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## Examining Iran's Global Terrorism Network

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Chairman King, Ranking Member Rice, Committee members, I am grateful for this opportunity to speak with you today about the threat posed by the Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force and their worldwide Shia militia network, the Shia Liberation Army (SLA).

The U.S. State Department considers Iran the world's most active state sponsor of terrorism. Iran's direct mechanism for supporting and directing terrorist organizations like Lebanese Hezbollah, the Taliban, and countless anti-American Iraqi militias, is a shadowy extraterritorial unit called the Qods Force. Its army of 200,000 organized, trained, armed, and motivated youth poses a significant threat to the American homeland and especially to U.S. forces stationed abroad. Furthermore, this threat is enduring and ideological, designed to outlast the Islamic Republic itself.

### THE QODS FORCE AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SHIA LIBERATION ARMY

The Qods Force, the expeditionary force of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), has a broad and continuing mission to exercise command and control over all militant Shia organizations and groups affiliated with the Islamic Republic and operating outside the Iranian borders. The Qods Force, whose commander reports directly to Iran's Supreme Leader, has evolved into the headquarters of the Shia militancy in the Middle East.

The Qods Force is the most lethal asymmetric fighting force in the Middle East today. The commander of the IRGC declared in 2016 that nearly 200,000 Shia youths from across the Middle East were organized and armed under the command of the Qods Force. "The upside of the recent (conflicts) has been the mobilization of a force of nearly 200,000 armed youths in different countries in the region."<sup>1</sup>

The Shia force, popularly known as the Shia militias, is also referred to as the "Shia Liberation Army."<sup>2</sup> The SLA is not a ragtag militia force. Its members are recruited by Shia militant groups based on strict

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<sup>1</sup> Jafari, Mohammad Ali. (2016, January 12). *The committed youths is one of the miracles and blessings of the Islamic Revolution* (in Farsi). Fars News Agency.

<sup>2</sup> IRGC general Ali Falaki was the first to refer to the force as the "Shia Liberation Army." (2016, August 18). *Fatemiyoun were the vanguards in battle for Syria* (in Farsi.) Quds Online.

military and ideological profiles. The best prospects are sent to one of the Qods Force's military training camps inside Iran. Captured militants have reported that their basic training courses were from twenty to forty-five days. They are then enrolled in advanced training courses on logistics and support, explosives, and advanced weapons skills. The more advanced courses cover Explosively Formed Penetrators (EFP), mortars and rockets, tactics and warfare, and sniper skills.<sup>3</sup>

## **ARMING THE MILITIAS**

A look at SLA's weaponry tells the story of how the militia groups evolved into the primary land forces of the Qods Force. During the 2003-2011 Iraq War, the Qods Force led Iraqi militia group in a deadly campaign against the U.S. and Coalition forces in the country. The weapons used by the militia came from Iran. The deadliest at the time were the Improvised Explosive Device (IED), a relatively crude bomb and anti-armor weapon, and the Improvised Rocket Assisted Mortar (IRAM), a propane or fuel tank filled with explosives and propelled by a 107mm rocket booster. As the war progressed, they began to use the advanced Explosive Formed Penetrator (EFP), with a charge designed to penetrate armor.

Since 2011, the Qods Force deployed Shia militia groups to the conflicts, civil wars, and insurgencies that erupted in the region. The SLA began to act as the primary land force for Qods Force's military campaigns. The major militia groups were supplied with tanks, armored personnel carrier (APC), artillery, UAV, anti-tank guided missile (ATGM), and man-portable air-defense system (MANPADS).

Different groups are also armed with specialized weapons for their specific missions. Currently, the Qods Force is conducting a massive "precision project" to upgrade tens of thousands of the Lebanese Hezbollah's rockets, making them more accurate and extending their range, for use against Israel. The Qods Force is also supplying the Yemeni Houthis with anti-ship cruise missiles and unmanned explosive boats for use against the U.S.-backed coalition naval forces off the Yemeni coast and in the Bab al-Mandab Strait, and is upgrading Houthi SCUD missiles as well as providing the Houthis with advanced Iranian ballistic missiles for use against targets in Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

## **ORGANIZING THE SLA**

The SLA-affiliated Shia militia groups are generally organized in independent brigades based on their nationality. Lebanese and Iraqi militant groups make up the core of the SLA. Qods Force's commander acts as the overall SLA commander, and along with the Qods Force senior officers, provide operational command and advise-and-assist functions across the SLA brigades. The Qods Force and its militias are active in all current conflicts in the region.

## **HEZBOLLAH**

Founded by the IRGC in 1982 as a resistance movement against the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon, the military wing of Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) has evolved into the premier element of the SLA, deploying nearly 8,000 fighters into Syria under the Qods Force command to fight Assad's Sunni opposition. Hezbollah also assists the Qods Force in its program to advise, assist, and train other Shia militia groups, including the Yemeni Houthis. Hezbollah also functions as the recruiter and trainer for the

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<sup>3</sup> Felter, Joseph & Fishman, Brian. (2008, October 13). *Iranian Strategy in Iraq: Politics and 'Other Means.'* Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point. Occasional Paper Series.

Qods Force in Arabic-speaking countries, including Iraq, Yemen, and the Gulf. A typical LH member wears insignia resembling the IRGC's and believes in the primacy of the *velayat-e faqih* religious doctrine, which translates in accepting Iran's Ayatollah Khamenei as their own supreme leaders.

The Qods Force maintains a joint command-and-control structure with Hezbollah. The Qods Force commander, Gen. Qasem Soleimani, frequently meets with Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, and his senior aides. The Qods Force senior officers also participate in Hezbollah's decision-making process at its highest levels regarding all military and terrorist operations carried out by the organization, almost certainly as part of Qods Force's larger campaigns. This practice began in the first days of the founding of Hezbollah, with the 1983 truck suicide bombings of the U.S. Marine and French barracks at Beirut International Airport, killing 241 U.S. and 58 French servicemen. Other terrorist attacks carried out by Hezbollah and its affiliates include the bombing of AMIA, the Jewish community center in Buenos Aires, that killed 85 people in 1994, and the 1996 truck bombing of the Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia, that housed members of U.S. Air Force's 4404 Wing, carried out by the Saudi-wing of Hezbollah, killing 19 U.S. servicemen.<sup>4</sup>

Iran provides the bulk of Hezbollah's budget, estimated at \$1 billion a year. Secretary-General Nasrallah has said, "Hezbollah's budget, its income, its expenses, everything it eats and drinks, its weapons and rockets, come from the Islamic Republic of Iran."<sup>5</sup>

The Qods Force provides advanced weaponry to Hezbollah and is in the process of upgrading LH's nearly 100,000 rockets for better accuracy and longer range.<sup>6</sup> Israel considers the weapons manufacturing plants and the Qods Force's delivery of advanced weapons to Hezbollah as direct threats to its security. This is heightening tensions in an already conflict-ridden part of the region and is raising the risk of a devastating war between a terrorist group and a U.S. ally.

## IRAQI MILITIAS

The Badr Organization, Kataib Hezbollah (KH), and Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) form the core of the Qods Force militia groups in Iraq. Among the senior leadership of these groups, are longtime IRGC and Qods Force Iraqi operatives who fought on the side of Iran in Iran-Iraq War of 1980s and during the Qods Force campaign against the U.S. and coalition forces during the 2003-2011 Iraq War. Today, the Qods Force shares close links with an estimated 40 of the 67 largest militias in the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), which is now part of the Iraqi security apparatus.<sup>7</sup> These Iraqi militias are battle-tested, having been deployed to Syria in support of Assad's regime and having fought against ISIS (Daesh) in Iraq. Some of the best leaders of major Iraqi militias are also helping assisting and training Shia militant groups in Bahrain and other parts of the Gulf. In the post-Daesh period, the PMF has focused its operations on Iraq-Syria border regions, enabling the establishment of a land corridor connecting Iran through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon and the Israeli front in the Golan Heights.

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<sup>4</sup> Levitt, Matthew. (2015). *Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God*. Georgetown University Press

<sup>5</sup> Rafizadeh, Majid. (2016, June 25). *In first, Hezbollah confirms all financial support comes from Iran*. Al Arabiya English. You can also watch a BBC video report on Nasrallah's speech with Farsi translation [here](#).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Heras, Nicholas A. (2017, October). *Iraq's Fifth Column: Iran's Proxy Network*. Middle East Institute, Counter-terrorism Series.

Like Hezbollah, the PMF has evolved into a hybrid organization with political and military wings, controlling the country's security institutions and having significant presence in the parliament and the executive branch.<sup>8</sup>

## AFGHAN AND PAKISTANI MILITIAS

In addition to Iraqi and Lebanese fighters, the SLA also incorporates Afghan and Pakistani Shia militants into its ranks. They form the Fatemiyoun and Zainabiyoun brigades of the SLA respectively, and both have seen heavy combat in Syria. The Afghan fighters in particular are groomed by the Qods Force for a long-term support role.

The Iranians have used financial aid and offers of Iranian residency to recruit Afghan Shias from the predominantly Hazara refugee community inside Iran.<sup>9</sup> Each fighter deployed to Syria is paid a salary of \$300-\$500 a month, a promise of Iranian permanent residency for themselves and their immediate families, and payment to families of those killed or severely injured in combat.

At the height of their involvement in the Syrian civil war, the 2015-2016 Battle of Aleppo, the Afghan division had nearly 10,000 Shia fighters. The Pakistani division was comprised of an estimated 2,000 Shia militants. Some of those fighters were deployed on multiple occasions to the battlefronts. In post-civil war Syria, many of the Fatemiyoun and some Zainabiyoun fighters are expected to be deployed to Syria-Iraq border region to keep the land corridor linking Iraq and Syria open, fulfilling a major Qods Force strategy in the two countries. Those fighters will be based in military camps and forward bases controlled by the Qods Force in Syria.

## THE HOUTHIS

The Qods Force regards the Shia-Zaydi Houthis as the main element of its Shia Liberation Army in the Arabian Peninsula. To have a well-armed, battle-tested militant Shia force in the Saudi and Emirati backyards, and to have a degree of control over the all-important Bab al-Mandab Strait, a pathway for international trade and a major choke point for oil transport, along with Iran's own Hormuz Strait, are two major factors in the Iranian calculus for regional hegemony. The Qods Force has supplied the Houthis with anti-ship cruise missiles, which they have used against Emirati and Saudi ships off the coast of Yemen.

The Qods Force technicians have also upgraded the SCUD missiles than came under the Houthi control after they captured Sanaa. The missiles' accuracy and range have improved considerably. The Qods Force has also supplied the Houthis with some of its own ballistic missiles. The Houthis have used their upgraded missiles and those delivered to them by Iran against targets inside Saudi Arabia, including unsuccessful attacks against Riyadh International Airport and the Royal Palace.

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<sup>8</sup> Eisenstadt, Michael & Michael Knights. (2017, May 9). Mini-Hizballahs, Revolutionary Guard Knock-Offs, and the Future of Iran's Proxies in Iraq. *War on the Rocks*.

<sup>9</sup> Zahid, Noor & Jedinia, Mehdi. (2016, January 29). *Iran Sending Afghan Refugees to Fight in Syria*. Voice of America. Different reports put the number of Afghan militias from 5,000 to 12,000. The figure of 10,000 was my estimate based on interviews with experts in the field.

## THE GULF MILITIAS

In addition to the main core of its Shia Liberation Army, the Qods Force also supports a variety of Shia opposition parties across the region. In Bahrain, where the Shias constitute the majority of the population in a country ruled by Sunni royalty, the Qods Force sponsors militant Shia groups who have attacked government targets with arms and explosives transferred to the country by the Qods Force operatives and affiliates, including Iraqi Shia militia groups. The Bahraini security forces have in recent years intercepted a number of major shipments of arms and explosives, including a 2013 interception of a maritime shipment containing Iranian-made IEDs and grenades.<sup>10</sup>

For the Qods Force, the eastern provinces of Saudi Arabia, especially the Qatif province with a significant Shia population, form a target rich environment. Hezbollah's affiliate, Hezbollah al-Hejaz (Saudi Hezbollah), has been involved in terrorist attacks on Saudi soil with the goal of destabilizing the Kingdom. In 1996, it targeted the Khobar Towers, killing 19 U.S. servicemen. The FBI investigation showed that the group detonated a 25,000-pound TNT bomb under "direct orders from senior Iranian government leaders."<sup>11</sup>

## THE QODS FORCE AT WAR

The Qods Force and the SLA are involved militarily on three fronts: the western front—the conflicts in Syria and Iraq; the southern front—the conflict in Yemen; and the eastern front—the conflict in Afghanistan.

### The Western Front

*The land corridor.* Last year, the Qods Force-led forces completed the so-called land corridor, connecting Iran through Iraq to Syria, Lebanon, and the Israeli northern fronts. Securing this line of communication and logistics connects Iran-led forces in the western front to their supply base in Iran. The Qods Force can now move personnel and materiel, including weapons and military equipment, through the corridor. It simultaneously maintains its "air bridge" to Damascus International Airport and other Syrian airfields, but the land corridor facilitates the movement of heavy military equipment and guarantees the continuation of supply, even if the airfields are taken out if a major war breaks out in the area.

*The Syrian conflict.* In Syria, Iran's sought to protect the regime of Bashar al-Assad and defeat Sunni opposition forces. Nearly eight years after the 2011 uprisings, the Assad regime is increasingly dependent on Iran and is on a trajectory toward becoming a client state. The Qods Force deployed tens of thousands of Shia militias, fighters from Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, to the Syrian battlefields. Its Shia Liberation Army, augmented by elements of specialized forces deployed from Iran, conducted complex military campaigns on behalf of Assad. The fall of Aleppo in 2016, fought primarily between the Qods Force-led forces and the Sunni opposition, signaled the beginning of the final victory by the regime. The Iranians and their proxies paid heavy price in blood and treasure to make the Aleppo victory possible. But Iran and the Qods Force gained unprecedented influence over Bashar al-Assad himself, his

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<sup>10</sup> Levitt, Matthew. (2014, May 16). Iran and Bahrain: *Crying Wolf, or Wolf at the Door?* The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. PolicyWatch 2255.

<sup>11</sup> Freeh, Louis J. (2006, June 23). *Khobar Towers*. *Wall Street Journal*.

extended family, his tribe, and above all the Alawi-Shia community that saw the Qods Force commander, General Soleimani, as their savior.

The presence of Qods Force-led forces near the Israeli border is part of the Iranian strategy to exert maximum pressure on Israel. The Qods Force is basing its operations and its foreign militia forces in dedicated parts of major Syrian military bases. It was from such a base, the T4 Airfield near Palmyra from which an Iranian UAV flew over the Israeli territory in February in an Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance mission. The violation of the Israeli airspace, a first for Iran, was met by an Israeli retaliatory attack on the UAV and the Iranian installations at T4 Airfield. This month, the Israeli Air Force aircraft attacked Iran's UAV operations center at the base, destroying the building and killing seven Iranian personnel, including an IRGC colonel. Israel considers permanent basing of the Qods Force-led forces on the Syrian soil as an existential threat.

With projects like establishing permanent bases and building manufacturing plants to upgrade Hezbollah rockets in Syria, and continuing its delivery of weapons to Hezbollah through Syrian territory, Iran is on a trajectory of a major direct military conflict with Israel in Syria.

*The Iraqi conflict.* Iran has always maintained close relations with the Shia community in Iraq. When the U.S.-led coalition forces toppled Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, the Qods Force senior officers crossed the porous border into a chaotic Iraq and brought along a large contingent of Iraqi exiles who had fought alongside the IRGC against their own country's military during the Iran-Iraq War of 1980s. They recruited the Shia youths, especially in Shia-majority southern Iraq, and staged a bloody war against American forces during the occupation years with the goal of establishing the Islamic Republic of Iraq, mimicking the Iranian experience. Most of American combat deaths in the years after the initial invasion came from Qods Force-controlled militia groups. When the U.S. forces left Iraq in 2011, the Qods Force-led Iraqi Shia militia forces were tens of thousands strong, well-armed, and battle tested. The Qods Force's Iraqi operatives were also in leading roles in the Shia-dominated government in Baghdad and in its newly reconstituted security forces. The road to establishing a full-fledged Islamic Republic of Iraq was clear.

Then came the Arab Awakening. Iraqi Sunnis joined the movement and staged protests in predominantly-Sunni regions of Iraq against the discrimination they had suffered in the hands of the Shia-dominated government in Baghdad. The Arab Spring soon spread to Syria, with the Sunni opposition protesting against the Alawi-Shia dominated government in Damascus. The Qods Force now had to fight Sunni opposition in both countries. It deployed a large number of Iraqi Shia militias across the border into Syria to join other Qods Force-led forces to help save Assad.

In June 2014, ISIS forces crossed the border back into Iraq, joined by its fighters from Fallujah and Ramadi areas, and captured Mosul and staged their thunderous march along the now-famous land corridor to capture Baghdad and points south, coming as close as nineteen miles to the Iranian border. The Qods Force mobilized all its forces in defense of Baghdad. The Qods Force-led Shia militias, along with Iraqi and Kurdish security forces, and U.S.-led coalition forces eventually rolled back ISIS advances and recaptured lost territories. The Shias saw the Qods Force and its Shia Liberation Army as the defenders of their Shia-led government, their capital Baghdad, and their Shia south - from Karbala and Najaf to Basra. The Iranians and their operatives cemented their position within the government and the country's security institutions. A full-fledged Islamic Republic of Iraq has not yet materialized, but Iraq increasingly looks and acts like a client state of Iran.

Not only does a Qods Force-dominated Iraq undermine nearly fifteen years of American stabilization and humanitarian efforts in the country, but it also means that U.S. forces will continue to face danger and be the target of the Qods Force, as they have been since the 2000s.

### **The Southern Front**

*The Arabian Peninsula.* In Yemen, the Qods Force is taking advantage of the civil war and the Saudi and Emirati military interventions to forge a close relationship with the Zaydi-Shia Houthis, who captured Sanaa, the capital, in the aftermath of the Arab Awakening upheavals that rocked the Middle East. The Houthis had always been close to the Iranians, with their leaders traveling to Tehran and Qom in the first days of the 1979 Islamic Revolution to undergo political, theological, and military training. They brought back to Yemen a radical interpretation of Shia Islam. During long years of struggle against the Yemeni government, they received arms and financial support from the Iranians. Now countering the Saudi and Emirati-led forces, more than ever indebted to the Qods Force's support. When they captured Sanaa airport, Qods Force General Qasem Soleimani established an air bridge to the city, supplying the Houthis with advanced weaponry, including anti-ship cruise missiles and short- and medium-range ballistic missiles. Using these weapons, the Houthis were able to attack Saudi and Emirati ships with the anti-ship cruise missiles, and attack Riyadh International Airport and other targets inside the Kingdom with the ballistic missiles.

By supplying advanced weaponry to the Houthis in the war against the Saudi-led coalition and the former Yemeni government, the Iranians are gaining strong support of the Zaydi-Shia community in Yemen, and also the Zaydi-Shia communities across the border in Saudi Arabia. The Qods Force is also on its way to flip its relations with Houthis from a longtime partner into a client organization, strategically located in the Arabian Peninsula, capable of causing trouble for Iran's nemesis, Saudi Arabia, and helping Iran to gain a degree of control over the Red Sea chokepoints.

*The Bab al-Mandab.* Bab al-Mandab, or the Mandab Strait, is a waterway off the coast of Yemen that connects the shipping route between the Mediterranean through the Suez Canal to the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean. More than 20,000 ships cross the 20-mile chokepoint annually. The Qods Force has trained and armed the Houthis, providing them with its most advanced anti-ship cruise missiles, explosive boats, and floating mines. Iran can already control the shipping through the Strait of Hormuz in the Persian Gulf, a major chokepoint for global oil transport. By gaining ability to control the Mandab Strait as well, Iran could cripple the shipping in the Eastern Hemisphere.

### **The Eastern Front**

*Afghanistan.* In the very first days of the revolution in Iran, the Islamic Republic recruited and organized Afghan Hazara refugees in Iran to take part in popular rebellion against the Socialist government in Kabul and later against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Those early recruits and their militia brigade were the predecessors of today's Fatemiyoun, the Qods Force-led Afghan brigade, which saw heavy combat during the civil war in Syria, some four decades later.

In 2001, the Qods Force officers led the Afghan Shia militia units alongside Afghan Mujahedeen and U.S. and British Special Forces to fight the Taliban and liberate Herat and western Afghanistan. The post-Taliban period, however, turned into a complicated political landscape for the Iranians, with the Taliban becoming the principle force fighting the U.S. and NATO forces. Iran's anti-U.S. instincts soon

led the Qods Force into a tactical coalition with the Taliban. The Qods Force strategy became raising the cost of U.S. presence in Afghanistan, both in blood and treasure, through the Taliban.

The depth of Iran's ties to the Taliban became public in 2016 when a U.S. drone struck a vehicle transporting the Taliban chief, Mullah Mansour, from Iran to Pakistani Baluchistan.<sup>12</sup> Mansour was in Iran to manage tactical cooperation in their new offensive against the U.S.-backed government. Later that year, three Qods Force officers were killed in a U.S. airstrike against Taliban positions in Farah province, on the Iranian border.

The Qods Force has organized more than 15,000 Afghan Shia militants under the Fatemiyoun Brigade and deployed the brigade to Syria to fight alongside pro-Assad forces against the Sunni opposition. They have seen heavy combat in Aleppo, Deraa, and Palmyra. The Afghan recruits receive a salary of about \$500 a month and the promise of Iranian residency paperwork after a deployment to Syria.<sup>13</sup> More than 600 Afghan militants have been killed in action in Syria.<sup>14</sup>

The Fatemiyoun fighters could at any time of Qods Force's choosing be deployed back to Afghanistan, especially in a post-Syria conflict. Such move would significantly increase Iran's influence in the country, and the militants could become a force inside Afghanistan, following the Iraqi PMF and Hezbollah model.

## EXPANSIVE LOGISTICS INFRASTRUCTURE

The Qods Force has developed and expanded its logistic and operational infrastructure beyond Iran's conventional forces like the Army and IRGC. Inside Iran, it maintains logistics depots near major airports, moving personnel and cargo, including weapons and equipment into Iraq and Syria via military and commercial aircraft. It also moves a large amount of military cargo through border crossings on Iran's western border into Iraq. The Qods Force has also established a land corridor between Iraq and Syria by capturing territories west of Mosul.<sup>15</sup> The corridor will allow the Qods Force to transfer arms and personnel through Iraq into Syria and Lebanon, all the way to the Israeli front and the Mediterranean.

The Qods Force maintains its own facilities in the region. In Iraq, it controls logistics depots and uses PMF-controlled military camps, which are also used for basic training venues for the newly recruited Shia militants as well bases for its UAV operations.<sup>16</sup> In Syria, the Qods Force maintains logistics areas at

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<sup>12</sup> Gall, Carolotta & Khapalwak, Ruhullah. (2017, August 9). Taliban Leader Feared Pakistan Before He Was Killed. *New York Times*.

<sup>13</sup> Mashal, Mujib & Faizi, Fatima. (2017, November 11). Iran Send Them to Syria. Now afghan Fighters are a Worry at Home. *New York Times*.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Indyk, Martin S. (2017, March 28). US strategy towards Iran. Brookings Institution. Testimony.

<sup>16</sup> Gordon, Michael R. (2014, June 24). Iran Secretly Sending Drones and Supplies Into Iraq, U.S. Officials Say. *New York Times*.

Damascus International Airport for deployment of foreign Shia fighters and weapons and equipment into the country.<sup>17</sup> The Qods Force also uses Syrian air fields for its UAV operations in the country.

## THE VOLATILE AND TURBULENT REGION

The situation in Middle East is highly unstable. Nearly a decade after the 2010-2011 Arab Awakening, failed political transitions and broken social contracts fuel continued unrest. Endemic state corruption, weak economic growth, poverty and unemployment add to these woes. These issues have created an environment that is susceptible to radical ideologies and extremist organizations. Insurgencies, civil wars, and terrorist campaigns have in turn fueled sectarianism, with Shias and Sunnis vying for power and influence across the region.

The militant Shias have formed a united bloc led by Iran's Qods Force, which now has years of experience and expertise in support of sectarian-political organizations across the Middle East. Its proxies and partners include the Twelver-Shia Lebanese Hezbollah; Twelver-Shia Iraqi militia groups; Zaydi-Shia Yemeni Houthis; and Afghan, Pakistani, and Bahraini Shia militants.

Reacting to the changing situation in the region, especially in the volatile and turbulent post-Arab Awakening period, the Iran military is shifting its strategy to preemptive, as opposed to its long-standing strategy of deterrence. The Qods Force is the expeditionary army of the new strategy, supported by IRGC's ballistic and cruise missile force, the largest in Middle East. The Qods Force is involved in all current conflicts in the region, and the domestically-produced missiles are capable of hitting land and sea targets anywhere in the Middle East. Advances in development of UAVs, naval assets, radar and satellite navigation systems, and electronic warfare add to Iran's growing military power. The mix of asymmetric and symmetric military capabilities is designed not only to deter foreign interventions against Iran that could threaten regime's existence, but also be used in preemptive and offensive operations in the near abroad, as witnessed in the Qods Force-led operations in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen.

## SLA IN PERSPECTIVE

The Iranians use the Shia Liberation Army as a key component of their regional project. In March 2017, the Iranian supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, said the "far reaching strategic depth of the Islamic Republic, particularly in (the Middle East), is of most significant progress in the last four decades."<sup>18</sup> The progress is particularly evident in terms of the Qods Force-led SLA military victories on the battlefields in Iraq and Syria, the Iranian dominance of the Iraqi and Lebanese politics, and its growing influence in Damascus and Sanaa. Together this amounts to dominance and influence in four Arab capitals. If there were ever a Shia crescent, 2017 and 2018 have been its greatest years.

If the Shia Liberation Army is the manifestation of the Qods Force's military prowess in the region, its vast network of associates and supporters manifests its global reach. A large number of religious, cultural, or academic conferences that popped up in Tehran or other major Iranian cities in the past decade provided the Qods Force with a pool of individuals, influential in their communities, who could be recruited to support its operations outside Iran.

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<sup>17</sup> Simons, Jake Wallis. (2016, August 30). Inside 'the Glasshouse': Iran 'is running covert war in Syria costing billions from top secret spymaster HQ near Damascus airport.' *Daily Mail*.

<sup>18</sup> Khamenei.ir. (2017, March 9). Tweet. *Twitter*.

The Qods Force network, with operators across the globe, controls dozens of front businesses, including air, sea and ground transportation companies, banking and foreign exchange firms, and import/export entities across the Middle East. The Qods Force also uses its local presence to store large caches of arms in Shia enclaves across the region.

The Qods Force's vast and ever-expanding logistics and operational network supports the Shia Liberation Army operations. With 200,000 committed armed Shia youths across the Middle East, associates across the globe, a vast logistics network, and arms stored in different countries in the region, the Qods Force is organized to last for decades as the headquarters of the Shia militancy in the region, and if necessary to outlast the Islamic Republic.

The Qods Force and its network will remain an enduring threat to the U.S. interests and personnel in the region. And its thousands of armed militants and their zealously anti-American ideology could become real threat to the security of the homeland, especially as the current conflicts in the region evolves.

It is in our vital national interests to counter the Qods Force activities and expansion in the Middle East. As time goes on, our lack of action will only increase the threat to the U.S., our forces stationed across the Middle East, and our regional allies.

*Nader Uskowi joined The Washington Institute as a visiting fellow after four years as the senior civilian policy advisor to U.S. Central Command.*