as it has significantly fewer military capabilities compared to Israel or Saudi Arabia, and the shadow war levels, to some extent, the playing field. Implausible deniability provides the pretext (on both sides) to continue to act through covert operations: covert operations are less expensive, less bound by ethics, and unhampered by diplomatic and official ties to other countries and actors. The last case study examined is an outlier, as Iran felt the pressure to respond to Israel's operation in a more overt manner, but at the same time it suggests that Iran has less of an upper hand when operations are overt, considering that the attempted retaliations were not successful, and covert war is more beneficial for Iran.

In other words, both terrorism and shadow war aspects suggest that implausible deniability is successful when both parties, the sponsor state as well as the target state, have interests to protect what could otherwise be compromised by an investigation on the covert action. Namely, in the first case study, Syria and Iran did not overly seek to further expose the involvement of Israel in the al-Kibar attack. This was aimed at protecting the relative secrecy and the official impunity surrounding their nuclear program. Additionally, Saudi Arabia was bound by the unwillingness of its allies to potentially damage the accomplishments, or projected accomplishments, that the JCPOA brought in relation to the nuclear threat posed by Iran. The implausible deniability that Iran claimed for the Houthis attack on Riyadh allowed for a non-intervention stance from all involved parties.

Finally, from the information gathered from all three case studies we can conclude that implausible deniability has a purpose in itself, one that is not as obvious when a covert action is plausibly deniable. These operations have the purpose to send a message or a warning not only to the target country, but also to the whole region and wider international arena. For instance, al-Kibar attack implies that Israel, backed by the U.S., will strongly oppose any nuclear ambitions that could aid Iran and its network comprising terrorist groups. Iran, by backing the Houthis, indicates that it has the power to influence the regional dynamic and negatively affect the much more powerful Saudi Arabia. Israel assassinated Khodayari to discourage the IRGC and Iran to continue their operations in which foreign and Israeli citizens were being kidnapped and killed. Moreover, Israel carried out the operation on Iranian ground, in Tehran, which is symbolically impactful and demonstrates a willingness for Israel to take upon a greater security risk and showcase their operational superiority. In all cases, implausible deniability plays a role in the deliverance of the message: the sponsorship of the operations has to be acknowledged in order to have an effective impact, yet not officially acknowledged as it would trigger escalation of conflict and negative international repercussions and accountability.

Implausible deniability is therefore a middle ground between overt operations and plausibly deniable operations. It holds a higher degree of risk of exposure, as it happened for Israel for Khodayari's operation. However, the characteristics of the Middle East situation and dynamic among states encourage this type of actions that walk on a very thin line in the grey zone. Covert actions and plausible deniability were originally studied in a widely different context, the Cold War between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, meaning that the unique situation that exists in the Middle East also affects how covert actions are carried out, under which premises and with which consequences. Implausible deniability fits the Middle Eastern context where a shadow war is taking place, where there is asymmetrical power distribution,

yet there is a craving for regional dominance, meaning that a degree of exposure and intimidation is required to compete for this power struggle.

CONCLUSION

This research exposes how covert actions in the Middle East has significantly different characteristics compared to covert actions that were previously observed that involved different actors and different settings. The conceptualisation of plausible deniability in the conventional sense was found to be lacking satisfying applicability to the context under analysis, especially after considering how sponsors of covert operations were often acknowledged and sometimes openly accused by adversaries, yet never took responsibility. This aspect has not always undermined the successes of the actions. On the contrary, empirical evidence collected in this study shows how implausible deniability does not defy the scope of covert actions, which is to protect the sponsor by allowing it to circumvent accountability of its actions, while intervening in foreign affairs.

Initially, the theoretical framing and the preliminary theory suggested that modern technology and information and communication technology in particular was the main drive to reframe plausible deniability to implausible deniability. Instead, while technology has an undeniable impact on the achievable secrecy of the sponsor of an operation, the case studies highlighted how it was mostly affecting the efficiency of investigative journalism and quickly reaching almost total public exposure. ICT accelerated the process of covert actions losing their claim to plausible deniability; however states have not been discouraged from using this political tool.

Furthermore, in the analysis reported above, we can identify how in all three studies the sponsor was able to avoid accountability despite the evidence and accusations. Naturally, we mean accountability in the official sense, because retaliation still occurs, albeit in a covert manner. Implausible deniability, in fact, protects the sponsor from overt retaliation and escalation into overt armed conflict, however, it does not protect from covert warfare. In the context of the Middle East, where the struggle over power compromises

the fragile regional balance, continuing to engage in a shadow war is the preferred tactic for countries such as Iran, who find asymmetrical warfare more suitable to their capabilities and objectives. The widespread presence of terrorism and state sponsored terrorism also caused the shift from plausible to implausible deniability and created new implications to covert operations. Implausible deniability is the connection between the intrinsically overt terrorist acts and the attempt to maintain hidden the state sponsors. State-sponsored terrorism also challenged the level of tolerance of the international community towards actions that damage the terrorist threat, meaning that such actions are less likely to be condemned in spite of weak deniability claims. In the case of Operation Orchard, there was little to no repercussions for Israel from a legal or political perspective, because implicitly the operation was deemed necessary and ultimately beneficial to the perpetual war on terror.

Finally, this research puts forward the argument that implausible deniability has an additional purpose compared to plausible deniability. The misleading assumption of plausible deniability is that ill-concealed sponsorship is detrimental to the objectives of the covert operation, thus, the factors that lead to the acknowledgment of the sponsor should discourage engaging in the operation all together. This research, however, supports the argument that sponsor sometimes actively seek to be acknowledged, in order to send a message, exert influence and display power through implausibly deniable covert operations. Israel has reinforced their stance against Iranian nuclear proliferation by engaging in assassinations and attacks on nuclear personnel and facilities and Iran has asserted their power by displaying the accomplishments of its terrorist proxy network.

This study contributes to the literature on covert action and its implausible claim on deniability, expanding the understanding of regional-centered research on this topic. The relation between covert action and (im)plausible deniability inevitably changes according to the context in which

it takes place. This explains why covert action studies concerning the Cold War era do not efficiently explain how Iran or Israel largely disregarded that their covert actions were often attributable to them and continued to resort to this tactic. Moreover, global elements such as ICT and regional elements such as terrorism and the power dynamic greatly influenced the strategies and outcomes of covert operation, which is what this study focused on.

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