



IRAN'S PLAYBOOK:

Deconstructing Tehran's Regional Strategy

THE SOUFAN CENTER
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AAB	Al Ashtar Brigades
AAH	Asa'ib Ahl Al Haq
EPFs	explosively-forced penetrators
FTO	Foreign Terrorist Organization
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
HAN	Harakat al-Nujaba
ICJ	International Court of Justice
IED	improvised explosive device
IFLB	Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain
IRAM	improvised rocket assisted munition
IRGC	Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps
IRGC-QF	Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Qods Force
IS	the so-called Islamic State
JCPOA	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
KAH	Kata'ib Hezbollah
NDF	National Defense Force
NIF	National Islamic Front
NPT	Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty
PDF	Popular Defense Force
PFLP	Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine
PFLP-GC	Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command
PIJ	Palestine Islamic Jihad
PMUs	Popular Mobilization Units
SAA	Syrian Arab Army
SCIRI	Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq
SDGTs	Specially Designed Global Terrorists
U.N.	United Nations
UAVs	unmanned aerial vehicles

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KEY FINDINGS

- To view Iran's foreign policy posture as strictly a state sponsor of terrorism is short-sighted and fails to appropriately capture the comprehensive nature of how Iran operates. Iran's strategy is sophisticated and nuanced, using tactics including soft power and various economic support structures to further its aims.
- Iran's grand strategy is intended to achieve absolute security, defined as the ability to thwart its adversaries' ability to overturn its regime or invade Iran militarily. Related goals are preserving the country's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and national unity, as well as keeping the country free from foreign interference, especially American interference.
- Iran has developed a "playbook" to effectively implement its regional strategy. It has empowered the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps – Qods Force to build pro-Iranian armed factions into political movements with progressively increasing influence and capabilities. Lebanese Hezbollah is the realization of this process and Iran seeks to build its other proxies into Hezbollah-like entities with similar capabilities.
- Iran is widely viewed as promoting Shia sectarianism in the region, but it has sought to work with Sunni movements as well, although with far less success. The ongoing proxy conflict between Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, on the one hand, and Iran on the other, serves to further reinforce sectarian identity and complicate and prolong conflict and humanitarian crises in the region.
- Iran's playbook is designed to avoid conventional conflict with more capable military powers, particularly the United States. Iran's weapons development programs are intended not primarily to enable Iran to prevail in a conventional conflict, but rather to sufficiently arm Iran's allies and proxies in their specific circumstances. Iran's development of ballistic missiles is to deter any attacks on the homeland as well as to make Iran's allies and proxies as effective as possible.
- Rolling back Tehran's regional influence will require an equally nimble approach combining diplomacy, smart counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism policy, and a nuanced understanding of how and why Iran's soft power efforts have been successful. Containing the Islamic Republic is thus possible through such clever application of U.S. leverage, and also presents a favorable alternative to the U.S. when compared with the option of direct military conflict.

INTRODUCTION

When the Trump administration assumed office in January 2017, it made clear from the very beginning that it held the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), or Iran nuclear deal, negotiated under the Obama administration, in low regard. One of Trump's primary campaign promises as a presidential candidate was to scrap the agreement, which he ultimately did in May 2018, calling it "a horrible, one-sided deal that should have never, ever been made."¹ Between the time it abrogated the agreement and the present day, the administration has consistently ratcheted up the pressure on Iran by re-imposing strict sanctions aimed to cripple Iran's economy, which is indeed suffering as a result.²

Over the course of the past year, the Trump administration and the mullahs in Tehran have continued to exchange barbs, with a tit-for-tat rhetorical escalation. The feud entered a new phase on April 8, 2019, after the Trump administration officially designated Iran's elite Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as a foreign terrorist organization (FTO).³ In response, nearly a week after the U.S. designation, Iran declared the United States Central Command, or CENTCOM, as a terrorist entity.⁴ Two weeks after the CENTCOM designation, Iran expanded its terrorist label to the entire U.S. military.

In early May 2019, in response to what the U.S. claims was specific intelligence indicating the possibility of direct Iranian attacks on American forces in the Middle East, a carrier strike group was deployed to the Persian Gulf.⁵ The show of force is intended to serve as a deterrent, and mere days after the announcement that the USS Abraham Lincoln would be rerouted to the region, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited Iraq to express growing concern over Iranian involvement in its neighbors' affairs.⁶ And on the heels of Pompeo's visit to Iraq, Iran's President Hassan Rouhani announced that Iran was taking steps to curtail its compliance with the nuclear deal, a move guaranteed to ratchet up tensions with Washington, even as the Europeans scramble to mollify all sides involved.⁷

As the U.S. and Iran appear on a collision course, it is prudent to step back and take stock of what Iran's grand strategy actually is and how Tehran seeks to achieve its objectives. An assessment of Iranian foreign and security policy demonstrates that conflict should not be considered inevitable, and that by analyzing Iran's so-called "playbook," containing the Islamic Republic is possible, and also presents a favorable alternative to the United States when compared with the option of direct military conflict. Rolling back Iranian influence will indeed require a military component, but the administration's stated campaign of "maximum pressure" should be reevaluated and replaced with a more pragmatic approach to dealing with Iran, which should include diplomatic overtures designed to attenuate, not accelerate, the prospects for war.

It can be argued that Iran's grand strategy reflects a combination of multiple goals – goals which are constantly in tension with each other and sometime contradictory – but which fall into two primary categories: ideology and national interests. Ideologically, Iranian leaders have consistently emphasized that the 1979 Islamic revolution has made Iran independent of U.S. meddling in its internal affairs, and that the Islamic regime's foreign policy and national security are intended to insulate the country from further interference. Khomeini was singularly determined to make Iran into the model Islamic Republic, with the Revolution furthering the new regime's ideals throughout the region.⁸

As stated in Chapter Ten of the Islamic Republic of Iran's Constitution:

*The foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran is based on the rejection of any kind of domination, both its exercise and submission to it; the preservation of the all-inclusive independence of the country and its territorial integrity; the defense of the rights of all Muslims; non-alignment in relation to the domineering powers; mutual peaceful relations with non-aggressive states.*⁹

As key grievances against the United States, Iran's leaders particularly cite the 1953 CIA-led overthrow of elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq and the Reagan Administration's backing for Saddam Hussein's regime—including his use of chemical weapons against Iran with impunity—in the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war.

Iran tries to rebut allegations that its ideology is sectarian, intended only to bring to power Shia Muslims who are historically politically and economically disadvantaged in the countries of the region. Iranian leaders note that they have been steadfast in their support not only for Shias but also for such Sunni entities as Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and the leadership of Sudan. Iranian figures have often characterized this "coalition" as an "Axis of Resistance"¹⁰ that will overturn a regional power structure that Iran sees as dominated by the United States and its regional allies, particularly Israel and Saudi Arabia. The new head of the Islamic Revolutionary

Guard Corps (IRGC), Maj. Gen. Hossein Salami, has long referred to the three countries as “the triangle” of Iranian adversaries.¹¹ Iran argues that this power structure oppresses Islamists of all stripes as well as peoples such as the Palestinians, who live under Israeli control. Yet, as will be shown, Iran has often struggled in its relationship with Sunni-led movements and governments, including Hamas, which often responds to appeals from fellow Sunnis to distance themselves from Iran. This suggests that Iran’s attempts to present itself as “pan-Islamic,” rather than Shia sectarian, have sometimes rung hollow, and it can be argued that Iran’s strategy is far more applicable to countries and cases in which Shia movements and leaders are strong or dominant.

Iranian leaders also argue that their policies are not indiscriminate, explaining that Iran has refrained from backing Islamist movements in the region that believe in global jihad and constitute a threat to global and regional order, such as al-Qaeda and the so-called Islamic State (IS).

However, there is substantial debate within and outside the U.S. government over Iran’s past and current relationship with al-Qaeda. According to documents recovered in the U.S. Special Operations Forces raid on Osama bin Ladin's compound in Pakistan, the IRGC sometimes mistreated al-Qaeda activists in Iran, causing bin Ladin himself to urge the Iranians to allow the al-Qaeda members to leave Iran.

Specifically regarding the September 11 attacks on the United States, the exhaustive study of the September 11 Commission was relatively clear, detailing some Iran-al-Qaeda cooperation in the 1990s but concluding that: “We have found no evidence that Iran or Hezbollah was aware of the planning for what later became the 9/11 attack. At the time of their travel through Iran, the al-Qaeda operatives themselves were probably not aware of the specific details of their future operation.” However, the Commission did also note that: “After 9/11, Iran and Hezbollah wished to conceal any past evidence of cooperation with Sunni terrorists associated with al-Qaeda. A senior Hezbollah official disclaimed any Hezbollah involvement in 9/11. We believe this topic requires further investigation by the U.S. government.”¹² More recently, Iran has expelled some al-Qaeda activists who it allowed to take refuge there since the September 11 attacks – although reportedly under tight surveillance by Iranian authorities – but some reportedly remain, perhaps in an effort by Iran to exert leverage against the United States or Saudi Arabia.

However, the Trump administration appears to believe that the Iran-al-Qaeda relationship remains extensive. When asked about the state of the relationship, Secretary of State Pompeo testified at a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing on April 10, 2019:

The factual question with respect to Iran's connections to Al Qaida is very real. They have hosted Al Qaida. They have permitted Al Qaida to transit their country. There-there's no doubt there is a connection between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Al Qaida. Period. Full stop.¹³

The Islamic Republic of Iran's foreign policy is clearly distinguishable from that of the Shah of Iran, the authoritarian leader who ruled Iran for several decades and was a close ally of the United States. The Shah's regime had cordial relations with the State of Israel and did not support Palestinian or other groups that sought to threaten or destroy Israel. Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamene'i, by contrast, has called Israel a "cancerous tumor" that should be excised from the region. Yet, the Islamic Republic's foreign policy shares with that of the Shah the assertion that it is Iran's right to dominate the Persian Gulf, given Iran's long coastline on the Gulf, its large population, and its long history of civilization.

In the years after the 1979 revolution, Iran attempted to "export" its revolution to nearby Muslim states. In the late 1990s, Iran appeared to abandon that goal because its promotion caused many governments in the region to fear Iran and to support U.S. efforts to counter Iran by hosting ever increasing numbers of U.S. troops. However, the various conflicts in the region that arose from the 2011 "Arab Spring" uprisings have appeared to give Iran opportunities to revive and even expand on that export-of-the-revolution goal. Iran's involvement in these Arab Spring-related internal conflicts, particularly those in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, has further facilitated Iran's pursuit of its national security goals.

Iran's characterizations of its regional ambitions in ideological and moral terms masks the national security and national interest imperatives of its strategy. Iran's policy strives for "absolute security" – defined as the ability to thwart any effort by the United States, Israel, Saudi Arabia, or any other state or non-state actor to overturn its regime or successfully invade Iran militarily. Iran's leaders consistently point to the substantial U.S. military presence in the region as an intent to attack Iran or be positioned to overthrow Iran's regime if the opportunity to do so presents itself. Iran's efforts to build influence within the countries of the region gives Iran the ability to deny the hosting of U.S. forces in the region or, at the very least, to deny the United States permission to use regional facilities as a base from which to attack it.

IRAN'S "PLAYBOOK"

This report demonstrates that Iran's regional strategy is sophisticated, intricate, and nimble. Whereas Iran's primary method of operations in the region is to support armed factions and pro-Iranian governments financially, politically, and militarily, it is a mistake to reduce Iran's strategy to "supporting terrorism." Officials and experts who analyze Iran's efforts as supporting terrorism alone risk underestimating the degree to which Iran's overall grand strategy has succeeded, and in fact frustrated counter-efforts by such capable powers as the United States and Israel. Iran has been able to capitalize on unexpected opportunities provided by the conflicts that resulted from the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011, as well as blunders by its regional opponents – exemplified by the Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates-led decision to exploit the vulnerability of Yemen and engage in military action there, as well as to isolate Qatar, a fellow Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) state. The Saudi and UAE-led isolation of Qatar has given Iran an opportunity to accomplish a goal – the fracturing of the GCC (made up of Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman and Qatar) — which Iran has pursued since the GCC was formed in 1981. At the same time, Iran itself has suffered some economic unrest in recent years but its leaders have highlighted that Iran is now perhaps the most stable state in the Middle East and has not become a "failed state."

The Trump administration in particular has sought to reduce Iran's strategy to supporting terrorism, in large part to justify a U.S. policy of applying maximum sanctions pressure on Iran's regime. The administration notes that Iran was placed on the U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism in January 1984, and each year for more than two decades, annual State Department reports on international terrorism have identified Iran as "the most active," the "foremost," or the "leading"¹⁴ state sponsor of terrorism. These reports cite Iran for providing arms, training, and military advisers in support of allied governments and movements, such as the client state of President Bashar Al Assad of Syria, Lebanese Hezbollah, Hamas and other Palestinian militant groups, Houthi rebels in Yemen, Shia militias in Iraq, and militant groups in Bahrain (all of

which will be discussed in more detail below). Other administration reports, testimony, and statements, including U.S. intelligence chiefs' annual worldwide threat assessment briefings, make similar points.¹⁵

However, although many of the groups Iran supports are named as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs) by the United States because they have used terrorist tactics, most of these FTOs have evolved into insurgent and/or political movements and have reduced their use of terrorism over time. Further, other armed factions that Iran supports have not been named as FTOs, including the Houthi ("Ansar Allah") movement in Yemen (composed of Zaidi Shia Muslims) and the Taliban. Yet, because of the deep-seated U.S. animosity against Iran, there has been debate within the Administration over whether even these groups should be designated as FTOs. Still, to describe Iran's support for regional governments and pro-Iranian factions as support for terrorism dismisses the subtlety and sophistication of Iran's regional strategy. It should also be noted that Iran generally opposes Sunni terrorist groups that work against Iran's core interests, such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State organizations. Iran actively combatted the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq.

Iran's playbook enables it to accomplish its objectives without invasion or conventional military conflict. Iranian leaders understand that they cannot accomplish their core security goals with a strategy that relies on prevailing in a conventional conflict with the most powerful military in the world — that of the United States — or with Israel, which is also highly militarily capable. This is not to say that Iran ignores its conventional military capability. Iran has an active weapons development industry and seeks to modernize its major combat arsenal. Iran is assessed by U.S. officials as having "the largest inventory of ballistic missiles in the region" that "continue to pose a threat to countries across the Middle East."¹⁶ However, it is an open question whether Iran's weapons programs are designed primarily to advance Iran's core strategy of supporting regional allies and proxies. Such weapons have limited utility when used directly by Iran against the United States or other major conventional powers. This understanding also explains why Iran agreed to bargain away any possibility of obtaining a nuclear weapon; such a weapon would have little practical utility given the overwhelming nuclear retaliatory capability of the United States, or even Israel.

As a long term strategy, the core of Iran's "playbook" has been to establish militia groups — mostly Shias, first as armed factions and then, through funding and advice, into political movements that acquire political legitimacy, seats in national parliaments and cabinets, and, over time, major roles as national decision makers. Iran essentially seeks to nurture its allies and proxies to the point where they, and by extension Iran, can take over state power from within. Iran is then able to sometimes harness that state power to its strategic advantage, particularly by

reorienting regional states toward Iran and away from the United States and other Iranian adversaries. This “playbook” is applied to multiple countries and regions, with varying degrees of success.

Cloning the IRGC and Basij

Iran’s instrument for building up proxy forces is the Qods (Jerusalem) Force of the IRGC (IRGC-QF). That force, estimated to have about 10,000 personnel, is headed by IRGC Major General Qasem Soleimani, who reports directly to Supreme Leader Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamene’i.¹⁷ Since taking control of the IRGC, Soleimani has been tasked with directing Iran’s most important missions outside of the country.¹⁸ The IRGC-QF developed from the IRGC expeditionary force sent to Syria and Lebanon in 1982 to build up a military wing for pro-Iranian figures who later formed Hezbollah. That force, called the “Office of Liberation Movements” in the early 1980s, was subjected to bureaucratic infighting among the IRGC, the Foreign Ministry, and the office of Ayatollah Khomeini and his designated successor, Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, before ultimately coming under the full purview of the IRGC.¹⁹ IRGC and IRGC-QF leaders generally admit to providing support to regional allies, but Iran’s leaders couch this support as providing “humanitarian aid,” or protecting Shia religious shrines or sites. As an example, Iran first described its intervention in Syria as a mission to protect the Shrine of Sayida Zaynab, the mausoleum of Imam Hussein’s sister.²⁰

The IRGC-QF’s primary mode of operations is to essentially “clone” the IRGC and its militia force, the Basij, in the countries where the IRGC-QF intervenes by organizing, recruiting, and training local volunteers into organized militias. The Basij, whose formal name is the Basij ol-Mustazafin va Janbazan (Mobilization of the Oppressed and Disabled), is a volunteer force that operates in Iran under the command of the IRGC. The IRGC and the Basij expanded in Iran through recruitment drives among hard-core supporters of the regime. Basij volunteers constituted the bulk of the Iranian forces that conducted near-suicidal “human wave” offensives against Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War.²¹ Both the IRGC and the Basij operate politically in Iran to protect the Islamic revolution against domestic dissent and organized opposition, with the IRGC generally only intervening against large demonstrations that threaten to overwhelm not only the Basij but also the riot police and other elements of the Law Enforcement Forces (LEF). Basij volunteers are often posted in Iranian factories, universities, large company offices, and other locations to monitor loyalty and adherence to Islamic customs, such as the public dress code for women.²²

The IRGC is a multi-faceted entity with wide-ranging responsibilities that extend beyond conflict. Its members produce materials, including books and pamphlets focusing on the geopolitical

context of Iranian foreign policy while also making connections between foreign policy and Islam and Shiite history.²³ The IRGC also plays a role in administering two universities, two think tanks, and assorted policy journals and several media outlets, including the major-state sponsored media.²⁴ The IRGC has also become a significant player in Iran's economy with direct or indirect control of as much as 20% of Iran's economic output, according to U.S. officials. The large Khatem ol-Anbiya construction company that the IRGC owns employs tens of thousands of people and frequently wins major contracts to build roads, bridges, airport upgrades, and ports. The IRGC also has had significant stakes in Iran's mobile telecommunications and other sectors, and has resisted pressure by President Hassan Rouhani to divest some of its interests.

In replicating themselves, the IRGC and the Basij have helped build militias as a parallel arm to the national force, but loyal to Iran's primary allies in that country. It is often unclear whether the local "clone" that the IRGC-QF creates reports to the national leadership of the country or to the IRGC leadership back in Tehran. The following sections discuss the major "clones" formed by the IRGC-QF.

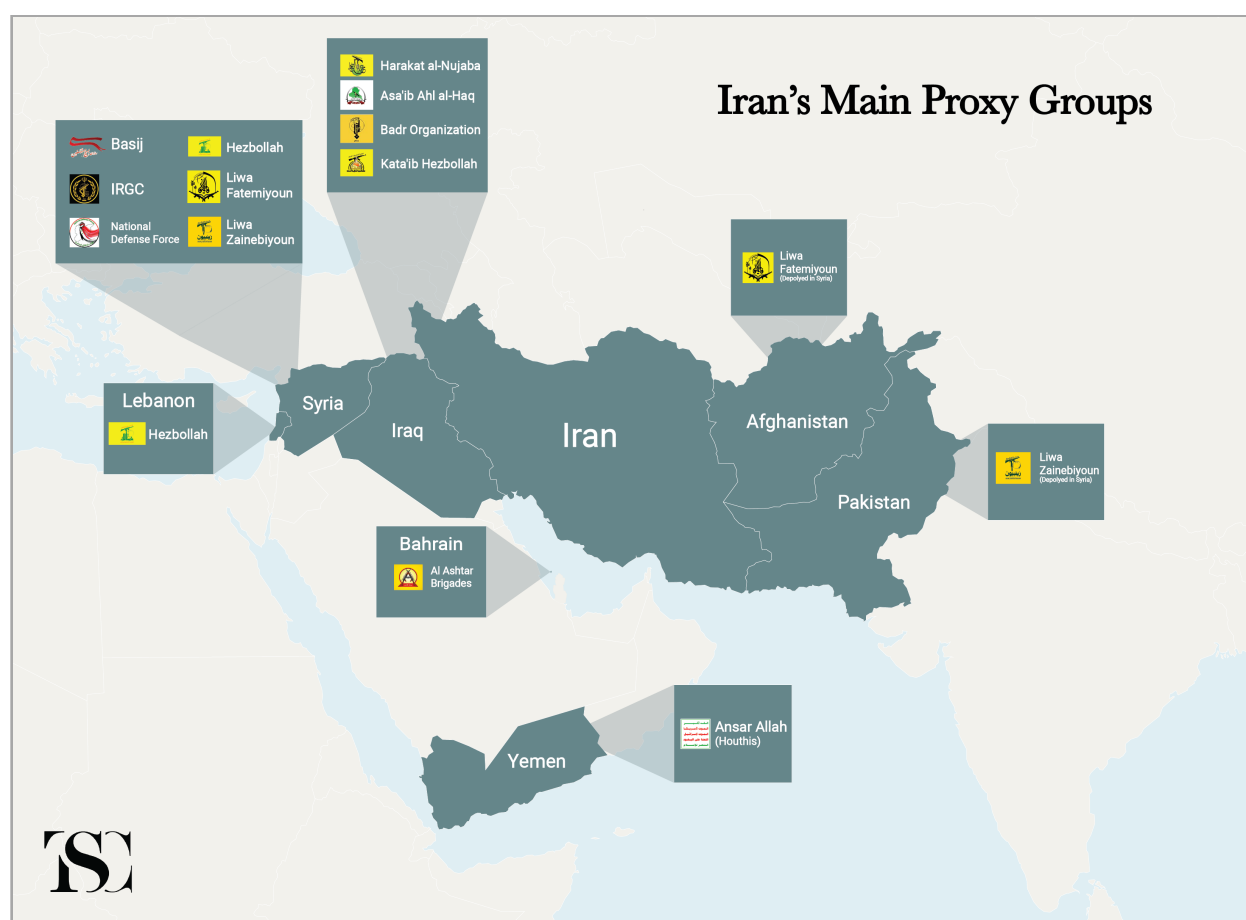
Hezbollah. Lebanese Hezbollah stands as the first and best example of the IRGC's efforts to replicate itself and its Basij militia in an intervention outside Iran's borders. Iran is widely regarded as the "principal moving force" behind the creation of Hezbollah.²⁵ About 2,000 personnel from the IRGC's Ramazan Garrison deployed to the Syrian border with Lebanon following the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon to help organize, train, and equip Lebanese Shias who would eventually form Hezbollah's militia wing. The IRGC deployment in Lebanon subsequently grew to about 3,000 by the mid-1980s,²⁶ but allegedly shrank to about 1,000 after the release of remaining U.S. hostages from Lebanon in December 1991. Some IRGC personnel involved in the Lebanon mission might have been redeployed to Sudan, where Iran sought to expand its influence, as discussed below. When the remaining hostages were released, there also was a debate in the Iranian leadership about whether to withdraw the IRGC from Lebanon entirely, but the IRGC resisted and remained. The IRGC deployment to Lebanon was considered so successful that the deployed personnel were ultimately organized into the IRGC-QF. With IRGC-QF training, Hezbollah's militia subsequently fought against Israeli forces in low-intensity conflicts and larger battles. It has also fought government-linked Lebanese factions as Hezbollah sought to expand its influence in Lebanon.²⁷

Iraq. In Iraq, the IRGC-QF has helped build several Shia militias that are legally under the national military command structure but operate largely separately, and at some degree of direction by Tehran and Iran's allies in Iraq.²⁸ These militias are discussed in detail below.

Sudan. *(Sudan as a failed example of Iranian influence in the long-term is explained in a later section of this paper).* As a consequence of its deployment to Sudan in the early 1990s, the IRGC-QF helped

build up the Popular Defense Force (PDF) militia into a significant force loyal to the National Islamic Front (NIF) of Islamist leader Dr. Hassan al-Turabi.²⁹ After a large high-level visit to Sudan in 1991 by top regime leader Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, as many as 2,000 IRGC-QF personnel deployed to Sudan to train and better organize the PDF.³⁰ While the IRGC-QF did not create the PDF, which was constituted by an act of national legislation in 1989, the IRGC-QF was instrumental in building it up as a parallel to the Sudanese Armed Forces, even though the PDF were legally subordinate to and commanded by the armed forces according to Sudanese national law.

Graph 1: Iran's Main Proxy Groups



Source: Graph created using data collected and analyzed by the report authors.

Syria. In Syria, the IRGC-QF helped organize a volunteer militia modeled after the Basij called the National Defense Force (NDF).³¹ The NDF's primary role was to defend fixed positions near the front lines, and in so doing free up Syrian Arab Army regulars – who had suffered enormous manpower depletion as the civil conflict ground on – to go on the offensive against the armed

opposition groups challenging the regime as of 2011. The NDF also suppressed unrest in the rear areas and cities so that the SAA and other Syrian forces could deploy elsewhere.

Foreign Militia Recruitment and Deployment

Iran has been able to create, recruit, and organize IRGC and Basij-like militias beyond countries where it is actively involved. The IRGC-QF has also demonstrated an ability to recruit militias from far afield and deploy them as needed. For example, Iran facilitated the movement into Syria of about 7,000 Lebanese Hezbollah fighters to assist Syrian government forces. This is significant, even keeping in mind that Lebanon and Syria are neighboring countries and Hezbollah's deployment there was not difficult or expensive, as Hezbollah was easily able to drive across the border in large numbers.³²

Similarly, the IRGC-QF had no difficulty deploying Iraqi militias to the Syrian battlefield. The IRGC-QF helped organize several Iraqi militias to fight in support of Assad, the most notable of which is Harakat al-Nujaba (HAN), led by Shaykh Akram Ka'bi. Iraq is a neighbor of Syria and HAN and other Iraqi militias were easily able to move into Syria to deploy. HAN played a major role in the late 2015 battle of Aleppo that recaptured for Assad the eastern half of that city.

While assisting neighbors into Syria was no great feat, Iran displayed significantly more logistical prowess in recruiting and deploying militia fighters from South Asia to the Syrian battlefield. Afghanistan and Pakistan had no fully formed deployable militias in those countries when the Syria conflict began. From 2013-2017, however, the IRGC-QF recruited and deployed 50,000 or more Afghan and Pakistani Shia fighters in Syria.³³ The Afghan recruits were organized into what was called the Fatimiyoun Division. According to the United States Treasury Department, which sanctioned the Fatimiyoun Division in January 2019 as a terrorism supporting entity, the IRGC-QF "prey[ed] on the millions of undocumented Afghan migrants and refugees in Iran, coercing them to fight in Syria under threat of arrest or deportation." The recruits "receiv[ed] little training prior to deployment to Syria, where many are thrust into dangerous front-line combat roles, resulting in significant casualties."³⁴

The Pakistani recruits were organized into the Zaynabiyoun Brigade. According to the United States Treasury Department sanctions designation in January 2019, "The Zaynabiyoun Brigade is another Syria-based IRGC-QF militia, composed of Pakistani fighters mainly recruited from among undocumented and impoverished Pakistani Shi'ite immigrants living in Iran."³⁵ Referring to the Fatimiyoun Division and Zaynabiyoun Brigades, on November 29, 2018, U.S. Special Representative for Iran and Senior Policy Advisor to the Secretary of State, Brian Hook, stated that Iran "manages as many as 10,000 Shia fighters in Syria, some of whom are children as

young as 12 years old.” His numbers were somewhat lower than widely-cited reports in the years prior to Hook’s comments, suggesting that Iran allowed some of these fighters to leave Syria as the Syrian government regained much of its territory.

Supplying Weapons to Proxies and Allies

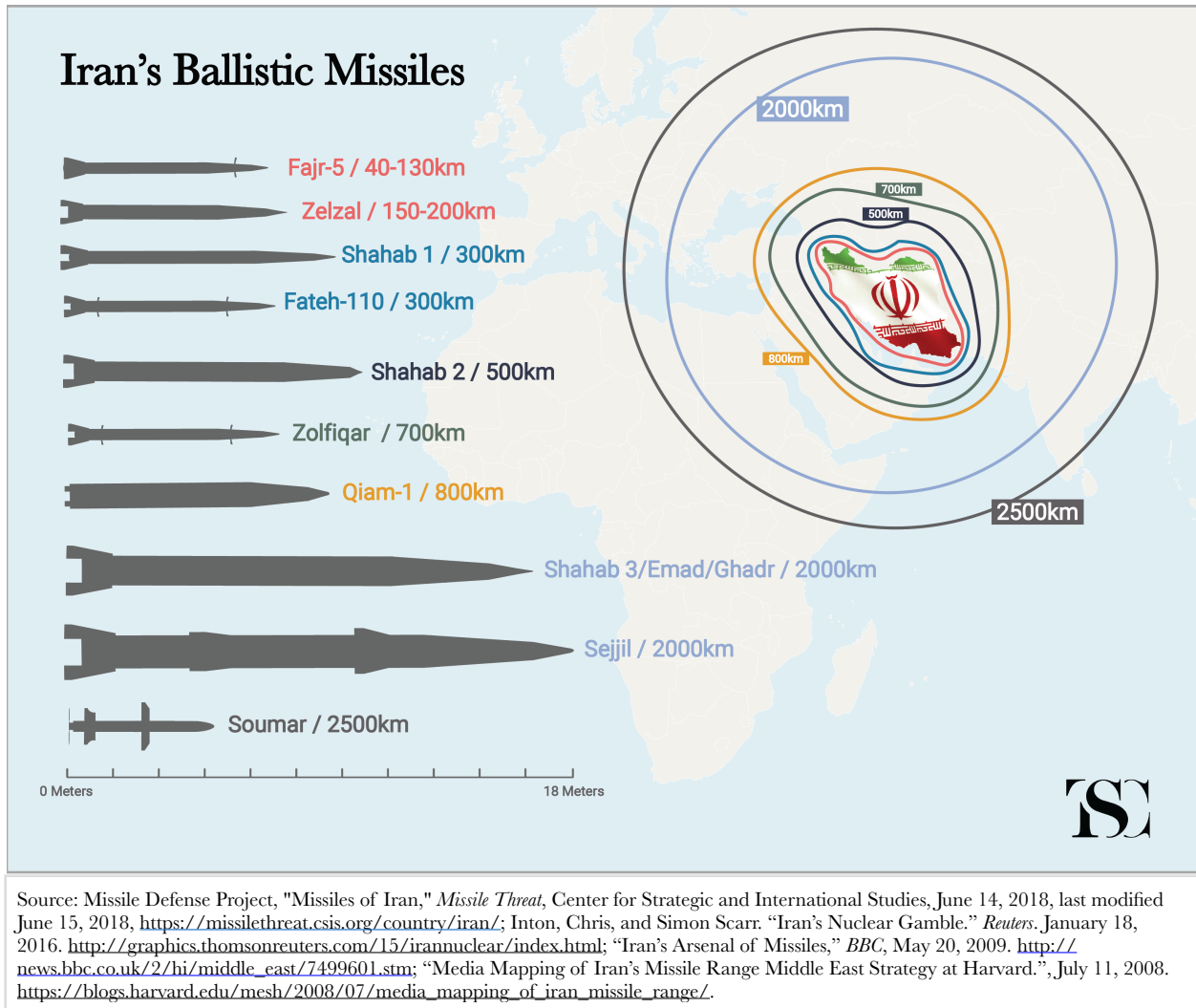
A key element of Iran’s strategy has been to provide its regional allies and proxies with a wide array of weaponry, tailored to their needs. To that extent, Iran’s weapons development programs are not intended to enable Iran to prevail in a conventional military conflict, but rather to give Iran’s regional allies and proxies the capabilities to prosper militarily and politically and thereby enhance Iran’s regional writ. Throughout the 1990s, Iran’s military budget was modestly funded and mostly focused on developing a defensive posture rather than an offensive one.³⁶ Its regional grand strategy now seems to be offensive, but in an indirect manner through the support of proxies. This includes its growing Shia foreign fighter network that spans the region in an attempt to construct a land bridge from Tehran to Damascus.³⁷

Some Iran-supplied weaponry is intended to enable its allies to project power regionally and internationally, for example by restricting access to sea lanes. Other weapons are geared toward ground warfare against adversary armor. Some Iran-supplied weaponry is intended to support urban insurrection operations. Iran’s unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) also enable Iran’s proxies to project power across front lines and acquire better intelligence on adversary military movements.

The major categories of weaponry that Iran has supplied in recent years have included specialized anti-tank systems called “explosively-forced penetrators” (EFPs) that Iran developed and pioneered for use in Iraq against U.S. personnel’s armor during the 2003-2011 U.S. intervention. Iran also developed an “improvised rocket assisted munition” (IRAM) that its Shia militia allies used to great effect against U.S. tanks. A U.S. official formally announced on April 2, 2019, that the U.S. military determined that Iran-backed forces in Iraq, using EFPs and IRAMs and other Iran-supplied weapons, had caused the deaths of 608 U.S. military personnel during the 2003-2011 U.S.³⁸ intervention in Iraq. Iran also supplied its Iraqi allies with artillery rockets, mortars, short-range ballistic missiles, and cruise missiles.³⁹

Building on the success in Iraq of its domestically-designed weaponry, Iran sought to outfit its militant allies in Bahrain with weaponry they could use against the armor utilized by Bahraini security forces. While no EFPs have been used in Bahrain to date, in 2016, security forces there found a warehouse containing Iranian-origin equipment that can be used to build EFPs.⁴⁰

Graph 2: Iran's Ballistic Missiles



A more recent trend has been for Iran to supply its allies with short-range ballistic missiles. Since the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war, Iran has resupplied Hezbollah with more than 100,000 rockets and missiles,⁴¹ some capable of reaching Tel Aviv from south Lebanon, as well as upgraded artillery, anti-ship, anti-tank, and anti-aircraft capabilities. The missiles Iran has supplied to Hezbollah as well as the Houthis in Yemen and Shia militias in Iraq reportedly include the Fajr, the Zelzal, the Fateh-110, and the Zolfiqar missiles, possibly supplemented by more advanced Iranian-made guidance systems.⁴²

In late 2018, Iran also reportedly transferred short-range ballistic missiles to one of its closest Iraqi militia allies, Kata'ib Hezbollah (KAH, Hezbollah Brigades), with ranges potentially able to

reach Riyadh if fired from southern Iraq. Saudi Arabia has, with backing from the U.S. and some United Nations (U.N.) entities, accused Iran of providing the ballistic missiles that the Houthis have fired on Riyadh on several occasions. In January 2018, the U.N. panel of experts on the Yemen conflict reported that two missiles fired on Saudi Arabia by the Houthis, on July 22 and November 4, 2017, were consistent with the design of Iranian missiles, though no determination was made on when or how those missiles might have ended up in Yemen. On November 29, 2018, U.S. Special Representative for Iran and Senior Policy Advisor to the Secretary of State, Brian Hook, displayed missiles, rockets, and other equipment that he asserted were supplied by Iran to the Houthis and captured by Saudi-led coalition forces.⁴³ One of the missiles apparently supplied is the Sayyad 2C surface-to-air missile that the Houthis have fired at the Saudi-led coalition's aircraft. Iran has denied providing the Houthis with missiles and asserts that they were acquired long ago by the government of Ali Abdullah Saleh and captured by the Houthis.

Iran also has an expansive program to develop and re-engineer unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). Iran and Hezbollah have used these vehicles on the Syrian battlefield, and the Houthis in Yemen reportedly have used UAVs to drop weapons on their opponents.⁴⁴

Iran also has retransferred to its allies weaponry acquired from major powers. For example, Iran bought significant quantities of C-802s from China in the 1990s; in July 2006, Hezbollah damaged an Israeli warship with an Iran-supplied C-802 sea-skimming missile. Speaking about the conflict currently waging in Yemen, and referencing the C-802 and other China-supplied cruise missiles, the U.S. military has contended that Iran is enabling the "Houthis to launch missiles at its neighbors and target ships in the Bab al Mandeb and Red Sea..."⁴⁵ Other weaponry Iran has reportedly provided to the Houthis includes coastal defense missiles and radar systems, mines, and explosive boats that have been redeployed from the Straits of Hormuz to the Yemen coast on the Bab el-Mandeb. The Houthis fired anti-ship missiles at UAE and U.S. ships in the Red Sea in October 2016. In January 2017, the Houthis damaged a Saudi ship in the Red Sea. That action contributed to the February 1, 2017, Trump administration statement announcing a more confrontational U.S. posture toward Iran and its regional malign activities.

Iran has been able to use historic smuggling and trade methods to evade interception of its weapons shipments. One key Iranian weapons transshipment route to the Houthis in Yemen has been through Oman, a country with whom Iran has excellent relations. Oman has tacitly allowed smuggling of a wide variety of goods to Iran from its Musandam Peninsula territory. In 2016, media reports indicated that Iran was using Omani territory to smuggle weapons into Yemen, taking advantage of the porous border between the two countries.⁴⁶ Smuggled materiel allegedly includes anti-ship missiles (some of which have reportedly been used to target U.S. warships),

surface-to-surface short-range missiles, small arms, and explosives. Successive U.N. reports from the Panel of Experts on Yemen have identified both land routes that stretch from the Omani border to Houthi-controlled areas in the west and Omani ports with road access to the Yemeni border as possible channels for weapons smuggling. Since the March 2018 visit to Oman by then-Defense Secretary James Mattis to discuss this issue,⁴⁷ U.S. assertions of smuggling via Oman have diminished, suggesting that Oman has satisfied U.S. concerns.

Iran has adapted to U.S. Navy tactics to ship weaponry to its allies. Early in the Yemen conflict, Iran used traditional dhows to deliver arms to the Houthis. Later, as the U.S. Navy honed in on the dhow traffic, Iran apparently began distributing its weapons shipments from the dhows off Kuwait waters, relatively far from Yemen, to smaller vessels that could evade detection to arrive on Yemeni shores.⁴⁸ Some reports indicate that Iran might have also shipped some weapons to the Houthis via Somalia, where Iran has sought to make inroads but has few close allies.⁴⁹

Graph 3: Iran's Transshipment Routes



Source: Graph created using data collected and analyzed by the report authors.

Iran has long used Damascus' airport to ship weaponry to Hezbollah, avoiding sea and air routes that might be vulnerable to Israeli interception. Part of Iran's intervention in Syria was motivated by an interest in making its transshipment route to Hezbollah even more secure by being able to go overland from Iran all the way to Lebanon. However, Iran more frequently used a direct air route from Tehran to Beirut in 2018, signaling the difficulty of securing such a long overland route.⁵⁰ For the direct flights, Iran has used Qeshm Fars Air, an affiliate of Mahan Air, long sanctioned by the United States as a terrorism supporting entity. Concurrent with the Fatimiyoun and Zaynabiyoun sanctions designations discussed above, the Treasury Department sanctioned Qeshm Fars Air as a mechanism by which the IRGC-QF flies "fighters and materiel to Syria to prop up the Assad regime."⁵¹

Soft Power

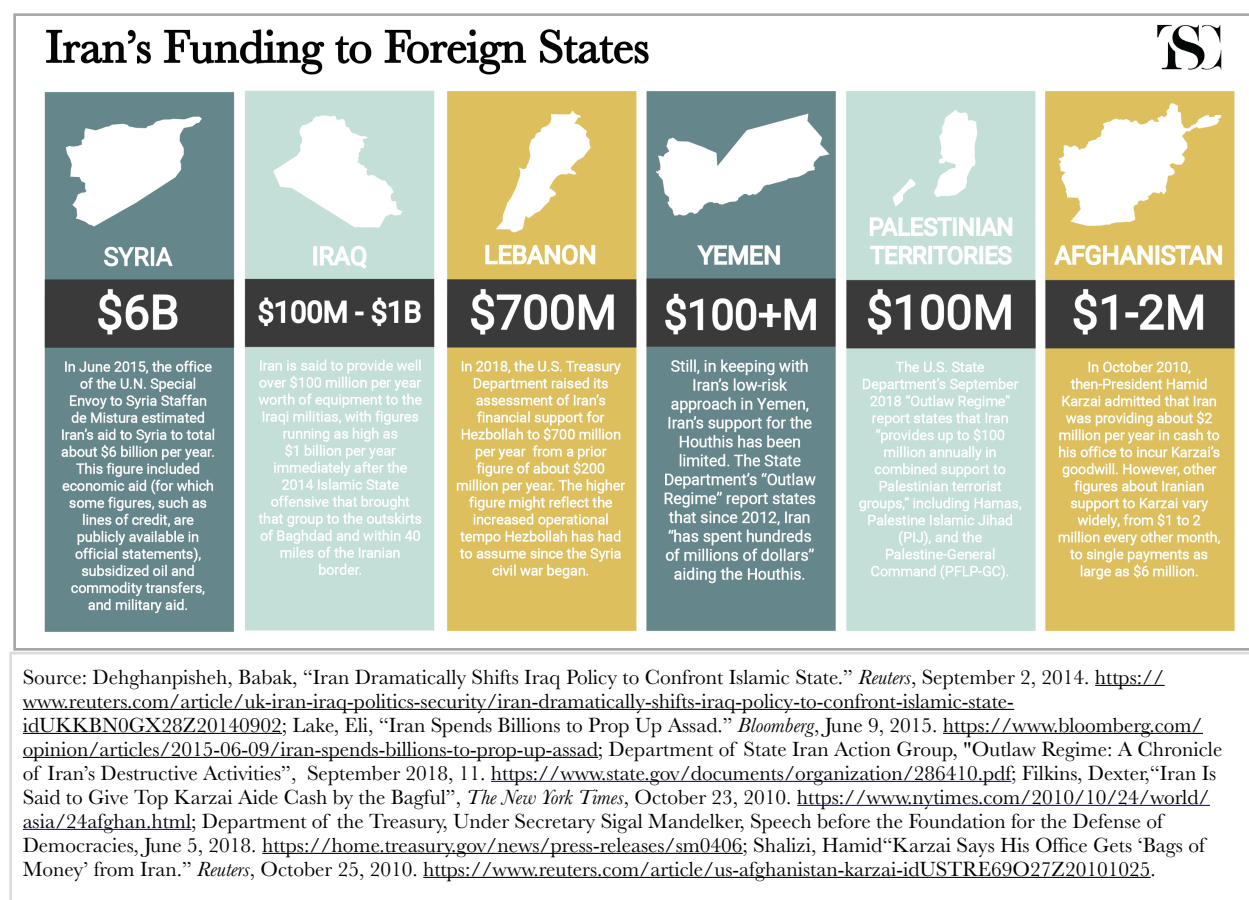
Iran uses soft power – financial, political, diplomatic, public relations methods; and other non-military mechanisms – effectively to build leverage over its neighbors and insulate its proxies and allies within those countries. Soft power helps Iran build both political and popular support in states where it seeks to be influential. It also creates economic dependency that gives all factions in target countries a stake in the relationship with Iran.

As part of its strategy on generating support in the political arena of target countries, Iran has provided direct payments to leaders to gain and maintain their support. For example, Iran has sought to shape legitimate political processes to its advantage by funding political candidates for the elected legislatures in both Iraq and Afghanistan. As noted below, then-Afghan President Hamid Karzai admitted publicly that his office had received cash payments from Iran.

Iran has sought to build influence by presenting itself as a reliable economic partner. In Iraq, even the most pro-U.S. politicians have resisted the U.S. insistence that Iraq join the U.S. economic pressure campaign against Iran because doing so threatens Iraq's economy.⁵² The Trump administration has threatened to sanction Iraq unless it ceases importing Iranian natural gas, despite the fact that the gas is crucial to Iraq's ability to generate electricity. Major protests have broken out in Iraqi cities in recent summers due to power failures and their effects. U.S. officials want Iraq to find alternative countries to help meet their energy needs, such as Qatar, but transportation costs will almost certainly make any alternative more expensive than the gas Iran supplies. Nor is Iran's economic influence in Iraq limited to the energy sector; Trump administration pressure on Iraq fails to adequately consider that Iran's light industry economy has become the source of many goods imported by Iraq, including basic medicines, construction materials, and processed foodstuffs.

Among other neighbors, Iran has been a capable and reliable supplier of construction and other services that have helped rebuild Afghanistan from decades of war. In the Gulf, Iran is a significant investor in Oman's major port development at Al Duqm and has exploited the intra-GCC rift between Qatar and Saudi Arabia/UAE by both increasing food exports to Qatar and by allowing Qatar Airways to fly in Iranian airspace.

Graph 4: Iran's Funding to Foreign States



Iran has funded construction not only of mosques and cultural centers but of significant infrastructure projects in countries where Iran seeks to enhance its influence. For example, through its "Iranian Committee for the Reconstruction of Lebanon," Iran has funded housing and health care facilities in areas dominated by Lebanese Shias – a move intended to build public support for Hezbollah.⁵³ In Syria, Iran is reportedly using another charity entity, the Hussein Organization, to distribute food, water, and electricity generators in areas ravaged by war, as part of an effort to "win hearts and minds" for the cash-strapped Syrian government. Iran is also

offering free educational opportunities in Syria, and using their influence in the religious sphere as well, urging people to convert from Sunnism to Shi'ism.⁵⁴

Iran has established some training and education programs that bring young Muslims to study in Iran. One such program runs in Latin America, despite the small percentage of Muslims there. It is reportedly run by Mohsen Rabbani, a former cultural affairs attaché. Critics assert that these Iranian programs are intended primarily to recruit operatives who can facilitate Hezbollah's illicit financial and economic activities in that region.⁵⁵

Propaganda also features into Iran's efforts to portray itself in a positive light. Iran remains highly cognizant of the struggle for public relations and uses information operations to further its regional agenda, relying on the "deft use of the media and other propaganda tools to influence popular sentiment" and often uses propaganda to frame Iran's positives while highlighting the negative attributes of its adversaries.⁵⁶ Where the government's reach is less robust, particularly in some of the rural areas of the country, the IRGC and Basij leadership stress the necessity of media cooperation in promoting a "culture of sacred defense." This is a suggestive way to coerce less formal media outlets into agreeing to Tehran's agenda.⁵⁷

THE BEST DEFENSE IS OFFENSE: EXPLOITING REGIONAL CONFLICTS

Iran has sought to acquire strategic depth not with large deployments of conventional forces, but rather by maximizing its use of proxies to project power and exert leverage on its adversaries. In Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, Iran has sought to exploit the effects of the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings, including the rise of the so-called Islamic State organization, to build pro-Iranian factions to promote Iran's interests in those countries over the long term.

Iraq

In Iraq, Iran is pursuing a strategy similar to that which it employed in Lebanon, where it built Lebanese Hezbollah into a major military and political force – a “kingmaker” capable of determining who occupies key leadership positions. Iran has had a significant base to build on in Iraq; its efforts to empower Iraqi Shia militias began in the early 1980s, when the fledgling Islamic Republic initiated multiple efforts to replace Iraq's Saddam Hussein with a Shia Islamist government. As early as 1980, Iran sought to empower Iraqi fighters and activists of the Shia Islamist opposition Da'wa (Islamic Call) Party that was founded by Khomeini's associate Mohammad Baqr Al Sadr. Hussein killed Baqr Al Sadr that year to try to squelch pro-Iranian opposition activity. In 1981, Iran created a Tehran-controlled Da'wa offshoot called the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), and the IRGC built SCIRI's armed wing called the Badr Brigades (later called the Badr Corps, and now the Badr Organization). The Badr Brigades conducted bombings and other armed action against Iraqi Ba'th Party figures and helped Iran fight Iraqi troops during the Iran-Iraq war.

In implementing its “playbook” in Iraq, after the U.S.-led overthrow of Hussein in 2003, Iran deployed the IRGC-QF to Iraq to support not only the Badr Brigades but also other Iraqi militias, including those linked to Iraqi Shia cleric Moqtada Al Sadr. Iran is said to provide well

over \$100 million per year worth of equipment to the Iraqi militias, with figures running as high as \$1 billion per year immediately after the 2014 Islamic State offensive that brought that group to the outskirts of Baghdad and within 40 miles of the Iranian border.⁵⁸ The assistance is not just financial; IRGC-QF commander Major General Qasem Soleimani meets frequently with Iraqi Shia militia leaders.

With Iran's extensive assistance, several Iran-backed militias and their commanders as well as the Badr Organization are emerging as major factors in Iraqi politics. There are an estimated 100,000 Iraqi Shia militiamen, collectively known as Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs), sometimes referred to as Hashd al-Sha'bi, most of which belong to Iran-backed groups. The PMUs were constituted formally in a large 2014 recruitment drive to combat the Islamic State challenge, but many of the PMUs were longstanding, having been formed as underground movements against Saddam Hussein or as Shia militias that fought the U.S. military presence in Iraq during 2003-11. Iran-backed Iraqi Shia militias have retained their independent capabilities and command structure even though IS was declared "defeated" in Iraq at the end of 2017, and despite a 2016 law requiring the militias to fold into the national military command structure.

At the same time, many Iraqis blamed Iran, at least in part, for supporting efforts by then-Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki to marginalize Sunni leaders in Iraq. Maliki's actions are widely assessed as provoking Iraqi Sunni support for the Islamic State and paving the way for that organization to seize nearly 40% of Iraq's territory in 2014. In 2019, Iran pressed for the appointment of an Interior Minister who would not strictly enforce laws curbing militia influence – a policy with the potential to again inflame Sunni Iraqi opinion against the Shia dominated government there.⁵⁹

The Shia militias provide Iran with substantial leverage over not only the Iraqi leadership but also against the United States. Iran has directed its Iraqi militia allies to advocate the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq. In the event of a broader U.S.-Iran confrontation, the Iraqi militias could be mobilized by Iran to attack the approximately 5,000 U.S. military personnel in Iraq. The purported transfers of short-range ballistic missiles to one of the militia groups, Kata'ib Hezbollah, indicates that Iran sees its Iraqi proxies as a means to project power in the broader region.⁶⁰

Iran's success in Iraq is evident from analysis of three key Shia militias and their commanders. One of the militias is designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) and others are under consideration for that designation, even though none of the Iraqi Shia militias is known to purposely target civilians.

Kata'ib Hezbollah. Kata'ib Hezbollah (KAH), which has about 20,000 fighters, is closer to the IRGC-QF than any other Iraqi Shia militia, perhaps explaining why it is designated by the U.S. State Department as an FTO. The commander of the KAH, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, was an operative of the pro-Iranian Da'wa (Islamic Call) party during the rule of Saddam Hussein. Muhandis formed KAH in 2006 to oppose the U.S. military presence in Iraq, and he is said to be a core figure in an effort by Iran-backed factions to urge a U.S. withdrawal from Iraq. Muhandis' clout also flows from his position as deputy leader of the whole PMU force.

Asa'ib Ahl Al Haq. The leader of Asa'ib Ahl Al Haq (AAH, League of the Family of the Righteous), Qais al-Khazali, holds one of twelve seats the faction won in Iraq's May 2018 national assembly elections. Khazali led a small Shia militia group when he was captured by U.S. forces for a 2007 raid that killed five American soldiers in Karbala. After his release in 2010, Khazali took refuge in Iran, returning to Iraq in 2011 to take command of the newly formed AAH. The Trump administration is reportedly considering designating AAH, which has about 15,000 fighters, as an FTO.⁶¹

Badr Organization. The Badr Organization, the oldest Iraqi Shia militia with about 20,000 fighters, was formed by the IRGC as a rearguard effort against Saddam Hussein's regime during the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war. It was largely recruited from Iraqis captured by Iran during the Iran-Iraq War and became the vanguard of the post-1991 Gulf War unsuccessful uprising against Hussein.⁶² The Badr Organization supported the 2003 U.S. military intervention in Iraq as a means of achieving Shia rule, and it immediately joined the political process. Its leader is Hadi al-Amiri, whose "Conquest" political society won the second-highest number of seats in the May 2018 Iraqi election, positioning Amiri as a major figure in Iraqi politics.

Harakat al-Nujaba (HAN). HAN with its leader, Akram Abbas al-Kabi, is among the most radical of the Iraqi Shia militias. It is a breakaway faction of the Mahdi Army "special groups" that attacked U.S. forces in Iraq during the 2003-11 U.S. intervention there. It formed in 2013 in order to specifically deploy to Syria to assist the Assad regime. Al-Kabi has stated publicly that he would follow any order by Iran's Supreme Leader Khamene'i, including overthrowing the Iraqi government or fighting alongside the Houthis in Yemen.⁶³ It was designated by the U.S. Treasury Department as a terrorist supporting entity on March 5, 2019.

Syria

Syrian President Bashar Al Assad is a key Iranian ally, despite his regime's secular ideology and loose connection to the Shi'i religious sect. He supports Iran's regional objectives and has been vital to Iran's ability to safely and securely resupply Hezbollah, as well as to ensuring that Sunni

radicals cannot attack Hezbollah from Syrian territory. The Assad family has been Iran's closest Arab ally in a region generally hostile to Iran, even to the point of shutting down a key Iraq-Syria oil pipeline during the Iran-Iraq war to choke off Saddam Hussein's revenue sources. Iranian leaders know that a Sunni opposition government hostile to Iran is likely to come to power if Assad falls, and all of the strategic benefits Iran accrues from Syria will be lost.

To safeguard this strategic asset, Iran has used all aspects of its national power to protect Assad's rule against the armed rebellion that began in 2011 and nearly caused his regime's collapse. Iran has provided funds, lines of credit to purchase Iranian goods, oil, weapons, and IRGC-QF advisors to Syrian forces. By 2015, Iran was deploying nearly 2,000 Iranian military personnel in Syria, including IRGC-QF personnel, IRGC ground forces, and some regular army special forces personnel.⁶⁴ The deployment of Iranian regular army forces ("Artesh") in Syria was particularly significant because Iran's regular military has historically not deployed outside Iran. Its participation in Syria demonstrated the ingenuity of the IRGC-QF in deploying to Syria the optimal combination of Iranian resources to suit battlefield needs. Iran's Artesh has more experience than the IRGC with tanks, mortars, and other major combat systems and this expertise was put to effective use by the Artesh in support of Assad.

Iran also created a Syrian militia, the National Defense Forces (NDF), to take pressure off the beleaguered Syrian Arab Army (SAA). Iran facilitated the intervention of about 7,000 Lebanese Hezbollah fighters to the battlefield. Hezbollah intervened not only to help Iran and Assad, but also to help itself, insofar as Sunni opposition fighters in Syria sought to use their presence in Syria to conduct cross-border attacks into Lebanon against Hezbollah. And, as noted above, Iran recruited tens of thousands of Shia fighters from Afghanistan and Pakistan to provide additional manpower on key fronts. Although many of the Shia recruits have gone home as of mid-2019, remaining Iran-backed forces are likely to play a role in any Syrian government offensive to recapture Idlib province, the last major bastion of opposition forces.

Iran's insistence on the Assad regime's survival will virtually ensure that Iran does not withdraw all its forces from Syria as long as any threat to Assad's grip on power persists, whether from organized opposition militias or from a popular uprising. In 2018, Iran and Syria updated their military cooperation agreements, perhaps suggesting Iranian intent to remain militarily in Syria indefinitely. A Russian withdrawal from Syria would likely prompt Iran to keep more forces in Syria for longer than might be the case if Russia remains involved in Syria.

Iran has sought to use its presence in Syria to secure a land corridor from Iran to Lebanon, which Iran has long wanted as an alternative to the relatively risky process of flying cargo aircraft to Damascus and then shipping weaponry to Lebanon. In so doing, Iran-backed forces

sometimes sought to encroach on U.S. training locations for Syrian forces in southeast Syria, and U.S. firepower was required to turn back that encroachment.⁶⁵ However, the presence of some U.S. forces in eastern Syria has complicated Iran's plans, and frustrating Iran's effort was likely a major factor in President Trump's 2019 decision to keep at least some U.S. forces from Syria.

Iran's military involvement in Syria also enables Iran to project power against Israel. Iran's extensive involvement in Syria has alarmed Israeli leaders who now apparently perceive Iran as using Syrian territory to exert greater leverage against Israel – adding to the threat posed by Hezbollah on Israel's northern border. Israel accuses Iran of constructing bases in Syria, including rocket and missile factories that can safely supply Hezbollah. The bases at which Iran reportedly maintains a presence in Syria include Tiyas and al Shayrat airfields near Homs, Damascus airport, Nayrab airfield near Aleppo, and a base at al-Qiswah.⁶⁶ Iran tested Israel's capabilities in February 2018 by launching a drone over Israeli territory, which Israel shot down, triggering a clash that resulted in the downing of one Israeli combat jet. Further clashes in April and May of that year, which culminated in a large Israeli strike on Iranian facilities in Syria on May 9-10, increased the potential for escalation.

Iran has been liberal in its use of funds and credits in Syria. In June 2015, the office of the U.N. Special Envoy to Syria, Staffan de Mistura, estimated Iran's aid to Syria to total about \$6 billion per year.⁶⁷ This figure included economic aid (for which some figures, such as lines of credit, are publicly available in official statements), subsidized oil and commodity transfers, and military aid. The State Department's "Outlaw Regime" report asserts that Iran has extended "at least \$4.6 billion in credit to the Assad regime" since 2012.⁶⁸

Iran has also engaged in multilateral diplomacy on a political solution in Syria in order to mask its intention to keep Assad in power. Iran offered a few proposals for a peaceful transition in Syria and, in 2015, joined the "Vienna Process," which included the United States after the Obama Administration dropped its objections to Iranian participation.⁶⁹ However, Russia's intervention in Syria eliminated the need for Iran to accept any compromise proposals. With the Vienna process moribund over the past two years, Iran has maintained a pretense of interest in negotiations by participating in the Russia-led "Astana Process" that also includes Turkey, and in which the United States does not participate.

Yemen

In Yemen, Iran has taken advantage of an unexpected opportunity to promote its national security and project power more broadly. Historically, Iran's clerical establishment has not had close relations with the Zaydi Shia in Yemen – the sect of Shiism to which the Houthis belong.

Nor was Yemen a target of early efforts by the Islamic Republic's regime to export the Islamic revolution. Perhaps because Yemen has not been a close ally of the United States or a base for U.S. forces, Iran's leaders perceived no strategic imperative to build influence there.

However, Iran's leaders saw the political and military success of the Houthi rebels in Yemen in 2014 and 2015 as an opportunity to encircle and outflank Iran's key strategic adversary, Saudi Arabia, with limited direct involvement of the IRGC-QF. Having largely accomplished that objective, the increasingly sophisticated nature of Iran's support for the Houthis could suggest that Iran perceives the Houthis as a potential proxy to project power on the southwestern coast of the Arabian Peninsula. Yet, this Iranian encroachment on the Bab el Mandeb Strait, through which as much as 10% of internationally-traded oil flows, has attracted the attention of the United States. According to then-commander of U.S. Central Command, General Joseph Votel, that Strait "...is a choke point, it is a major transit area for commerce, not only ours but for international ships. About 60 to 70 ships go through there a day. What we have seen, I believe, that the—with the support of Iran, we have seen the migration of capabilities that we previously observed in the Straits of Hormuz, a layered defense, consists of coastal defense missiles and radar systems, mines, explosive boats that have been migrated from the Straits of Hormuz to this particular area right here, threatening commerce and ships and our security operations in that particular area."⁷⁰ The Trump administration has repeatedly referred to the threat to the Strait as justification for its maximum pressure campaign on Iran. The Obama Administration also considered this an important strategic goal, and struck Houthi missile installations along the Strait in 2016 after the Houthis fired these weapons at U.S., UAE, and Saudi ships off the Yemen coast.

Still, in keeping with Iran's low-risk approach in Yemen, Iran's support for the Houthis has been limited. The State Department's "Outlaw Regime" report states that since 2012, Iran "has spent hundreds of millions of dollars" aiding the Houthis. Secretary Pompeo mentioned the same figure in the transcript of his briefing for Senators on November 28, 2018, during which he also stated that a relatively small 20-person IRGC-QF unit called "Unit 190" is responsible for funneling Iranian weaponry to the Houthis.⁷¹ Pompeo added that the head of the unit also arranges for the travel of IRGC-QF and Hezbollah advisers to go to Yemen to advise the Houthis. However, there have not been any reported visits to Yemen by IRGC-QF commander Qasem Soleimani. Neither Iran nor Hezbollah have announced any casualties among their personnel suffered in Yemen, suggesting that their direct, on-the-ground involvement in Yemen is limited.

CONTROLLING THE PERSIAN GULF

Iran's efforts to dominate the Persian Gulf long predate the Islamic Republic. Iran has always asserted its argument for hegemony influence in the Gulf based on its long coastline on that waterway and its long and historical civilization. The Islamic Republic has sought to exert its control of the Gulf by applying its "playbook" to several of the Gulf states – particularly Bahrain and Saudi Arabia – but with little success to date. Iran's setbacks in the Gulf are, in large part, a function of the reality that, with the exception of Bahrain and eastern Saudi Arabia, Shias are either a small minority or not particularly restive and susceptible to Iran's revolutionary appeals. One of Iran's goals in the Gulf has been to deny the U.S. military access to close proximity to Iran, and Iran has demonstrably and definitively failed in that goal.

Bahrain

In Bahrain, which was shaken by an Arab Spring uprising, Iran has sought to address both ideological and national interest imperatives. Because Bahrain has a Shia majority, it was an immediate target for Iranian efforts to export the Islamic Revolution.

Iranian leaders calculated that bringing a Shia-led, pro-Iranian government to power in Bahrain would rupture the GCC, deal a significant strategic blow to Saudi Arabia, and likely cause the United States to lose the critical regional U.S. naval headquarters that Bahrain has hosted since World War II. To some in Bahrain, the Islamic Republic's policy represented an expression of the longstanding Iranian belief that Bahrain should not have become independent in 1970, but instead should have accepted offers to formally affiliate with Iran.

The government in Bahrain has long blamed Iran for encouraging Bahrain's Shia opposition to rebel against the government, and for supplying the violent opposition with arms and explosives. In December 1981, and again in June 1996, Bahrain publicly accused Iran of trying to organize

a coup by pro-Iranian Bahraini Shias. Bahraini authorities linked the alleged 1981 plot to a group called the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain (IFLB), a faction formed by the two Modarassi brothers (Mohammad Taqi and Abd al-Hadi) linked to a radical Iran-based cleric, Grand Ayatollah Mohammad Shirazi.⁷² Bahrain blamed the 1996 plot on an IFLB offshoot termed “Bahrain Hezbollah.” In September 2018, Bahrain’s government revived such coup plotting accusations against Iran, charging 169 individuals for allegedly forming a reorganized Bahrain Hezbollah, with the backing of the IRGC-QF and links to Lebanese Hezbollah.⁷³ Bahrain has consistently backed Saudi Arabia in its disputes with Iran and other parties. In sympathy with Saudi Arabia over the Nimr al-Baqr Al Nimr execution, Bahrain broke diplomatic relations with Iran, going beyond a 2011-2012 cycle of tensions in which Iran and Bahrain withdrew their ambassadors. Bahrain also closed Future Bank, a Bahrain bank owned by two major Iranian banks, Bank Saderat and Bank Mell.⁷⁴

Bahrain’s leaders cite Iranian statements as evidence that Iran seeks to promote the overthrow of the government. In June 2016, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamene’i called the revocation “blatant foolishness and insanity” that would mean “removing a barrier between fiery Bahrain youths and the state.” The Trump administration has firmly backed the government view that Iran is arming Shia militants in Bahrain, and has used its sanctions authority and public diplomacy to support Bahrain government assertions of IRGC-QF intervention in the country.

The U.S. State Department reports that several underground Bahraini Shia militant groups are working with the IRGC-QF. These groups have periodically attacked security forces with bombs and improvised explosive devices (IEDs). These groups have not targeted civilians, although on at least one occasion civilians have been killed or injured. On January 1, 2017, 10 detainees who had been convicted of militant activities such as those discussed above broke out of Bahrain’s Jaw prison with the help of attackers outside the jail. According to the State Department’s international terrorism report for 2017, “Terrorist activity in Bahrain increased in 2017,” citing Shia militant attacks that the report says killed four police officers in 2017.⁷⁵ Mainstream opposition factions deny any connection to underground violent groups, accusing the government of exaggerating Iran’s support for these groups.

The most active underground militant groups in Bahrain include the following:

Al Ashtar Brigades (AAB). This group, the most well-known of the underground groups, issued its first public statement in April 2013. It has claimed responsibility for about 20 bombings against security personnel, including a March 2014 attack that killed three police officers, including a UAE officer. On March 17, 2017, the Trump administration designated two Ashtar Brigades members, one of which is Iran-based, as Specially Designated Global Terrorists

(SDGTs) under Executive Order 13224, which blocks U.S.-based property of entities that conduct terrorism. On July 10, 2018, the State Department named the Al Ashtar Brigades as an FTO under Section 219 of the Immigration and Nationality Act.⁷⁶ Some small groups, using the names Bahrain Liberation Movement, the Resistance Brigades, the Mukhtar Brigades, the Basta organization, and the Imam Army, appear to be offshoots of the Al Ashtar Brigades.

The “14 February Coalition.” Named for the anniversary of the Bahrain uprising, it derives inspiration from anti-regime protesters in Egypt and the uprising there in 2011. The group claims to be broadly representative of the Bahraini Shia uprising but the Bahrain government considers it a terrorist group because it has committed acts of violence.⁷⁷ The group claimed responsibility for an April 14, 2013, explosion in the Financial Harbour district. In September 2013, 50 Shias were sentenced to up to 15 years in prison for alleged involvement in the group. On November 10, 2017, militants allegedly from the group attacked a key pipeline that supplies Saudi oil to the Bahrain Petroleum Company refinery in Sitra, Bahrain.

Saudi Arabia

Iranian leaders consider Saudi Arabia an existential adversary of no less significance than the United States or Israel. Iran and Saudi Arabia accuse each other of seeking regional hegemony and of attempting to undermine each other's regimes. Iran initially viewed the mostly Shia-inhabited eastern provinces of Saudi Arabia as an arena for export of the Islamic Revolution. Iran reportedly provided support to a Shia dissident group called the Organization for Islamic Revolution in the Arabian Peninsula (OIRAP), some of whom formed a clone of Lebanese Hezbollah in 1987, called Saudi Hezbollah.⁷⁸ Saudi Arabia asserts that this group was responsible for the June 1996 Khobar Towers bombing that killed 19 U.S. Air Force personnel housed there. Saudi Arabia accused Iran of providing safe haven to the alleged mastermind of the bombing, Ahmad Mughassil, a leader of Saudi Hezbollah. Mughassil was arrested in Beirut in August 2015 as he prepared to board a flight to Tehran.⁷⁹

If Iran is seeking to orchestrate the breakup of Saudi Arabia in an effort to mortally weaken the Kingdom, that effort appears to be failing. Shia dissidents do not currently seem to pose any threat to Saudi security forces. Shia unrest in eastern Saudi Arabia has been muted in recent years. Some assess that the Saudi execution of dissident Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr at the end of 2015 reflected an unjustified Saudi paranoia about Iran's ability to influence the Kingdom's Shia citizens. In January 2016, Saudi Arabia severed diplomatic relations with Iran in the wake of violent attacks and vandalism against its embassy in Tehran and consulate in Mashhad, Iran.⁸⁰ The attacks were a reaction to the Nimr execution. In sympathy with Saudi Arabia, Bahrain broke diplomatic relations with Iran, and Qatar, Kuwait, and UAE recalled their ambassadors

from Tehran. In December 2016, Saudi Arabia executed 15 Saudi Shias sentenced to death for “spying” for Iran.

Saudi officials also accuse Iran of attempting to destabilize the Kingdom in the Sunni heartland, not only the Shia-inhabited eastern provinces. Saudi leaders claim that Iran incited violent demonstrations at several Hajj pilgrimages in Mecca in the 1980s, and a particularly violent Hajj caused a break in relations with Iran in 1987. Relations were restored in 1991, but were broken again in 2016 over the Nimr execution.

The mutual animosity has aggravated regional sectarian tensions and caused escalations of the region’s various conflicts. In 2015, Saudi Arabia assembled an Arab coalition to intervene in Yemen’s internal conflict. Saudi leaders, and their allies in the UAE, specifically assert that Iran seeks to implement its standard “playbook” in Yemen by engineering a takeover of state power by the Houthi rebels. The Saudis and their partners refer to this intent as the “Lebanonization of Yemen” that they will not permit. Saudi Arabia and the UAE insisted that a Houthi consolidation in Yemen would enable Iran to essentially control the underbelly of the Arabian Peninsula, from which it or its proxy could continue to launch missiles at Saudi Arabia and its allies and threaten the Bab el-Mandeb shipping chokepoint. Saudi Arabia and its allies say they must roll back Iranian influence by militarily pushing back Houthi and Houthi-allied forces and restoring the former Hadi government – a project that the Saudi-led coalition has found nearly impossible to accomplish.

Saudi Arabia’s Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman has sought to roll back Iran’s influence in Lebanon as well, despite Hezbollah’s political strength there. In 2017, Saudi leaders unsuccessfully sought to undermine Lebanese Hezbollah by pressuring Saudi ally and Lebanese Prime Minister Sa’d Hariri to resign and expose Hezbollah’s pervasive influence over the government of Lebanon. The move backfired with public clamor for Hariri to remain in his post. Saudi leaders also have sought since mid-2017 to engage Iraqi leaders to draw the country closer to the Arab world and away from Iran.⁸¹

Iran has in recent years pursued a relatively nuanced strategy in the other Gulf states, recognizing that that Shia population in these states is either smaller or, in the case of Kuwait, well integrated into the political system. The overall Iranian goal of destroying the GCC as an alliance and as an instrument of U.S. regional power is on display in Iran’s exploitation of the intra-GCC rift between Qatar and Saudi Arabia/UAE. Still, Iran’s efforts to influence Qatar or promote instability within it have been muted or absent, and Qatar is not analyzed separately in this section.

United Arab Emirates

Short of an all-out missile barrage intended to maximize damage on the UAE's expensive infrastructure, Iran has little strategic, ideological, or sectarian leverage over the country, which is closely aligned with Saudi Arabia on virtually every regional issue, particularly Iran. The UAE is also a close U.S. ally that hosts more than 5,000 U.S. military personnel at various bases and facilities – a force that would undoubtedly conduct overwhelming retaliation against any Iranian military assault on the Emirates. The de-facto ruler in Abu Dhabi, Shaykh Mohammad bin Zayid Al Nahayyan, is an outspoken defender of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman against criticism for the killing of Saudi dissident journalist Jamal Kashoggi. Iranian-origin residents of the Dubai emirate number about 300,000, and many Iranian-owned businesses are located there, including branch offices of large trading companies based in Iran. However, there has never been any evidence of organized dissent against the UAE government among any members of the Iranian community in Dubai. And, the country has few hardline Islamists of any stripe, even if the UAE leadership has been overly fearful of a threat from domestic Muslim Brotherhood adherents.

Lacking opportunity for the IRGC-QF to undermine UAE stability from within, Iran seeks to pressure the UAE from outside, by supporting the Houthi rebels in their control of substantial territory in northern Yemen, including the capital, Sanaa. UAE leaders blamed Iran for arming the Houthis with anti-ship missiles that damaged a UAE naval vessel in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait in late 2016, and for firing Iran-supplied short-range ballistic missiles on UAE territory. The UAE has been, aside from Saudi Arabia, the lead force combatting the Houthis in Yemen.

In 1971, the Shah of Iran's forces seized the Persian Gulf islands of Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tunb islands. This seizure of several islands from the UAE in the Persian Gulf gives Iran the ability to directly pressure the Emirates. The UAE and Iran subsequently agreed to share control of Abu Musa but the Tunbs remained under full Iranian control. The Islamic Republic took full control of Abu Musa in 1992, expelling all UAE police forces from the island. In the 1990s, Iran gained a strategic advantage not only over the UAE but also over the U.S. Navy by emplacing artillery, surface-to-air missiles and other weapons on the three islands.⁸² Later, the two countries sought mechanisms to resolve the dispute, but without agreement. The UAE has sought to refer the dispute to the International Court of Justice (ICJ), but Iran insists on resolving the issue bilaterally. (ICJ referral requires concurrence from both parties to a dispute.) In 2013-2014, the two countries held direct, apparently productive, discussions on the issue, and Iran reportedly removed some military equipment from the islands.⁸³ However, to date, no resolution has been announced.

Kuwait

Iran has very few tools to use against Kuwait, in large part because Kuwaiti Shias are well integrated into the political process and the economy. Kuwait's Shias – comprising approximately 25% of the population – do not constitute a “dispossessed” minority looking to overturn the existing political structure. They have tended to support the ruling Al Sabah family, including within the elected National Assembly. The Al Sabah's opposition has instead come from Sunni Islamists linked to the Muslim Brotherhood or Salafist schools of thought.

Iran was not at any time able to mobilize Kuwaiti Shias to end Kuwait's support for the Iraqi war effort in the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988). Iran in fact lost support within Kuwait for its violent efforts to pressure the Kuwaiti government in the early 1980s. That took the form of Iranian support for the December 1983 bombing of the U.S. and French embassies in Kuwait City by the pro-Iranian Iraqi Da'wa Party, and that group's May 1985 assassination attempt on then-Amir of Kuwait Jabir al-Ahmad al-Jabir Al Sabah.⁸⁴

Later, after the Iraqi invasion and occupation of Kuwait during 1990-1991, Kuwait moved past the Iran-backed attacks inside Kuwait and supported Iran as a counterweight to Saddam Hussein's regime. Kuwait hosted conferences in which members of some of these same militant Iraqi Shia groups participated, in large part because these Shias were seeking to overthrow Hussein. After the fall of his regime in 2003, Kuwait again shifted toward a more anti-Iran posture, in line with U.S. policy to contain Iranian power. On numerous occasions, Kuwaiti courts have convicted Kuwaitis with spying for the IRGC-QF or Iranian intelligence. Kuwait recalled its Ambassador from Iran in connection with the Saudi-Iran dispute over the execution of Nimr.

Oman

Iran has refrained entirely from trying to destabilize Oman or exert pressure on it. Rather, Iran sees Oman as a unique channel to the broader GCC and to the United States, taking advantage of Oman's relatively positive view of the Islamic Republic. Omani leaders assert that engagement with Iran better mitigates the potential threat from that country than confrontation – a stance that has positioned Oman to mediate disputes between Iran and the GCC and the United States. Omanis are Ibadhi Muslims, a moderate form of Islam not amenable to either Sunni or Shiite Islamist extremism. There are positive sentiments among the Omani leadership for the Shah of Iran's support for Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al Said's 1970 bloodless takeover from his father, and the Shah's provision of troops to help Oman end the leftist revolt in Oman's Dhofar Province during 1962-1975.

Sultan Qaboos has taken political risks to preserve ties to Iran. He made a controversial visit to Iran in August 2009 at the height of the “Green Movement” protests in Iran over the allegedly fraudulent reelection of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. He visited again in August 2013, after Iran’s President Hassan Rouhani first took office. Rouhani sought to use Omani mediation during 2014-2017 in an effort to improve relations with the GCC states.

In order not to ruin its relations with Iran, Oman pointedly delayed joining the December 2015 Saudi formation of a broad “counterterrorism coalition” that notably excluded Iran and Iran’s allies, although Oman finally did join that initiative in December 2016. Oman furthermore did not support the Saudi efforts to persuade all the GCC states to break relations with Iran in connection with the dispute over the Saudi execution of dissident Shiite cleric Nimr Al Nimr in 2016.

Yet, if Iran’s strategy is to divide the GCC, Oman might be helping Iran do so. Oman has signed defense agreements with Iran, including a 2013 Memorandum of Understanding on military cooperation that provides for joint naval exercises. The other GCC states oppose defense ties to Tehran. Iran and Oman are also increasingly intertwined economically. Iran reportedly envisions the expansion of Oman’s port of Al Duqm as providing Tehran with a major trading hub to interact with the global economy. Iran and Oman are studying a potential joint venture to build a \$200 million car production plant at Al Duqm.⁸⁵

Still, Oman and Iran have conflicting interests in Yemen. As noted above, Iran apparently has taken advantage of its relationship with Oman’s porous border with Yemen to smuggle weapons to the Houthi rebels in Yemen, causing strain between Oman and the United States. Iran’s support for the Houthis in Yemen has contributed to the lack of a resolution of the Yemen conflict which, as it continues, increasingly threatens to spill over to tribes and communities inside Oman, along the Yemen border.

MOVES ON THE PERIPHERY

Iran has sought, with mixed success, to exert influence outside the core of the Middle East region. One such peripheral state, Afghanistan, borders Iran and has been generally responsive to Iran's operations there. Iran also shares a border with Pakistan and borders, or is in close proximity to, several Central Asian states. However, Pakistan and the Central Asian states have faced varying degrees of threat from Sunni jihadist groups similar or related to those that have sometimes attacked Iran. As a result, Iran has sought cooperative relations with Pakistan and the Central Asian states rather than try to influence them from within.

Afghanistan: A Complex Engagement

In Afghanistan, Iran has to some extent shown an ability to support a wide variety of actors that are in conflict with each other. In so doing, Iran is attempting to advance multiple goals – to build influence in the U.S.-backed Afghan government as well as develop leverage against the United States. This strategy has led Iran to, in some cases, support actors that are inimical to Iran's Shia-based ideology and, it can be argued, have posed a threat to Iran's national interests. Iran's willingness to undertake such risks – by supporting Taliban-related militants – demonstrates Iran's imperative of keeping the United States military under pressure in areas near Iran's borders. Other than obtaining leverage against the United States, one Iranian goal is to restore its historic influence over areas of eastern, central, and northern Afghanistan, where “Dari” – speaking (Dari is akin to Persian) Afghans are dominant.

The Iranian support to Taliban factions comes despite the fact that Iran saw the Taliban regime in Afghanistan of 1996-2001 as an adversary. Taliban fighters killed nine Iranian diplomats at Iran's consulate in Mazar-e-Sharif in August 1998, prompting Iran to mobilize ground forces to the Afghan border⁸⁶, and the Taliban committed atrocities against Shia Afghans (Hazara tribes) in the course of capturing central and western Afghanistan.

Iran has been widely assessed as providing materiel support, including rockets, to select Taliban and other militants in Afghanistan, and of training Taliban fighters in small unit tactics, small arms use, explosives, and indirect weapons fire.⁸⁷ In his May 21, 2018, speech, Secretary Pompeo demanded that “Iran, too, must end support for the Taliban and other terrorists in Afghanistan and the region, and cease harboring senior Al Qaeda leaders.”⁸⁸ Iran appears to be calculating that Taliban inclusion in a future Afghan government will ensure that U.S. troops cannot operate there. Reflecting apparent concern about the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan, Iran reportedly tried to derail the U.S.-Afghanistan Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA), signed in September 2014, that allowed the United States to maintain troops in Afghanistan after 2014. The BSA contains a provision, included partly at Iran’s behest, prohibiting the United States from launching military action against other countries from Afghanistan.

Yet, Iran’s program for Afghanistan is complex and sophisticated, not exclusively limited to arming anti-U.S. militant groups.⁸⁹ Iran directly engages the central government, which is dominated by ethnic Pashtuns, who are generally Sunni Muslims. In October 2010, then-President Hamid Karzai admitted that Iran was providing about \$2 million per year in cash to his office to incur Karzai’s goodwill.⁹⁰ However, other figures about Iranian support to Karzai vary widely, from \$1 to 2 million every other month, to single payments as large as \$6 million.⁹¹ Iran also has donated funds to Afghan parliamentary candidates in order to build support in the broader political structure. The two countries have long cooperated effectively against cross-border narcotics trafficking.

Iran also works with Afghanistan’s Persian-speaking and Shia minorities to extend its tentacles. Iran has long supported the Tajik minority that formed the core of the anti-Taliban “Northern Alliance” during 1996-2001 and continues to be a strong and pro-Iranian element of Afghanistan’s political government structure. One of Iran’s allies is Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, who is half-Tajik and speaks Dari; he is “Chief Executive Officer” of the Afghan government under a power-sharing arrangement with President Ashraf Ghani that followed the 2014 presidential election. Some of the Shia fighters that Iran recruited to fight in Syria have returned from that battlefield to Afghanistan, where they are reportedly being used by Iran to extend its influence there.⁹²

Sudan: A Failure of Lasting Influence

Sudan represents an arena where all of Iran’s strategies and activities failed to accomplish any objectives for Iran, whether ideological, strategic, political, defensive, or offensive. What once was the object of a major Iranian push to establish its influence in the southern reaches of the Middle East has now turned into a significant ally of Iran’s main nemesis, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf

states. That will likely continue to be the case despite the ousting of President Omar Hassan Al Bashir by popular protests and his replacement by a military transition council.

The Iran-Sudan relationship began in the 1990s when Islamist leaders in Sudan, who came to power de-facto in 1989, welcomed international Islamist movements to train and organize there. Iran began supplying Sudan with weapons and training it used on its various fronts, such as in its internal conflicts with rebels in what is now South Sudan, as well as in the Darfur region.⁹³ Iranian pilots reportedly assisted Sudan's air force, Iran's regular navy made port calls in Port Sudan, and Iran helped Sudan build military production capabilities. Iran's relations with Sudan provided Iran with a channel to supply weapons to Hamas and other Palestinian militant groups in the Gaza Strip, and Israel, at times, took military action against sites in Sudan that Israel asserted were being used by Iran to arm Hamas.⁹⁴

However, because Sudan is inhabited by Sunni Arabs, it has always been considered susceptible to overtures from Saudi Arabia and other GCC countries to distance itself from Iran. Since 2014, Saudi and UAE economic assistance to and investment in Sudan have caused Sudan to realign. In September 2014, the Sudanese government closed all Iranian cultural centers in Sudan and expelled the cultural attaché and other Iranian diplomats on the grounds that Iran was using its facilities and personnel in Sudan to promote Shia Islam.⁹⁵ In March 2015, Sudan joined the Saudi-led Arab coalition against the Houthis in Yemen, appearing to confirm that Sudan had realigned from Iran to the GCC states. In December 2015, Sudan joined the Saudi-led antiterrorism coalition discussed earlier. In January 2016, Sudan severed ties with Iran in connection with the Saudi execution of Nimr al-Nimr.

Sudan, like Iran, is still named by the United States as a state sponsor of terrorism, although U.S. officials have praised the country's counterterrorism cooperation in recent years, possibly to the point where the administration might decide to remove Sudan from the terrorism list. The prospect for removal from the list will depend on what regime emerges from the ouster of Bashir.

LEBANESE HEZBOLLAH: IRAN'S FORCE MULTIPLIER

In no instance is Iran's strategic playbook in greater view than the case of Lebanese Hezbollah. Iranian leaders uphold Hezbollah as the clearest example of success for Iran's "exportation" of Iran's Islamic Revolution, and Hezbollah is Iran's most significant non-state ally. Iran has steadily nurtured Hezbollah from a small collection of clerics, to a significant militia with a charity and humanitarian arm and media network, to a political party capable of winning seats in parliament and government, now acting as a major determinant of Lebanon's leadership. That political success also gives Hezbollah a stake in supporting its own interests, and not just serving as Iran's unquestioning proxy.

The June 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, a response to attacks on northern Israel by Palestinian fighters, galvanized the formation of Lebanese Hezbollah. The invasion provoked Iran, with Syrian approval, to send a contingent of about 1,000 IRGC personnel to the Baalbek region of eastern Lebanon, ostensibly to combat the Israelis. However, instead of fighting Israeli forces about 35 miles south of their position, the IRGC began propagating Iran's Islamic Revolution among the Shia community and started running social welfare programs, schools, and hospitals. Gradually, the IRGC and hardline Iranian clerics promoted the coalescence in the Baalbek of local Shia clerics and non-clerical militants who, by late 1982, were referring to themselves as Hezbollah, the Arabic word for "Party of God". Each cleric who joined Hezbollah brought large parts of his congregation into Hezbollah's militia. Additional recruits were attracted by Hezbollah's vision of an Islamic Lebanon within a broader Islamic revolution, catering to the economically deprived.

The emotional and ideological ties between Iran and Hezbollah run deep. Many of the clerics that formed Hezbollah had studied under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini when he was in exile in Najaf, Iraq, in the 1970s, or his associate Muhammad Baqr Al Sadr, who was executed by

Saddam Hussein's regime in 1980.⁹⁶ (Khomeini began teaching in Najaf, which is sacred to Shias worldwide, when the Shah of Iran exiled him from Iran in 1963.) Hezbollah cleric Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah helped found the Da'wa (Islamic Call), a forerunner of Hezbollah, when he was a student of Muhammad Baqr Al Sadr in Najaf, Iraq in the 1960s. Fadlallah brought the Da'wa to Lebanon in the mid-1960s. It is this mentor-student relationship – a crucial element in the Shia clerical hierarchy – that in large part forms the emotional bond between Iran and Hezbollah. However, there have always been some strains between Iran and Hezbollah over tactics, as well as cultural differences between Arab Hezbollah and Persian Iran.

Iranian leaders have long worked with Hezbollah as an instrument to pressure Israel. Hezbollah's attacks on Israeli forces in its self-declared "security zone" in southern Lebanon contributed to an Israeli withdrawal from that territory in May 2000. Hezbollah fired Iranian-supplied rockets on Israel's northern towns and cities during a July-August 2006 war with Israel. In 2018, the U.S. Treasury Department raised its assessment of Iran's financial support for Hezbollah to \$700 million per year⁹⁷ from a prior figure of about \$200 million per year. The higher figure might reflect the increased operational tempo Hezbollah has had to assume since the Syria civil war began. And, as noted, Iran has resupplied Hezbollah with well over 100,000 rockets and missiles of various types since the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah conflict – an arsenal capable enough to concern Israeli commanders that Hezbollah might be able to overwhelm Israeli defenses such as the Iron Dome rocket interceptor system.

Hezbollah's battlefield experience and Arab language made the organization useful to Iran's aims well beyond Lebanon. Iran has facilitated Hezbollah's involvement in the Syria conflict on behalf of the Assad regime, whose continuation in power is in the interests of both Iran and Hezbollah. Syria is the key conduit through which the IRGC-QF arms and assists Hezbollah. Hezbollah reportedly has helped Iran train and advise Iraq's Shia militias as well as the Houthis in Yemen.⁹⁸

The perceived "victories" over Israel and Iran's unflinching support have empowered Hezbollah to become a major force in Lebanon's politics.⁹⁹ It started competing in Lebanese parliamentary elections in the 1990s and began to accept cabinet seats in the mid-2000s. As a result of 2018 elections in Lebanon, it and its allied factions control 70 out of Lebanon's 128 seats in the Lebanese parliament, putting Hezbollah in position to veto any potentially adverse legislation.¹⁰⁰ Hezbollah is now a "kingmaker" in Lebanon – its backing helped Hezbollah ally General (ret.) Michel Aoun become president in October 2016.¹⁰¹ Hezbollah also has been able to exert influence in key ministries, such as the Ministry of Health, that legitimize Hezbollah's longstanding charity and social welfare component and help Hezbollah argue that it is serving the needs of the Lebanese people.

U.S. officials say that Hezbollah is “capable of operating around the globe,” and Iran and Hezbollah still see some utility in carrying out acts of terrorism – presumably by signaling to Israel that this “Axis of Resistance” is capable of striking Israel at a time and place of the Axis’ choosing. In 2012, Hezbollah terrorists killed five Israeli tourists (and one Bulgarian) in Bulgaria. Hezbollah operatives are known to operate in parts of Africa and South America where large Lebanese diaspora communities reside. Two of Hezbollah’s most significant terrorist attacks occurred in Buenos Aires in the 1990s – the March 1992 bombing of Israel’s embassy and the July 1994 bombing of the Argentine-Jewish Mutual Association (AMIA).

THROWING ISRAEL OFF BALANCE

Iran identifies Israel as an illegitimate feature of the region, essentially a creation of the West and a “branch office of the United States” in the Middle East. To that extent, Iran’s rhetoric mirrors that of hardline Arab nationalists. Supreme Leader Khamene’i has gone several steps further, repeatedly referring to Israel as a “cancerous tumor” that needs to be “eradicated” from the region.¹⁰² He has stopped short of threatening to take action to bring about that result, but, in a September 2015 speech, Khamene’i stated that Israel will likely not exist in 25 years – the time frame for the last of the Iran nuclear deal restrictions to expire. Iran also blames Israel for oppressing the Palestinians and denying them their rights. All of these positions and formulations represent a sharp departure from those of the regime of the Shah of Iran, whose government maintained relatively normal relations with Israel. These statements and threats prompt Israeli leaders to assert that a nuclear-armed Iran would be an “existential threat” to Israel and that a nuclear-armed Iran needs to be prevented, even if doing so requires military action.

Strategically, Israel represents not only a threat to Iran by itself, but also by extension in Israel’s role as a proxy and ally of the United States. Iran is addressing that perceived threat by providing material support to non-state actors, such as Hamas and Hezbollah, that have undertaken armed action against Israel. Building on the success of Hezbollah in compelling Israel to withdraw from south Lebanon, Iran calculates that pressuring Israel through allies and proxies can perhaps compel Israel to make additional territorial concessions or undertake actions that stimulate increased international criticism of Israel. Iran also perceives that providing its allies with ballistic missiles and rockets gives Iran the ability to threaten Israel with greater damage and more civilian casualties than have been inflicted by any of Israel’s other adversaries. Iran’s leaders also try to discredit Israel in international bodies by claiming there is a “double standard” under which Israel faces no sanctions for its nuclear arsenal. Israel is the only Middle Eastern country to possess nuclear weapons and to refuse to become a party to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

Hamas

Iran has long supported the Islamist Palestinian organization Hamas, even though Hamas is a Sunni Muslim offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, which itself is not a natural partner of Iran. Iran did not create Hamas' military wing, but Iran forged a relationship with Hamas in the 1990s as part of an apparent attempt to disrupt the Israeli-Palestinian peace process through Hamas attacks on buses, restaurants, and other civilian targets inside Israel. Iran and Hamas share the perception that Palestinians cannot achieve a just peace with Israel in light of Israel's military strength, the extent of Israel's demands in any peace settlement, and the strong support Israel receives from the United States. Hamas terrorist attacks within Israel have decreased in frequency over the past decade, but Hamas has used Iran-supplied and Hamas-produced rockets and other weaponry during three significant conflicts with Israel since 2008, the latest of which was in 2014.

At the same time, Hamas' Sunni Muslim composition has caused some distrust between it and Iran. The strains have prevented Iran from deriving durable strategic benefit from Hamas' seizure of control of the Gaza Strip in 2007 and its administration of that territory. In 2012, because of sectarian sympathy with Sunni rebels in Syria, Hamas opposed the Assad regime's military attack on Sunni rebel groups inside Syria. Iran, by contrast, as noted, strongly supported Assad's crackdown. Hamas and Iran's political differences on this issue caused Iran to withhold support from Hamas in the 2014 war with Israel – a sharp contrast to prior Hamas-Israel conflicts in which Iran backed Hamas extensively and quickly resupplied it with weaponry. In 2016, Iran resumed providing missile technology to Hamas to enable it to construct its own rockets. Iran resumed supplying Hamas with weaponry in mid-2017¹⁰³ and Iran formally restored relations with Hamas in October 2017.

U.S. officials assert that Iran's current levels of funding and arms supplies are substantial; Iran's yearly financial support to Hamas is widely assessed in the tens of millions per year as of 2019. The U.S. State Department's September 2018 "Outlaw Regime" report states that Iran "provides up to \$100 million annually in combined support to Palestinian terrorist groups," including Hamas, Palestine Islamic Jihad (PIJ), and the Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC).¹⁰⁴

Palestine Islamic Jihad

Iran also supports a smaller Islamist Palestinian faction called Palestine Islamic Jihad (PIJ). PIJ is a mostly underground group operating primarily in Gaza, with a minimal presence in the West Bank and Israel, according to the U.S. State Department. It is assessed as having "close to 1,000

members,” making it far smaller than Hamas.¹⁰⁵ Because of its small size, PIJ is considered a proxy of Iran without the political influence or governing responsibility in Gaza that typically restrain Hamas’ operations. And, unlike Hamas, PIJ leaders have shown no flexibility whatsoever toward negotiations or a final state of relations with Israel.

PIJ receives funds and training primarily from Iran and conducts operations jointly with Lebanese Hezbollah. PIJ is said to be stockpiling Iran-supplied rockets and other weaponry, potentially enabling it to attack Israel in concert with a major rocket attack on Israel by Hezbollah and/or Hamas.

Other Palestinian Militant Groups

Iran also supports some Sunni-dominated secular Palestinian groups because these groups help Iran apply pressure on Israel, despite their disagreements with Iran’s ideology. Two such groups that Iran supports are the Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigades and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC). Both are designated by the United States as FTOs.

The Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigades is a militant offshoot of the dominant Palestinian faction Fatah; it seeks to establish a Palestinian state loyal to Fatah. According to the U.S. State Department, most of the Brigade’s operational activity is in Gaza but it has also planned and conducted attacks inside Israel and the West Bank.¹⁰⁶ Iran sees the group as an additional tool in its arsenal to pressure Israel, and reportedly funds the Brigades via Hezbollah facilitators. Exact amounts of Iranian funding are not known but are likely small, given that the Brigades is assessed at having only a few hundred members and is only sporadically active.

Iran has long supported another secular group, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command (PFLP-GC). Based in Damascus, the group has been led by former Syrian army captain Ahmad Jibril since its founding in the late 1960s as a splinter group from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). As with the other secular groups, however, the PFLP-GC has become eclipsed by Islamist groups such as Hamas, and the PFLP-GC has only sporadically been active against Israel over the past several years. The group has instead focused primarily on assisting the Assad regime against its armed opposition – partnering with Iran and Hezbollah in the effort¹⁰⁷ – but the winding down of the civil conflict in Syria could enable the group to reorient its activities back toward Israel. The group is assessed as having “several hundred” members.¹⁰⁸

Graph 5: Iran-Backed Militant Groups

Iran-Backed Militant Groups			
Name/Location	Estimated Size of Militia/Armed Wing	FTO Designation	Description
Lebanese Hezbollah	25,000 – 30,000	Yes	Main Iranian ally/proxy
Houthis (Yemen)	100,000	No	Zaidi Shia
Kata'ib Hezbollah (Iraq)	15,000 – 20,000	Yes	
Badr Organization (Iraq)	15,000 – 20,000	No	Least anti-U.S. Iraqi Shia militia
Asa'ib Ahl Al Haq (Iraq)	15,000	No	
Harakat al-Nujaba (Iraq)	5,000	No	Terrorism supporting entity under Executive Order 13224
Hamas (Gaza control)	5,000	Yes	Sunni, Palestinian Islamist
Palestine Islamic Jihad (Gaza)	1,000	Yes	Sunni, Palestinian Islamist
Al Aqsa Martyr's Brigade (West Bank)	500	Yes	Secular Palestinian
Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (Syria)	500	Yes	Secular, leftwing Palestinian
Al Ashtar Brigades (Bahrain)	Small, Unknown	Yes	Shia, ideology unclear
Fatimiyoun Division (Syria)	5,000	No	Afghan Shia recruits. Terrorism-supporting entity under E.O. 13224. As many as 25,000 in Syria in 2015
Zaynabiyoun Brigade	5,000	No	Pakistani Shia recruits. Terrorism supporting entity under E.O. 13224. As many as 25,000 in Syria in 2015.
National Defense Force (Syria)	Tens of Thousands	No	Clone of Basij
Popular Defense Force (Sudan)	Several Thousand	No	No longer Iran-supplied or advised

Source: Graph created using data collected and analyzed by the report authors.

CONCLUSIONS AND FORECAST

Iran and its key regional instrument, the IRGC-QF, appear to have found a successful formula to expand Tehran's regional influence and complicate U.S., Saudi, Israeli, and other efforts to strategically pressure its leadership. Its successes in building deep influence in several key regional states, including gaining control of much of the state machinery in the case of Lebanese Hezbollah, greatly outweigh its setbacks, and it can be argued that Iran's grand strategy has placed it in its best strategic position regionally since the 1979 Islamic revolution. Iran now has preponderant influence in Syria, and extensive influence in Lebanon and Iraq. And, Iran is now in a position to project power not only in the vital Strait of Hormuz but also on another key waterway, the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. Iran is on the cusp of developing a secure land route all the way from Iran to the Mediterranean. Iran has also been able to take advantage of rifts in the GCC to essentially sever the organization.

By following its "playbook," which includes cloning the IRGC, foreign militia recruitment, the delivery of weapons to proxy forces, and the use of soft power initiatives, Iran has been able to accomplish key regional objectives, which are to challenge U.S. influence in the region and challenge regional adversaries such as Saudi Arabia and Israel. More importantly, it has done so without provoking a major armed conflict with the United States, Israel, Saudi Arabia, or any of its other primary adversaries, all while suffering only light casualties to its own forces, even if its proxies have taken heavy losses in some cases.

Because it perceives its efforts as largely successful, Iran is certain to continue to pursue its regional strategy, unless and until its adversaries are willing or able to blunt Iran's efforts. Rolling back Tehran's regional influence will require an equally nimble approach combining diplomacy, smart counter-terrorism policy, and a nuanced understanding of how and why Iran's soft power efforts have been successful so they may be effectively countered. Containing the Islamic Republic is possible through such clever application of U.S. leverage, and also presents a

favorable alternative to the U.S. when compared with the option of direct military conflict. Public support for major U.S. interventions in the region has clearly declined over the past decade and the U.S. – regardless of which administration is in office or what is its policy toward Iran – is not likely to further intervene militarily in any regional conflict for the sole reason of rolling back Iran's grand strategy.

In many ways, Lebanese Hezbollah has served as the prototype for Iran to follow as it cultivates an array of proxy groups throughout the region. In Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, Iran has played a more hands-on role in building up foreign militia forces. In Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf states, Tehran has attempted to empower the Shia population in those countries, while in Sudan and Afghanistan, Iran has primarily sought to establish cooperative relationships with the governments in power. Finally, as a means of trying to destabilize Israel, Iran has maintained on-again, off-again relationships with various Palestinian militant groups, providing varying degrees and types of support over time.

Iran's regional tactics are difficult to disrupt with U.S. or even global sanctions, insofar as Iran's efforts are inexpensive and involve working with partners that have established support bases in the countries where they operate. Iran has been able to implement its regional strategy even when international sanctions were applying severe pressure to its economy during 2011-2016. The Trump administration's April 2019 designation of the IRGC as an FTO was publicized in Washington as an important step toward rolling back Iranian influence in the region. The designation is interpreted as an end in itself by the administration, which mistakenly continues to view its relationship with Iran almost exclusively through the lens of countering it as a state sponsor of terrorism. Iran's grand strategy extends beyond supporting terrorism and its playbook is integral to the promotion of its ideology and the achievement of its myriad national security requirements, both at home and abroad.

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ABOUT THE SOUFAN CENTER (TSC)

The Soufan Center (TSC) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to serving as a resource and forum for research, analysis, and strategic dialogue related to global security issues and emergent threats. TSC fills a niche-role by producing independent, quality research and hosting proactive events in order to effectively equip thought leaders, policy makers, governments, bi- and multilateral institutions, the media, funders, and those in the non-profit and academic communities to engage in strategic security-related practices. Our work focuses on a broad range of complex security issues—from international and domestic terrorism, to humanitarian crisis analysis, to refugee and immigrant issues, and more.

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