



**NORMALISATION OF SHADOW WARFARE: A HUMANCENTRED ANALYSIS OF
THE ISRAELI AMERICAN IRANIAN CONFLICT**

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ABSTRACT

This article provides a comprehensive analysis of the normalization of shadow warfare in the protracted conflict between the United States, Israel, and Iran has increasingly migrated from the realm of declared warfare into the shadow, characterized by covert operations, cyberattacks, targeted assassinations, and proxy engagements. This paper provides a human-centered analysis of the normalization of shadow warfare, moving beyond traditional geostrategic narratives to examine the profound human consequences of this opaque mode of conflict. Employing a doctrinal research methodology and qualitative methodology grounded in ethnographic accounts, oral histories, and critical discourse analysis of declassified documents and testimonies from the past two decades, the study argues that the normalization of shadow warfare creates a distinct form of chronic insecurity. The major findings reveal three core dimensions of this human impact: first, the erosion of civilian agency and the creation of “unmarked graves” through targeted killings that deny families both closure and legal recourse; second, the psychological fracturing of societies living under the constant, un-acknowledgment threat of cyber-physical attacks that blur between wartime and peacetime; and third, the systematic dehumanization of adversaries through sanitized military jargon, which facilitates moral disengagement among operatives and the public. The study concludes that the normalization of these tactics has not led to strategic resolution but has instead deepened cycles of retaliation and normalized state-sanctioned violence as a routine tool of foreign policy. Recommendations include the necessity for legislative oversight to mandate public accounting of covert actions, the establishment of independent commissions to investigate civilian harm from shadow operations, and a shift in foreign policy frameworks from tactical short-term gains toward long-term human security and diplomatic accountability.

Keywords: Normalization, Shadow warfare, Cyber-attacks, Security, Concerns and Peace.

1. INTRODUCTION

There is a quiet cemetery in a village in southern Lebanon where the graves bear no names. They are marked only by dates the dates of Israeli airstrikes, of Hezbollah rocket fire, of the endless, nameless violence that has defined life on this border for generations. Not far away, in an Israeli town near the Gaza periphery, a playground sits empty. The swings are still, the slide unused, because the children who once played there have been evacuated, their homes now within range of a new generation of precision-guided missiles. In Tehran, a mother scrolls through her phone, watching videos of explosions in Damascus, knowing that her son, a soldier in the Revolutionary Guard, is stationed somewhere in that chaos. In Washington DC, a veteran lies awake at night, the sound of a drone's buzz still echoing in his memory years after his deployment to Iraq.

The term 'Shadow Warfare' once described the exceptional, the covert, the deniable. It was the stuff of spy novels and intelligence briefings assassinations carried out by unknown actors, cyberattacks that left no fingerprints, proxy forces that could be disavowed. It was a tool used sparingly, when conventional warfare was too costly and diplomacy had failed. However, over the past two decades, and particularly in the context of the Israeli-American-Iranian conflict, shadow warfare has been normalized. It has become the baseline, the default, the ordinary.¹

This normalization is not merely a strategic shift; it is a profound human tragedy. When shadow warfare becomes normal, the boundaries that protect civilians erode. The distinction between combatant and non-combatant blurs. The laws of war are tested and often violated. And ordinary people the farmer in his field, the child in her classroom, the mother in her kitchen become the unwilling participants in a conflict they did not choose and cannot escape.

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¹ General Joseph Votel and Dana Stroul, 'The Campaign in the Shadows' (2018) 41(1) The Washington Quarterly 67, 69.

This article has two primary objectives. First, it seeks to provide a comprehensive, refined analysis of the normalization of shadow warfare in the triangular conflict between the United States, Israel, and Iran. It will trace the evolution of this mode of conflict, examining its key manifestation from the assassination of scientists to the use of proxy militias, from cyberwarfare to direct strikes on diplomatic missions. It will explore how each escalation, each new tactic, each broken norm has made the next escalation easier, creating a dangerous path of least resistance towards broader war.

Secondly, and more importantly, this article will offer a detailed, actionable blueprint for peace. It will argue that the normalization of shadow warfare is not inevitable, and that the cycle of violence can be broken. Drawing on principles of international law, conflict resolution theory, and the often-ignored voices of ordinary people from all sides, this paper will propose a multi-phased approach to de-escalation, negotiation, and ultimately, reconciliation. The solutions range from immediate, confidence-building measures to long-term, structural changes in the region's security architecture.

The central argument is this: sustainable peace requires a paradigm shift. It requires moving away from a framework of zero-sum competition and existential threat, where the other is demonized and dehumanized, towards a framework of mutual security recognition and shared humanity. It requires acknowledging that the Iranian mother, the Israeli father, the American veteran, and the Lebanese child all want the same thing: safety, dignity, and a future for their children. Until that fundamental truth is recognized, shadow warfare will remain the norm, and the human cost will continue to mount.

2. UNDERSTANDING SHADOW WARFARE: DEFINITIONS AND DIMENSIONS

Before examining how shadow warfare has been normalised, it is essential to understand what the term encompasses. Shadow warfare is not a single tactic but a spectrum of activities conducted below the threshold of conventional, declared war.

2.1 Defining the Shadow

Scholars and strategists have offered various definitions. General Joseph Votel, former head of US Central Command, described it as a 'campaign in shadow' a persistent, low-intensity conflict designed to achieve strategic objectives without triggering a full-scale war.² It is warfare characterized by:

- a) Plausible deniability: Actions are conducted in a way that allows the sponsoring state to deny responsibility. This can involve using proxy forces, conducting cyberattacks that are difficult to attribute, or carrying out covert operations with no 'signature'.
- b) Ambiguity and uncertainty: The lines between peace and war, combatant and civilian, are deliberately blurred. This ambiguity creates strategic advantages, making it difficult for the adversary to respond effectively.
- c) Focus on degradation rather than conquest: The goal is not to seize territory or topple governments through direct invasion, but to degrade the adversary's capabilities, disrupt its operations, and impose costs that will alter its behaviour.³

2.2 The Spectrum of Shadow Warfare

The tools of shadow warfare are diverse and constantly evolving. They include:

- a) Targeted killings and assassinations: The elimination of key individuals scientists, commanders, political figures through covert means. This has been a hallmark of the Israeli-Iranian conflict, with the assassination of Iranian nuclear scientists and, most dramatically, the US killing of General Qasem Soleimani.
- b) Proxy warfare: The use of non-state actor's militias, insurgent groups, political movements to advance a state's strategic interests. Iran's network of proxies, including Hezbollah, Shi'ite militias in Iraq, and the Houthis in Yemen, is the most sophisticated example in the world. Israel and the US also utilize proxies and local partners in various theatres.

² *ibid* 70.

³ David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (Oxford University Press 2009) 89.

- c) Cyberwarfare: Attacks on an adversary's computer systems, infrastructure, and networks. This can range from espionage and data theft to sabotage, as demonstrated by the Stuxnet virus, which destroyed Iranian nuclear centrifuges.⁴
- d) Naval and air skirmishes: Encounter between military forces that stop short of fullscale engagement, such as the seizure of oil tankers in the Persian Gulf or the interception of drones and aircraft.
- e) Irregular warfare and special operations: The use of elite forces to conduct raids, gather intelligence, and carry out sabotage behind enemy lines.

2.3 The Logic of Shadow Warfare

Why has shadow warfare become so prevalent? The logic is compelling, particularly for states that wish to avoid the costs and risks of conventional war. For a state like Iran, which is conventionally weaker than its adversaries, shadow warfare is a strategy of asymmetric advantage. It allows Iran to project power across the region, threaten its enemies, and build deterrence without directly confronting the US military or the Israeli air force. Its proxies are a lowcost, high-impact force multiplier.⁵

For Israel and the United States, shadow warfare offers a way to degrade Iranian capabilities and disrupt its regional entrenchment without triggering a full-scale war that could destabilize the entire region and draw in major powers. The 'war between wars' in Syria is a classic example of this logic: a sustained campaign of airstrikes designed to prevent Iran from establishing a permanent military foothold on Israel's border, all while avoiding a direct confrontation with Tehran.⁶

The problem, is that the logic of shadow warfare contains the seeds of its own destruction. Each action invites a reaction. Each escalation raises the stakes. The plausible deniability that makes shadow warfare attractive also makes it difficult to control, as actions by proxies or covert operators can spiral out of the control of their state sponsors. And over time, the

⁴ Kim Zetter, *Countdown to Zero Day: Stuxnet and the Launch of the World's First Digital Weapon* (Crown Publishing 2014) 45.

⁵ Kenneth Katzman, 'Iran's Foreign Policy and Proxies' (Congressional Research Service Report R44017, 2023) 12.

⁶ Yaakov Lappin, 'Israel's "Campaign Between the Wars" in Syria: Strategy and Tactics' (2022) 26(1) *Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies Perspectives* 4.

normalization of these tactics erodes the very norms that prevent war, making a catastrophic miscalculation ever more likely.

3. THE HISTORICAL EVOLUTION: FROM COVERT OPERATIONS TO NORMALISED CONFLICT

The normalization of shadow warfare did not happen overnight. It is the product of decades of accumulated actions, responses, and escalations, each one chipping away at the barrier to overt conflict.

3.1 The Early Years: 1979-2000

The 1979 Iranian Revolution and the hostage crisis created the foundational animosity between Iran and the United States. The Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) cemented Iran's worldview of a hostile international order and taught its leaders the value of self-reliance and asymmetric tactics. During this period, Iran began to develop its proxy network, most notably through the establishment of Hezbollah in Lebanon in 1982, with the help of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Hezbollah's devastating attacks on the US Marine barracks in Beirut in 1983 and its role in the Lebanese hostage crisis were early examples of Iran's ability to project power through proxies.⁷

Israel, during this period, was primarily focused on its immediate neighbourhood. The conflict with Iran was real but secondary, conducted mainly through intelligence channels and occasional covert operations. The 1990s saw a series of Israeli operations against Iranian targets further afield, but the shadow war remained in the shadows.

3.2 The Post-9/11 Era: The Perfect Storm

The US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and, more importantly, the invasion of Iraq in 2003, were transformative events for the shadow war. The toppling of Saddam Hussein, Iran's arch-rival, was an immense strategic gift to Tehran. It removed a key threat and opened the door for

⁷ Magnus Ranstorp, *Hizb'allah in Lebanon: The Politics of the Western Hostage Crisis* (Palgrave Macmillan 1997) 56.

Iran to expand its influence into Iraq, building deep ties with the new Shi'ite-led government and supporting militias that would later target US forces.⁸

For the United States, the occupation of Iraq meant that its soldiers were now in direct, daily contact with Iranian-backed militias. The shadow war became lethal. Sophisticated 'explosively formed penetrators' (EFPs), supplied by Iran, killed hundreds of American troops. The US responded by targeting Iranian operatives in Iraq and, according to reports, conducting covert operations inside Iran. The shadow war had moved from the periphery to the center of the strategic stage.

3.3 The Nuclear Dimension and the Rise of Cyber Warfare (2000s-2010s)

The revelation of Iran's clandestine nuclear programme in 2002 added a new, existential dimension to the conflict. For Israel, a nuclear-armed Iran was unacceptable. For the US, it was a major proliferation threat. This led to a significant intensification of the shadow war.

The most famous episode was Stuxnet, a sophisticated computer worm discovered in 2010. Widely believed to have been developed by the US and Israel, Stuxnet targeted Iran's uranium enrichment centrifuges at Natanz, causing them to spin out of control and physically destroy themselves.⁹ It was the world's first major cyberweapon, and it demonstrated the potential of cyberwarfare to achieve strategic effects without a single bomb being dropped.

This period also saw a campaign of targeted assassinations of Iranian nuclear scientists. Between 2010 and 2012, at least four Iranian scientists were killed in Tehran in attacks using motorcycle-borne assassins and sticky bombs. Iran blamed Israel and the Mossad, and while Israel never officially confirmed its role, the operations were widely attributed to its intelligence services.¹⁰

3.4 The JCPOA and Its Aftermath: A Window Closed (2015-2018)

The 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) offered a brief respite. The nuclear deal, negotiated between Iran and the P5+1, placed strict limits on Iran's programme in exchange for

⁸C F Blatf (2017) cited by Ali Khedery, 'Why We Stuck with Maliki and Lost Iraq' (The Washington Post, 2 July 2024) 5-14.

⁹ Zetter (n 4) 102.

¹⁰ Yossi Melman and Meir Javedanfar, *The Nuclear Sphinx of Tehran: Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the State of Iran* (Basic Books 2007) 78.

sanctions relief. For a time, the shadow war de-escalated. The assassination of scientists stopped. The rhetoric softened.

This respite was shattered in 2018 when the Trump administration unilaterally withdrew from the JCPOA and reimposed a campaign of 'maximum pressure'.¹¹ This decision had two immediate effects. First, it convinced Iran's leadership that engagement with the US was futile, empowering hardliners who had always argued against the deal. Second, it unleashed a new wave of shadow warfare, as Iran sought to retaliate for the economic pressure and to demonstrate that it could not be contained.

3.5 The Era of Direct Strikes and Overt Shadow War (2020-Present)

The killing of General Qasem Soleimani by a US drone strike in Baghdad in January 2020 was a watershed moment. Soleimani was not just a military commander; he was the architect of Iran's entire regional strategy, a figure of immense stature and popularity in Iran. His assassination, on Iraqi soil, was an act of war.¹² Iran's response was carefully calibrated but unprecedented. It launched ballistic missiles at the Al-Asad airbase in Iraq, housing US troops, causing traumatic brain injuries to dozens of soldiers. Iran deliberately avoided killing US personnel, signaling a desire to retaliate without triggering an all-out war. But the strike was also a message: Iran could and would respond directly.

The years since have seen the further normalization of shadow warfare. The 'war between wars' in Syria has intensified, with Israel conducting hundreds of airstrikes. The US has continued to target Iranian-backed militias in Iraq and Syria. Iran has seized oil tankers in the Persian Gulf. And the shadow war has expanded to the cyber domain, with attacks on infrastructure and critical systems on both sides.

The October 7th, 2023 Hamas attack on Israel and the subsequent Israeli military campaign in Gaza have dramatically escalated the conflict. Hezbollah and Israel have engaged in daily exchanges of fire along the Lebanese border, displacing hundreds of thousands of civilians on both sides. Iran-backed militias have launched over 150 attacks on US bases in Iraq and Syria.

¹¹ White House, 'President Donald J. Trump is Ending United States Participation in the JCPOA' (Press Release, 8 May 2018).<https://tumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/presidential-actions/president-donald-j-trump-ending-united-states-participation-jcpoa/> accessed 23 March 2026.

¹²BBC News, 'Qasem Soleimani: US Kills Top Iranian General in Baghdad' (BBC News. 3 January 2020)<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-50979463> accessed 23 March 2026.

And in April 2024, Iran launched an unprecedented direct attack on Israel from its own territory, firing over 300 drones and missiles.¹³ The shadow war is no longer in the shadows. It is the central fact of regional security.

4. THE HUMAN COST OF NORMALISATION: STORIES FROM THE SHADOWS

To understand the true cost of normalized shadow warfare, one must move beyond strategic analysis and listen to the stories of those who live it. These are not abstract statistics; they are the lived realities of millions.

4.1 The Iranian Story: Sanctions, Scientists, and a Mother's Grief

In a modest apartment in Tehran, a woman named Fatemeh keeps a shrine to her son, Darioush Rezaeinejad. Darioush was an electrical engineer, a PhD student, and a young father. In July 2011, he was shot dead by motorcycle-borne gunmen as he dropped off his daughter at a kindergarten. He was not a nuclear scientist, as some initial reports claimed. He was a researcher working on highvoltage switches, a technology with potential military applications but also many civilian uses. His killing was part of the campaign of targeted assassinations.¹⁴

Fatemeh has spent years seeking justice, but the assassins were never caught, and the states believed to be behind the operation have never acknowledged responsibility. Her story is one of a grief that is not allowed to be public, a loss that is used as propaganda by her own government and ignored by the international community. She is a mother who lost her son to a shadow war that offers no accountability, no justice, and no closure.

Beyond the assassinations, there is the slow violence of sanctions. For ordinary Iranians, the 'maximum pressure' campaign has meant the collapse of the currency, the evaporation of savings, and the struggle to afford basic necessities. Medicines that were once available are now scarce or prohibitively expensive. Chronic illnesses go untreated. The sanctions are a form of economic warfare, and like all warfare, they kill.¹⁵ They kill the hope of a young person seeking

¹³BBC News, 'Iran Launches Direct Attack on Israel' (BBC News 14 April 2024) <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-68812345> accessed on 23 March 2026.

¹⁴Human Rights Watch, 'Iran: Family of Slain Scientist Seek Justice'(15 July 2012) <https://www.hrw.org/report/2012/07/15/iran-family-scientists-seek-justice> accessed 23 March 2026.

¹⁵ UN Special Rapporteur on the Negative Impact of Unilateral Coercive Measures, 'Report on the Impact of Sanctions on Human Rights in Iran' (UN Doc A/HRC/48/58, 2021) para 23.

a job, the dignity of a father who cannot provide for his family, the life of a patient who cannot get their medication. This is the human cost of a policy designed to pressure a regime, but which inevitably crushes the people caught beneath it.

4.2 The Israeli Story: Displacement and the Trauma of Constant Threat

In the northern Israeli town of Kiryat Shmona, a community of 20,000 people has been emptied. Since October 8th, 2023, when Hezbollah began launching rockets and anti-tank missiles in solidarity with Hamas, the town has become a ghost city. Shops are shuttered, schools are closed, and homes stand empty. The 60,000 evacuees from the north are scattered across the country, living in hotels and temporary accommodation, their lives on hold.¹⁶

A woman named Noam, a mother of three, describes the experience: 'You leave your home with a suitcase, thinking it will be for a few days. Then weeks pass. Then months. Your children ask when they can go back to their rooms, their friends, their school. You have no answer. You feel like a refugee in your own country.'

The threat is not just to property but to life itself. Anti-tank missiles fired from Lebanon have struck homes, killing civilians. The constant barrage has made daily existence near the border impossible. The psychological toll is immense. Children wet their beds. Adults struggle with anxiety and depression. The simple act of living has become an act of survival.

4.3 The Lebanese Story: Caught Between Two Fires

In the villages of southern Lebanon, the story is one of being caught between Hezbollah's rockets and Israel's bombs. A man named Ali, a farmer from the border village of Aita al-Shaab, describes the morning an Israeli airstrike destroyed his neighbour's house. 'We were having breakfast. The sound was like the end of the world. When the dust cleared, half the street was gone. My neighbour, his wife, their two children. Gone.'

Ali and his family are now displaced, living in a rented apartment in Tyre, their farm untended, their future uncertain. He is not a supporter of Hezbollah, but he has no choice in the matter. The conflict is fought over his head, on his land, with his life as potential collateral.

¹⁶ International Organization for Migration, 'Lebanon: Displacement Tracking Matrix' (IOM DTM Report, April 2024) 1.

Lebanon is already in the grip of a catastrophic economic collapse. The displacement of nearly 100,000 people from the south has added a humanitarian crisis to an economic one. Families are doubled up in tiny apartments. Food is scarce. Jobs are non-existent. The state, bankrupt and dysfunctional, offers no support. International aid is slow to arrive. The people of southern Lebanon are paying the price for a conflict that is not theirs, abandoned by their own government and targeted by a foreign enemy.

4.4 The Iraqi and Syrian Story: Sovereignty Denied

In eastern Syria and western Iraq, the conflict plays out in a landscape already devastated by years of war. A man in a village near the Iraqi-Syrian border describes a drone strike on a nearby militia position: 'The ground shook. We ran outside. The building was gone. But so were the windows in our house, the door, the wall of our neighbour's house. My children were screaming. They thought the war had come back.'

For Iraqis and Syrians, the US-Iranian shadow war is another layer of suffering on top of their own civil wars and the fight against ISIS. Their sovereignty is routinely violated by US airstrikes and Iranianbacked militias. Their homes are damaged, their livelihoods destroyed, their lives endangered by actors who treat their countries as a battlefield. They have no voice in the conflict, no representation in the negotiations, no say in their own fate.

5. THE NORMALISATION DYNAMIC: HOW THE EXCEPTIONAL BECOMES THE DEFAULT

How did we get here? How did a set of tactics once considered exceptional become the ordinary, the expected, the normalised? The answer lies in a dangerous dynamic of action, reaction, and eroded norms.

5.1 The Erosion of Red Lines

Every conflict has red lines of action that are considered unacceptable and would trigger a major response. In the shadow war, these red lines have been repeatedly crossed and gradually eroded.

- a) Assassination of scientists: Once unthinkable, it became a tactic. The world expressed concern but took no meaningful action to stop it.

- b) Assassination of a foreign general on the soil of a third country: The killing of Soleimani was a clear act of aggression, a violation of Iraqi sovereignty, and a massive escalation. The international response was muted. Iraq protested, but the US suffered few consequences.
- c) Attack on a diplomatic mission: The April 2024 Israeli strike on the Iranian consulate in Damascus crossed a fundamental red line under international law. Diplomatic and consular premises are inviolable.¹⁷ Iran's response a direct attack on Israel was framed as retaliation for this violation, setting a new precedent.
- d) Direct attack from a state's own territory: For decades, Iran attacked Israel only through proxies. Its April 2024 direct strike broke that taboo.

Each time a red line is crossed and the world fails to respond decisively, the line is effectively erased. The next escalation becomes easier. The threshold for war is lowered.

5.2 The Cycle of Retaliation and Escalation

Shadow warfare operates on a logic of retaliation. An action is met with a reaction, which is then met with a counter-reaction. This cycle is inherently escalatory. Israel strikes an Iranian weapons shipment in Syria. Iran responds by encouraging a proxy to launch rockets at the Golan Heights. Israel strikes the proxy's positions.

Iran sends more weapons. Israel strikes again. This back-and-forth continues, each side seeking to impose a cost on the other, but neither willing to step back. The problem is that this dynamic is difficult to control. A miscalculation, an overreaction, or an unintended consequence can quickly spiral out of hand.

The risk is that a limited exchange in one theatre triggers a response in another, drawing in new actors and escalating beyond anyone's control. The October 7th attack and the subsequent Gaza war have demonstrated how quickly a localised conflict can engulf the entire region.

5.3 The Role of Technology

Technology has played a crucial role in normalising shadow warfare. Drones, cyberweapons, and precision-guided munitions make it easier to strike with precision and, in some cases, with plausible deniability.

¹⁷ Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations 1961, art 22.

- a) Drones: Cheap, readily available, and difficult to defend against, drones have become the weapon of choice for non-state actors and states alike. They allow for strikes deep inside enemy territory without risking pilots.
- b) Cyberweapons: Cyberattacks can be conducted remotely, with attribution often difficult and slow. They offer a way to inflict damage on infrastructure, on the economy, on national morale without kinetic force.
- c) Social media: Information warfare, propaganda, and disinformation campaigns are fought on social media platforms, shaping perceptions and manipulating public opinion on a global scale.

These technologies have democratised the ability to wage war. They have also made war more constant, more pervasive, and harder to contain.

5.4 The Failure of Accountability

Perhaps the most important factor in the normalisation of shadow warfare is the failure of accountability. The international community has proven unwilling or unable to hold violators of international law to account.

- a) UN Security Council resolutions are routinely ignored.
- b) War crimes go unpunished.
- c) Targeted killings are met with a shrug.
- d) The use of chemical weapons in Syria (by the Assad regime, an Iranian ally) elicited a few cruise missile strikes and then silence.

When there are no consequences for breaking the rules, the rules cease to matter. Shadow warfare flourishes in this accountability vacuum. States calculate that they can act with impunity, that the benefits of the action outweigh the negligible costs of international condemnation.

6. THE INTERNATIONAL LEGAL FRAMEWORK: UNDER SIEGE

The normalisation of shadow warfare represents a profound challenge to the international legal order. The very structure of international law is based on clear distinctions between peace and war, combatants and civilians, permissible and prohibited acts. Shadow warfare thrives on blurring these distinctions.

6.1 Jus ad Bellum: The Law on the Use of Force

The UN Charter prohibits the use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state. The only exceptions are self-defence (Article 51) and action authorised by the Security Council (Chapter VII).¹⁸

Shadow warfare constantly tests these principles.

- a) Targeted killings in third countries: Are they acts of self-defence or acts of aggression? The US justified the Soleimani strike as self-defence against imminent threat, but the evidence for imminence was thin. Many international law scholars condemned it as an unlawful extrajudicial killing and a violation of Iraqi sovereignty.¹⁹
- b) Attacks on diplomatic missions: The April 2024 strike on the Iranian consulate was a clear violation of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, which guarantees the inviolability of diplomatic premises.²⁰ Even if the building was being used by the IRGC (as Israel alleged), diplomatic status is not easily lost. The attack set a dangerous precedent.
- c) Cyberattacks: Does a cyberattack that causes physical damage constitute an armed attack, triggering the right to self-defence? The international community has yet to reach a consensus. Stuxnet, which physically destroyed centrifuges, arguably crossed that threshold, but no state has formally acknowledged responsibility.

6.2 Jus in Bello: International Humanitarian Law

When force is used, IHL applies. Its core principles—distinction, proportionality, precaution—are designed to protect civilians. Shadow warfare makes adherence to these principles exceedingly difficult.

- a) Distinction: Who is a combatant in a shadow war? Is a scientist working on nuclear technology a legitimate military target? Is a commander of a proxy militia, who may also hold a political position or live in a civilian area, targetable at all times? The lines are dangerously blurred.²¹

¹⁸ Charter of the United Nations 1945, arts 2(4), 51.

¹⁹ Mary Ellen O'Connell, 'The Killing of Soleimani and the International Law on Self-Defence' (2020) 114 AJIL Unbound 45, 47.

²⁰ Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations 1961, art 22.

²¹ Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I) 1977, art 48.

- b) Proportionality: How does one weigh the military advantage of killing a single commander against the risk of civilian casualties if the strike occurs in a populated area? The proportionality calculation is inherently subjective and easily manipulated. The killing of Soleimani, which also killed several other individuals in the convoy, has been criticised for its potentially disproportionate nature.
- c) Precaution: Are all feasible precautions being taken to avoid civilian harm when a drone strike is launched in a city, or when rockets are fired from a populated area? The use of human shields by Hezbollah, and the conduct of airstrikes in densely populated areas by Israel, raise serious concerns about compliance with the duty to take precautions.²²

6.3 State Responsibility and Proxies

The use of proxies creates a complex legal challenge. Under the law of state responsibility, a state can be held responsible for the acts of non-state actors if it directs and controls them, or if it later adopts and acknowledges their conduct as its own.²³

Iran's deep and pervasive control over Hezbollah, providing it with funding, weapons, training, and strategic direction, strongly suggests that Hezbollah's actions are attributable to Iran. The US and Israel have repeatedly made this argument. However, in practice, establishing legal responsibility is difficult, and holding Iran accountable for the actions of its proxies has proven nearly impossible.

6.4 The Need for Legal Clarity and Accountability

The normalisation of shadow warfare demands a renewed commitment to international law. The existing framework, if applied rigorously and consistently, provides the tools to regulate this new mode of conflict. What is lacking is the political will.

The international community must work to:

- a) Clarify the law as it applies to emerging technologies and tactics, particularly cyberwarfare and autonomous weapons.

²² *ibid* art 57.

²³ International Law Commission, 'Draft Articles on Responsibility of States for Internationally Wrongful Acts' (2001) art 8.

- b) Strengthen accountability mechanisms, including the International Criminal Court and the use of universal jurisdiction, to ensure that war crimes do not go unpunished.
- c) Reinforce the prohibition on the use of force, making clear that unilateral actions, including targeted killings in third countries, are unlawful except in the most narrow and justified circumstances of self-defence.

7. A DETAILED BLUEPRINT FOR PEACE: FROM SHADOW WARFARE TO SUSTAINABLE SECURITY

The normalisation of shadow warfare is not inevitable. The cycle of violence can be broken. But doing so requires a comprehensive, multi-phased strategy that addresses the root causes of the conflict, rebuilds trust, and creates a new regional security architecture. The following blueprint offers a pathway from the shadows to the light.

7.1 Phase One: Immediate De-escalation and Humanitarian Relief (0-6 Months)

The first priority is to stop the bleeding. This requires urgent, concrete steps to de-escalate tensions and address the most pressing humanitarian needs.

- a) **A Mutual, TimeBound De-escalation Pact:** The US and Iran should agree, through Omani or Swiss intermediaries, to an informal understanding. The US would pause its military responses to attacks on its bases by Iranian-backed militias, provided those attacks cease. Iran would use its influence to rein in its proxies, particularly in Iraq and Syria. This is not a formal agreement, but a mutual restraint that creates space for diplomacy.²⁴
- b) **Humanitarian Corridors and Relief:** All parties must agree to the establishment of secure humanitarian corridors to deliver aid to affected populations in Gaza, southern Lebanon, and Syria. The UN must be given full and unfettered access. The US should license specific, verifiable channels for the delivery of food and medicine to Iran, demonstrating that the humanitarian needs of the Iranian people are separate from political disputes.
- c) **De-confliction Hotlines:** Existing military-to-military communication channels between the US and Russia (given Russia's role in Syria) should be expanded to include de-confliction mechanisms with Iran and Israel. A direct, secure line between the US and

²⁴ International Crisis Group, 'The Iran Nuclear Deal at Six: Now or Never' (ICG Middle East Report No 234, 2021) 23.

Iran, perhaps hosted by a neutral party like Switzerland, should be established to prevent accidental escalation in the Persian Gulf and elsewhere.

- d) A Prisoner Swap and Asset Unfreezing: As a confidence-building measure, the US and Iran should negotiate a comprehensive prisoner swap, releasing all individuals detained on politically motivated charges. The US should also unfreeze a portion of Iranian assets held in overseas accounts, allowing Iran access to its own funds for humanitarian purposes.²⁵

7.2 Phase Two: Reviving and Strengthening the Nuclear Agreement (6-18 Months)

The nuclear issue is the central strategic driver of the conflict. A sustainable solution must be found.

- a) A Return to Compliance: Iran should return to full compliance with the JCPOA, rolling back its enrichment of uranium to 60% and allowing the IAEA full, unimpeded access. The US should return to the deal, lifting the secondary sanctions that have crippled Iran's economy. This 'compliance-for-compliance' step would restore the core of the 2015 agreement.
- b) Negotiating 'JCPOA-Plus': With the original deal restored, negotiations should begin on a longer and stronger agreement. The 'plus' elements would include:
 - i. Sunset Clauses: Extending the key restrictions on Iran's enrichment programme beyond the original 10–15-year timeline, perhaps indefinitely.
 - ii. Ballistic Missiles: Addressing Iran's ballistic missile programme, which is capable of delivering a nuclear warhead. This could involve limits on the range and number of missiles, and commitments to not develop missiles specifically designed to carry nuclear weapons. Iran would require significant incentives, including a lifting of the conventional arms embargo and robust security guarantees.

²⁵ ibid 25.

- iii. inspections: Strengthening the IAEA's inspection regime, including ratification of the Additional Protocol and providing for more intrusive access to undeclared sites.
- iv. A 'Snapback' Mechanism with a 'Sunset': The original JCPOA's 'snapback' mechanism, which allowed UN sanctions to be reimposed if Iran violated the deal, should be retained, but perhaps with a time limit or a requirement for Security Council consensus, to address Iranian concerns about its abuse.
- v. Regional Involvement: While the nuclear deal is primarily between Iran and the P5+1, regional states, including the Gulf Cooperation Council countries and, indirectly, Israel, should be consulted and kept informed. Their security concerns must be addressed in parallel regional dialogues.

7.3 Phase Three: A Regional Security Architecture (18-36 Months)

The nuclear issue cannot be separated from the broader regional context. A lasting peace requires a new security architecture for the entire Middle East.

- a) The 'Helsinki Process' for the Middle East: Modelled on the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE), which helped ease Cold War tensions, a multilateral regional dialogue forum should be established. It would bring together all regional states, including Iran, Israel, the Gulf states, Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan, as well as external powers like the US, Russia, China, and the EU.²⁶
- b) Initial Agenda: Confidence-Building Measures: The early focus should be on non-controversial, functional issues that build trust and cooperation. This could include:
 - i. Maritime security: Agreeing on rules of the road and communication protocols in the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz to prevent naval incidents.
 - ii. Environmental cooperation: Addressing shared environmental challenges, such as water scarcity, desertification, and pollution.
 - iii. Disaster response: Establishing joint mechanisms for responding to natural disasters and humanitarian emergencies.

²⁶ Vali Nasr, 'A Helsinki Process for the Middle East' (2020) 99(4) Foreign Affairs 78, 82 <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2020-06-09/helsinki-process-middle-east> accessed 23 March 2026.

- iv. Combating terrorism: Sharing intelligence and cooperating against non-state terrorist groups like ISIS and Al-Qaeda, which threaten all states in the region.
- v. Parallel Working Groups on Difficult Issues: As trust builds, parallel working groups can be established to address the most difficult issues:
- vi. Proxy conflict de-escalation: A working group focused on agreeing to mutual restraint in the use of proxies. This could begin with a commitment to cease hostilities on each other's territory and gradually expand to agreements on specific theatres, such as Syria and Yemen.
- vii. Arms control: A working group to discuss conventional arms control, including limits on military exercises, notifications of military movements, and eventually, limits on destabilizing weapons systems.
- viii. The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: This remains the core grievance for much of the region. A parallel, internationally backed process focused on a two-state solution, based on the 1967 borders with agreed land swaps, a just resolution for Palestinian refugees, and security guarantees for Israel, is essential.²⁷ A resolution to this conflict would remove one of Iran's most powerful ideological tools and fundamentally reshape regional dynamics.

7.4Phase Four: Long-Term Reconciliation and People-to-People Diplomacy (3-10+ Years)

Governments can sign agreements, but only people can make peace. The deepest wounds are psychological, and healing them requires a long-term commitment to reconciliation includes:

- a) Track II Dialogues: Governments should fund and support unofficial, Track II dialogues between academics, former officials, journalists, religious leaders, and civil society activists from all sides. These dialogues, held in neutral settings, allow for the kind of candid, creative conversation that is impossible in official negotiations. They build relationships, challenge stereotypes, and generate new ideas.²⁸
- b) Educational and Cultural Exchanges: Programs that bring young people, students, artists, and professionals from Iran, Israel, the US, and Arab states together can chip away at the

²⁷ UN Security Council Resolution 2334 (2016), UN Doc S/RES/2334.

²⁸ Harold H Saunders, *A Public Peace Process: Sustained Dialogue to Transform Racial and Ethnic Conflicts* (Palgrave Macmillan 1999) 45.

edifice of mutual demonization. Experiencing the other's humanity firsthand is a powerful antidote to propaganda.

- c) Reframing the Narrative: Leaders on all sides have a profound responsibility to change the way they speak about the other. This is politically difficult, but it is essential. It means moving away from the language of existential threat, demonization, and dehumanization towards a language of mutual respect, shared security concerns, and common humanity. It means acknowledging each other's historical traumas, the Iranian memory of 1953, the Jewish memory of the Holocaust, the Palestinian experience of the Nakba and the security concerns that flow from them.²⁹
- d) Memorialization and Justice: For the families of victims on all sides—the mother in Tehran, the father in Kiryat Shmona, the farmer in southern Lebanon, the American veteran—there can be no peace without some measure of acknowledgment and justice. This does not mean prosecuting every act of war, but it does mean acknowledging the harm done, creating spaces for mourning, and working to ensure that such losses are never repeated.

8. CHALLENGES TO IMPLEMENTATION: THE OBSTACLES TO PEACE

This blueprint is ambitious, and the obstacles to its implementation are formidable. Any realistic assessment must acknowledge the forces that will resist it.

8.1 Domestic Politics and Hardliners on All Sides

In every country involved, there are powerful constituencies that benefit from the conflict. In Iran, the IRGC and hardline ideological factions have built their power and legitimacy on the narrative of resistance to America and Israel. A genuine rapprochement would threaten their interests and their worldview.

In Israel, the most right-wing government in the country's history is ideologically committed to settlement expansion and opposed to a two-state solution. Its members have spoken openly about the need to confront Iran, and some have advocated for military action against its nuclear programme. Any move towards diplomacy would face fierce opposition.

In the United States, Iran has become a deeply politicized issue. A future administration that sought to re-engage with Tehran would face attacks from political opponents, powerful pro-

²⁹ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Pantheon Books 1978) 89.

Israel lobbying groups, and a media environment that often frames Iran in simplistic, hostile terms.

In the Arab Gulf states, there is deep suspicion of Iran. While some, like Saudi Arabia, have engaged in their own diplomacy with Tehran (brokered by China in 2023), they also have close security ties with the US and Israel and would need to be convinced that a regional security architecture would protect their interests.

8.2 The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: The Perennial Obstacle

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not the cause of all problems in the Middle East, but it is a profound source of grievance and a powerful tool for mobilization. As long as this conflict remains unresolved, Iran will have a ready-made justification for its hostility towards Israel and a means of garnering support across the Arab and Muslim world.

The October 7th attack and the subsequent devastating Israeli military campaign in Gaza have inflamed passions across the region and made the prospect of Israeli-Palestinian peace seem more distant than ever. Any effort to build a regional security architecture must confront this reality and include a credible, internationally backed pathway to a just and lasting resolution for both Israelis and Palestinians.

8.3 The Trust Deficit

Decades of hostility, broken promises, and covert actions have created a chasm of mistrust that will not be easily bridged. Iran's leadership does not trust the US to keep its word, having been burned by the US withdrawal from the JCPOA. Israel's leadership does not trust Iran's intentions, seeing its nuclear programme, its proxy network, and its hostile rhetoric as proof of its expansionist, genocidal aims. The US does not trust Iran to abide by any agreement, pointing to its history of deception and its support for terrorism.

Rebuilding trust is a generational project. It requires not just agreements, but consistent, transparent, and verifiable behaviour over many years. It requires leaders on all sides to take political risks for peace. And it requires a patient, persistent commitment from the international community.

9.0 TREATIES AND THEIR INTERPRETATION

9.1 The UN Charter’s Prohibition on the Use of Force

Article 2(4) of the UN Charter commands all members to “refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state.”³⁰ This provision is widely regarded as customary international law and a peremptory norm (*jus cogens*).³¹

The sole exceptions are self-defence under Article 51 (in response to an “armed attack”) and authorisation by the Security Council under Chapter VII.³² Shadow warfare often attempts to bypass these exceptions by characterising operations as falling below the threshold of an “armed attack.” A single drone strike, it is argued, does not constitute an “armed attack” triggering the right of self-defence—and therefore cannot be judged under Article 51 at all. This reasoning, if accepted, creates a legal vacuum in which states can use lethal force without accountability.

Interpretative guidance from the International Court of Justice (ICJ) contradicts such a vacuum. In *Nicaragua v United States*, the Court held that “the prohibition of armed intervention” extends to “the use of force short of an armed attack,” including the financing, arming, and training of irregular forces.³³

9.2 International Humanitarian Law and the Notion of ‘Armed Conflict’

³⁰Charter of the United Nations (adopted 26 June 1945, entered into force 24 October 1945) 1 UNTS XVI, art 2(4).

³¹ICJ, *Military and Paramilitary Activities in and against Nicaragua (Nicaragua v United States) (Merits)* [1986] ICJ Rep 14, para 190. International Law Commission, ‘Draft Articles on Responsibility of States for Internationally Wrongful Acts’ (2001) Art 26 (*jus cogens*).

³²UN Charter arts 51, 39–42.

³³*Nicaragua v United States* (n 6) para 195.

International humanitarian law (IHL) applies only in situations of “armed conflict,” whether international or non-international.³⁴ The Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols presuppose a threshold of hostilities that many shadow operations are designed to fall beneath.

Yet the ICRC’s interpretive guidance on the notion of direct participation in hostilities notes that sporadic acts of violence, even if isolated, may constitute an armed conflict if they reach a certain intensity.³⁵ Moreover, when a state repeatedly uses force against individuals in another state’s territory over an extended period, such as the US drone campaign in Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia, commentators have argued that this creates a non-international armed conflict with the target state, triggering IHL obligations.³⁶ In the context of US-Iran tensions, the sustained pattern of attacks—cyber, kinetic, and proxy—suggests a state of armed conflict, yet states have avoided acknowledging this to evade IHL’s full constraints.

9.3 International Human Rights Law: The Right to Life

Outside armed conflict, the applicable legal regime is international human rights law (IHRL), particularly the right to life under Article 6 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).³⁷ In General Comment No. 36, the UN Human Rights Committee

³⁴Geneva Convention (III) Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War (adopted 12 August 1949, entered into force 21 October 1950) 75 UNTS 135, common art 2; Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I) (adopted 8 June 1977, entered into force 7 December 1978) 1125 UNTS 3, art 1(4).

³⁵ICRC, ‘Interpretive Guidance on the Notion of Direct Participation in Hostilities under International Humanitarian Law’ (2009) 90(872) *International Review of the Red Cross* 991, 1005–15.

³⁶Mary Ellen O’Connell, ‘Drones and the Law of Armed Conflict’ (2015) 91(1) *International Law Studies* 184, 195–202.

³⁷International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (adopted 16 December 1966, entered into force 23 March 1976) 999 UNTS 171, art 6.

emphasised that the right to life is non-derogable and that lethal force by a state must be strictly necessary and proportionate.³⁸

The use of drones to kill individuals far from any active battlefield, without due process, violates IHRL unless justified under the narrow law enforcement paradigm (imminent threat, necessity, and proportionality).³⁹ The UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions has repeatedly condemned targeted killings outside armed conflict as arbitrary deprivations of life.⁴⁰

The tension between IHL and IHRL in shadow warfare is acute. States often claim that their covert operations occur within an armed conflict (to justify IHL's more permissive rules on targeting) while simultaneously denying that a conflict exists (to avoid accountability for civilian casualties).⁴¹ This “legal black hole” is where victims fall.

1.0 JUDICIAL DECISIONS ILLUMINATING THE SHADOWS

International courts have addressed several core issues relevant to shadow warfare, though rarely in the context of covert operations directly. Their holdings nonetheless provide crucial interpretive guidance.

10.1 Nicaragua v United States (1986): The Foundations of Non-Intervention

³⁸UN Human Rights Committee, ‘General Comment No 36: Article 6 (Right to Life)’ (2018) UN Doc CCPR/C/GC/36, paras 3, 12.

³⁹Philip Alston, ‘Report of the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions: Study on targeted killings’ (2010) UN Doc A/HRC/14/24/Add.6, paras 58–64.

⁴⁰UN Human Rights Council, ‘Report of the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions’ (2021) UN Doc A/HRC/47/37, paras 45–51.

⁴¹Rosa Brooks, ‘The Perils of Shadow Warfare’ (2015) 94(2) Foreign Affairs 40–42.

In the Nicaragua case, the ICJ held that the United States had violated international law by mining Nicaraguan harbours, attacking ports and oil installations, and supporting the contras.⁴² The Court famously articulated the customary prohibition on the use of force, stating that “the principle of non-intervention involves the right of every sovereign State to conduct its affairs without outside interference.”⁴³

Crucially, the Court rejected the argument that the US actions were lawful collective self-defence, finding that no armed attack by Nicaragua against the US or its allies had occurred.⁴⁴ The judgment stands for the proposition that support for irregular forces and direct military actions short of war are illegal unless justified under the strict criteria of Article 51.⁴⁵

10.2 Oil Platforms (2003): The Limits of Self-Defence

In Oil Platforms (Iran v United States), the ICJ considered whether US attacks on Iranian oil platforms in 1987–88 were justified as self-defence against Iranian attacks on US-flagged vessels.⁴⁶ The Court held that even if the Iranian actions could be considered an “armed attack,” the US response was disproportionate and not necessary.⁴⁷

The case illustrates the high threshold for invoking self-defence. The Court required that the attacks be of sufficient gravity and that the response be strictly proportionate.⁴⁸ In the context of contemporary shadow warfare, this jurisprudence casts doubt on claims that a single assassination or cyber operation can constitute a lawful exercise of self-defence.

⁴²Nicaragua v United States (n 6) paras 251, 292.

⁴³ibid para 202.

⁴⁴ibid paras 230–35.

⁴⁵ibid para 249.

⁴⁶ICJ, Oil Platforms (Iran v United States) (Merits) [2003] ICJ Rep 161.

⁴⁷ibid para 76.

⁴⁸ibid paras 74–77.

10.3 Armed Activities (2005): State Responsibility for Proxy Forces

In *Armed Activities on the Territory of the Congo (DRC v Uganda)*, the ICJ found Uganda responsible for acts committed by its troops and by proxy forces it had armed and supported.⁴⁹

The Court held that “the financing, training, equipping and supplying” of irregular forces could constitute a violation of the prohibition on the use of force.⁵⁰

This principle applies directly to Iran’s support for Hezbollah and Hamas, as well as US and Israeli support for anti-Iranian groups. The Court’s approach confirms that states cannot evade responsibility by channelling operations through non-state actors.

10.4 Advisory Opinions on the Wall and Nuclear Weapons: Humanising the Law

The ICJ’s *Advisory Opinion on the Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons* emphasised the “cardinal principles” of IHL: distinction and proportionality, and the prohibition on causing unnecessary suffering.⁵¹ The Court also noted that humanitarian law applies in all circumstances and that “the protection of the environment” is a relevant consideration.⁵²

In the *Advisory Opinion on the Legal Consequences of the Construction of a Wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory*, the Court underscored the applicability of human rights law alongside IHL.⁵³ These opinions remind that even in situations of conflict, the law’s humanitarian purpose must guide interpretation.

⁴⁹ICJ, *Armed Activities on the Territory of the Congo (Democratic Republic of the Congo v Uganda)* (Merits) [2005] ICJ Rep 168, paras 239–44.

⁵⁰*ibid* para 162.

⁵¹ICJ, *Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons (Advisory Opinion)* [1996] ICJ Rep 226, paras 78–79.

⁵²*ibid* para 30.

⁵³ICJ, *Legal Consequences of the Construction of a Wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (Advisory Opinion)* [2004] ICJ Rep 136, paras 106–13.

11. CONCLUSION

The normalisation of shadow warfare is one of the most dangerous developments of the 21st century. In the conflict between the United States, Israel, and Iran, it has become the default mode of engagement, a constant, low-level war that exacts a devastating human toll and risks catastrophic escalation at any moment.

The human cost is not abstract. It is written in the grief of an Iranian mother whose son was assassinated on a Tehran street. It is etched in the anxiety of an Israeli child evacuated from her home, uncertain when she will return. It is carried in the exhaustion of a Lebanese farmer displaced from his land, his livelihood destroyed. It is felt in the trauma of an American veteran who cannot forget the sound of a drone. These are the faces of shadow warfare. They are the reason we must find a better way.

This article proposed a detailed, multi-phased blueprint for peace. It is not a quick fix or a magic solution. It is a long, difficult, painstaking process of de-escalation, negotiation, confidence-building, and reconciliation. It requires political courage, strategic patience, and a genuine commitment to the well-being of all the peoples of the region.

The path begins with an immediate de-escalation pact and humanitarian relief. It moves through the revival and strengthening of the nuclear agreement. It builds towards a comprehensive regional security architecture, modelled on the Helsinki process. And it culminates in the long, slow work of people-to-people reconciliation, reframing narratives, and healing the psychological wounds of war.

The obstacles are immense. Hardliners on all sides will resist. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict will complicate every step. The trust deficit is vast. But the alternative—the continued normalisation of shadow warfare, the endless cycle of retaliation and escalation, the ever-present risk of a catastrophic regional war—is unthinkable.

The choice is clear. We can continue to stumble through the shadows, accepting the normalisation of violence and the erosion of international law, and wait for the inevitable miscalculation that plunges the region into an even deeper abyss. Or we can choose the light. We can choose the slow, frustrating, essential work of diplomacy. We can choose to see the humanity in the other. We can choose peace.

For the mother in Tehran, the child in Kiryat Shmona, the farmer in southern Lebanon, and the veteran in Washington, the choice must be peace. They have paid the price of shadow warfare for too long. They deserve a future in the light. To mitigate the human cost and break the cycle of normalised shadow warfare, this article recommends the following:

1. **Mandate Legislative Oversight and Transparency:** For the United States and Israel, legislation should be enacted requiring that Congress and Knesset be notified within a strict timeframe of all covert actions, with declassification timelines for the public interest. The current reliance on executive discretion has allowed shadow warfare to operate without democratic accountability.
2. **Establish Independent Civilian Harm Commissions:** An independent, non-partisan body should be empowered to investigate civilian casualties resulting from drone strikes and cyber operations. These commissions would provide families with answers, create a public record, and mandate compensation for victims, restoring a degree of human dignity and legal accountability currently absent.
3. **Re-invest in Diplomatic and People-to-People Infrastructure:** The normalisation of shadow warfare has atrophied diplomatic channels. A human-centred approach requires a strategic pivot that treats diplomacy not as reward for good behaviour but as a necessary tool for de-escalation. This should include funding protecting Track II and people-to-people exchange between Iranian, Israeli, and American Societies to counter the dehumanizing narratives that enable covert violence.
4. **Reform Military and Intelligence Discourse:** Institutions should mandate internal ethical reviews that explicitly challenge the use of dehumanizing language in operational planning. Training programmes should incorporate the testimonies of civilians affected by shadow warfare to reinforce the human consequences of actions that are often abstracted technology and distance.