



DECONSTRUCTING AND COUNTERING IRAN'S THREAT NETWORK

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IN RECENT YEARS, the phrase “countering Iran’s regional activities” has been increasingly used by U.S. officials and others to describe a desired policy with respect to Iran. Yet when invoking the phrase, such officials often implicitly refer to Iran’s proxies in the Levant, Iraq, and Yemen, and thus fail to deal with the larger problem—the even broader network Iran has been building for decades. Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran has invested a great deal of money and effort into developing a complex network of allies, partners, and surrogates worldwide, in hopes that such a network would deter its enemies from attacking the Islamic Republic while simultaneously enabling it to project influence throughout the region and beyond.



In remarks made on October 13 at the White House, President Trump outlined a strategy to “counter the regime’s destabilizing activity and support for terrorist proxies in the region.” This paper intends to establish a base of knowledge for such a policy, aimed at countering the Iran Threat Network (ITN), as the collection of pro-Iran entities is known. It focuses on mapping Iran’s proxies and partners and examining how they evolved over the years under Iranian sponsorship. It then draws conclusions regarding Iran’s strategic behavior when dealing with its network and supporting its members, and deduces guidelines for a policy seeking to counter this network.

Speaking broadly, Iran is more an opportunistic player than an actor implementing a grand strategy regarding where to get involved, although it does have a grand strategy aimed at promoting its vision of Islamic revolution. It probes for vacuums in fragile states, seeking to exploit sectarian conflicts to increase its influence abroad and using Shia populations as change agents within foreign countries.

Iran uses Shiism as the main tool to attract foreigners to cooperate in its undertakings. In countries where Shia populations have felt threatened, Tehran presents itself as a savior, supporting “resistance” movements with arms and money. In countries where Shiism is not present, Iran has invested resources in spreading Shiism and converting the local population, with Nigeria’s Shia community, currently numbering in the millions, serving as the best such example.

The ITN’s main initiators are the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps–Qods Force (IRGC-QF), the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence, and, to some extent, Lebanese Hezbollah. All three use front companies and cultural-religious centers as covers for their operations abroad, laying an infrastructure for supporting terrorist activities as well as providing arms supplies and illicit funding to Iran’s proxies.

Tehran prefers working with substate actors (e.g., militant groups, Shia leaders) rather than with governments. Although Iran finds it more difficult to compete with other countries for influence on a state level, it has registered some successes, such as in Syria and arguably Iraq. But in 2015, when Saudi Arabia offered billions of dollars to Sudan—then an important hub in Iran’s arms-smuggling network—the kingdom succeeded in weaning Khartoum from Iran’s influence. Iran can also engage with Sunni partners on a cobelligerent basis, supporting them against a common enemy such

as Israel or U.S. forces in the region. With that said, whenever Iran has competed with a Sunni state for influence over Sunni groups, it has lost.

Separating a member from Iran’s network, evidence suggests, is easier when that member’s relations with Iran have not yet matured. Thus, the critical phase to stop the expansion of Iran’s network would be before a Shi-ite group establishes strong connections with Tehran. Unfortunately, only a few instances of immature relations between Shia entities and Iran remain today, making overall disruption prospects less bright than they might have been. Still, in some cases, IRGC-QF agents or operatives have not yet become embedded in the group’s decisionmaking process.

Given such a background, any policy that aims to contain Iran’s regional activities should observe the following guidelines:

- **Hold Iran accountable for the actions of its proxies and partners.** Tehran, and mainly President Hassan Rouhani, should understand that it cannot continue to engage in proxy wars and maintain its proxy network without absorbing costs. Doing so might drive Rouhani—who sees the ITN as a means, not an end—to push back against some of the IRGC’s actions in the region.¹ Rouhani, however, has limited influence over Iran’s network, which is almost entirely under the control of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Impressing upon Khamenei the price Iran will pay for maintaining the ITN will not be easy, but this is a central task for the West.
- **Embrace a holistic approach to countering Iran’s network, focusing on its centers of gravity to achieve an aggregate effect on the larger network.** This could be achieved, among other things, by targeting Iran’s logistical networks for financing and supplying arms for its proxies, and by focusing on the IRGC-QF’s leadership as the main “conductor” of the network, at least in the Middle East.
- **Counter Iran’s mechanisms for smuggling arms to its proxies by increasing the number and expanding the scope of interdictions of Iranian shipments by air, land, and sea.** A parallel effort could be aimed at helping countries whose territory is used by Iran for smuggling arms to build the awareness and capability needed to prevent Iran from engaging in such exploitation.

- **Disrupt Iran’s mechanisms for controlling its network, such as by publicly exposing the identities of IRGC-QF, Ministry of Intelligence, and Lebanese Hezbollah operatives in public, designating them, and placing them on various sanctions lists.** Other efforts should include tracing the money trail to fight the network’s illicit fundraising, and pressuring countries to close any Iranian religious and cultural center used as a front for ITN infrastructures.
- **Adopt efficient processes for sharing information and intelligence with other governments.** With such an approach, much of the evidence related to the ITN’s activities and fronts in a specified country can be used by that government to take on the ITN’s “civilian covers” using legal tools.
- **Encourage Sunni-majority states to adopt a differentiated approach to Shia populations, aimed at dissuading them from cooperating with Iran.** Such an end could be achieved, for instance, by engaging with moderate Shia leaders and communities based on their needs and problems—including by encouraging governments to better integrate Shia into society and even offering political reforms where needed—while empowering local Shia leaders and providing them with the means to decrease their dependence on Tehran.
- **Encourage governments to avoid adopting a generalized policy or collective punishments against Shia communities or opposition groups.** Such a policy will have the opposite of its intended effect, only helping Iran attract more supporters.
- **Encourage regional actors—e.g., Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates—to fill vacuums and gaps in fragile states.** Investing in social welfare infrastructures and good-governance projects might help change domestic conditions in designated countries across the Middle East, thus rolling back Iranian influence.
- **Engage in an intensive information war with Iran.** Highlight for the Iranian public the costs inflicted by supporting the ITN, and show Shia communities worldwide that Iran exploits them for Tehran’s needs and would eventually abandon them for a larger strategic interest.

The Strategic Rationale for Sustaining Iran’s Network

The ITN exists to fulfill Iran’s strategic goals. First, it is a key component in Iranian deterrence. Over the past decade, Iranian officials have frequently threatened to activate the country’s proxies in retaliation against Israel and the United States if Iran were to be attacked.² Supporting its network worldwide provides Iran bases of operation for its international terrorist cells, making it easier for Iranian and Hezbollah operatives to engage in covert activities against Western interests and strike back when needed.

Second, the ITN is a tool to realize the Iranian aspiration to be the dominant power in the Middle East. Such dominance encompasses Iran’s goal of obtaining leverage over neighboring countries, including through political, economic, and military influence over their governments. On March 9, 2017, Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei articulated the rationale behind this strategy, noting the achievement of “far-reaching [Iranian] strategic depth in the world, especially in western Asia”³—the Iranian geographic term for the broader Middle East, including central Asia, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.

Third, having an established network of partners, proxies, and surrogates enables Iran to challenge the current global order, which it considers to be controlled by “global arrogance”—its moniker for the United States and its allies. Iran thus seeks to promote an agenda of “resistance” to U.S. “domination” that is global in scope. In a meeting with Iranian officials in 2014, Khamenei explained that Iran’s strategic depth and its ability to confront the West are rooted, in part, in “Islam, the Persian language, and [the] Shia denomination.” He added that Iran is enjoying “strategic depth in Latin America and in important parts of Asia” and possesses “certain resources” in these regions.⁴

Finally, some in the Iranian leadership evidently still see the ITN as a means to export the Islamic Revolution abroad—an idea forged by the first Supreme Leader of Iran, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Although some would argue that the concept of revolutionary export has become obsolete, one can find in the speeches of IRGC and Qods Force officials—who are charged with exporting the revolution—proof that this line of thinking still influences Iranian decisionmakers and strategists.⁵ Even if the ITN does not truly regard exporting the revolution as a goal, the network still serves as a device to defend

Shia in the Middle East, a task Iran considers a moral and religious duty. For example, throughout the war in Syria, Hezbollah and other Iran-sponsored militias have played a major role in protecting Shia holy places, especially the Sayyeda Zainab shrine, near Damascus. Indeed, Iranian rhetoric has portrayed the militias as “defenders of the shrine,”⁶ and these militias have also acted to protect Shia localities, most notably in the campaign to free the besieged towns of al-Fua and Kefraya.⁷

Tehran uses several organizations to sustain and advance its network. The Qods Force, the main agency in charge of exporting the Iranian revolution abroad, is headed by Gen. Qasem Soleimani and reports directly to the Supreme Leader. According to a 2013 story in *The New Yorker*, Khamenei himself declared in 1990 that the mission of the Qods Force is to “establish popular Hezbollah cells all over the world.”⁸ A report by the U.S. Department of Defense, moreover, asserts that Qods Force activities include gathering tactical intelligence, conducting covert diplomacy, and providing training, arms, and financial support to surrogate groups and terrorist organizations. The report also sheds light on the Qods Force modus operandi: deploying operatives in foreign embassies, charities, and Shia diaspora communities around the globe to sustain a complex network of money transfers and logistical support for its operations, including terrorist attacks against Jewish, Israeli, and Western targets.⁹

Worth noting further is that, in recent years, amid the Syrian war and the rise of the Islamic State, the Qods Force has evolved into an Iranian “command” and headquarters for Iranian and Shia forces operating throughout the region. In Iraq and Syria, the Qods Force has deployed its “Shia foreign legion” (discussed later) to support Syrian president Bashar al-Assad and cooperate with Baghdad, and General Soleimani is reported to have commanded major operations in the campaign against the Islamic State and the Syrian rebels.

The Iranian Ministry of Intelligence is focused on confronting threats to the regime. During the 1980s and 1990s, the Intelligence Ministry was responsible for assassinating Iranian opposition figures at home and abroad. Ministry operatives have likewise taken part in major terrorist attacks, including the 1992 murder of Iranian Kurdish oppositionists at the Mykonos restaurant in Berlin and the 1994 bombing of the Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina (AMIA) in Buenos Aires, an attack that killed eighty-five and injured hundreds. In

recent decades, the ministry has used its resources to collect intelligence abroad, create Iranian terrorist cells, and support terrorist organizations worldwide.¹⁰

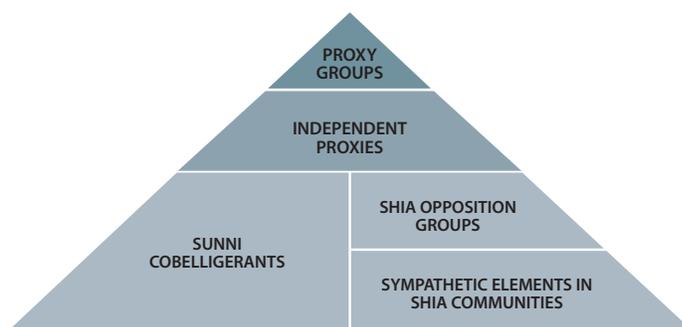
Various Iranian governmental and nongovernmental cultural organizations promote the Iranian revolutionary vision and serve as fronts for Qods Force and Intelligence Ministry operations. Thus, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance provided cover for operatives who supported the AMIA attack.¹¹ Many such entities operate under the Islamic Culture and Communications Organization, an umbrella with branches in more than sixty-seven countries. One of its subgroups, the Ahlul Bayt World Assembly, is responsible for promoting Iran’s ideology overseas and connecting Tehran with foreign Shia communities. Aside from enhancing Iran’s links with Shia clerics, a 2013 report claims the organization has been used by the Qods Force and Intelligence Ministry to bolster its operations worldwide.¹² According to another 2013 report, these organizations support more than twenty religious seminaries abroad—including in Lebanon, Syria, Pakistan, the African island nation of Comoros, and other countries—and sponsor foreign students who study Shiism in Iran, in the hope they will serve as change agents in their home countries. Indeed, as of 2008, 20,000 foreign students had graduated from Iranian institutions.¹³

Hezbollah, working in close collaboration with the Qods Force, also plays an active role in expanding Iran’s networks abroad, including in Africa, Europe, and the Western Hemisphere. The Department of State’s *Country Reports on Terrorism 2015* stated that Hezbollah receives support from Lebanese Shia diaspora communities in Europe, Africa, South America, North America, and Asia, including through smuggling of contraband goods, passport falsification, narcotics trafficking, money laundering, and credit card, immigration, and bank fraud.¹⁴ The report mentioned that Hezbollah continues to maintain a presence in the Western Hemisphere, assisted by members, facilitators, and supporters. In recent decades, those supporters helped Hezbollah execute several terrorist attacks against Israeli and Western targets, including the U.S. embassy and Marine barracks in Beirut in 1983, the U.S. embassy annex in Beirut in 1984, the Israeli embassy in Argentina in 1992, and the AMIA bombing in 1994.¹⁵

Mapping Iran’s Network

The first step in countering the Iran Threat Network should be to define the problem with precision. Such a definition must include classifying members according to their respective subgroups. Equipped with this information, Western and regional officials will be able to more effectively allocate tools to counter the network. In broad terms, then, Iran’s network can be classified into five models:

- Proxy groups over which Iran exerts preponderant influence, e.g., *Lebanese Hezbollah*
- Independent proxies, or semicontrolled partners, which have an independent decisionmaking process but are influenced by Iran, e.g., *the Houthis*
- Sunni armed groups that are cobelligerent with Iran, e.g., *Hamas*
- Shia armed opposition movements that oppose Sunni or secular governments and are supported but not fully controlled by Iran, e.g., *Bahraini Shia*
- Shia communities worldwide, which are often supported by Iran in the cultural and religious fields and are viewed by Tehran as potential bases of support for its policies



GROUPS COMPRISING THE ITN

The groups comprising the ITN can be conceptualized as a pyramid, with those at the apex having the strongest links to Iran, with a wider and deeper overlap in interests. These groups also enjoy the greatest support from Iran but, in turn, incur the highest costs for it. Moreover, some groups may move up the pyramid over the course of their existence. Thus, a Shia community may establish a militant group in response to local sectarian tensions—or the group may be established with Iranian encouragement. Thereafter, the group may receive money and arms from Iran, becoming ever more dependent on the Islamic Republic. Eventually, this process allows Iranian operatives to influence the group’s decisionmaking processes and activities in exchange for more money and advanced arms.

TAXONOMY OF IRAN’S THREAT NETWORK

	PROXY GROUPS	INDEPENDENT PROXIES	SUNNI COBELLIGERANTS	SHIA OPPOSITION GROUPS	SHIA COMMUNITIES
IDEOLOGY	Shared ideology	Partially shared ideology	Partially shared orientation (resistance)	Shared ideology	Diverse
DECISIONMAKING PROCESS	Preponderant Iranian influence	Independent but influenced by Iran	Independent	Independent but influenced by Iran	N/A
CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS SUPPORT FROM IRAN	Significant	Minor	Nonexistent	Significant in some countries	Significant in some communities and countries
ARMS/MONEY FROM IRAN	Significant, including advanced weapons	Significant, including advanced weapons	Significant	Minor	Little or none to limited
MAINTENANCE COSTS FOR IRAN	Significant	Significant	Minor	Limited	Limited

MODEL 1: FULLY CONTROLLED PROXIES

Immediately after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Tehran sought to export its ideology abroad, hoping to found “extensions” of the Islamic Republic. Iran sponsored Shia populations, urging them to form militant and political groups that shared the regime’s ideology of *velayat-e faqih* (rule of the jurispudent) and were willing to work with Tehran to achieve common goals. Those groups, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, remain aligned with Iran’s interests in the Middle East, and their decisionmaking process is heavily influenced by Iran, to the extent that Iranian operatives are active partners in such decisionmaking. In return, Tehran supports its proxies with arms, money, advice, and state-level backing.

Hezbollah embodies Iran’s most successful attempt to export the revolution. Founded by Iran in the 1980s as a resistance movement against the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon, the group has an intimate relationship with Tehran. Hezbollah symbols resemble those of the IRGC, and the group’s secretary-general, Hassan Nasrallah, conveyed that “the subject of *velayat-e faqih* is at the heart of Hezbollah’s religious doctrine.” Hezbollah’s decisionmaking process is powerfully influenced by Iran—with Qods Force officials possibly even participating in such decisionmaking—but Hezbollah also takes Lebanese interests into account. Thus, the two parties have reciprocal influence, with Iran as the senior actor in the relationship. Hezbollah derives its strategy from Iran’s directives, although it probably has a high degree of autonomy regarding implementation.

Iran has likewise been central in Hezbollah’s evolution as a military organization, supporting it with arms and money. Nasrallah has stated that the “budget of Hezbollah, its salaries, its expenses, its food, its drink, its weapons, and its missiles come from the Islamic Republic of Iran.¹⁶ Indeed, Israeli officials recently estimated that Iran gives Hezbollah more than \$800 million a year, around 75 percent of the organization’s budget; others place the number much lower, though all agree Iranian support is a very significant portion of Hezbollah’s revenue.¹⁷ According to U.S. and Israeli reports, Iran has helped Hezbollah stockpile more than 130,000 rockets and missiles, as well as anti-aircraft and antiship cruise-missile systems.¹⁸ The latest comments by Israeli military officials even reveal that Iran has attempted to build production facilities for precise weaponry in Lebanon for the organization’s use.¹⁹ In return, Iran is using Hez-

bollah as a deterrent vis-à-vis Israel and harnessing the organization to protect Iran’s goals in the region (e.g., fighting for the survival of the Assad regime).

Iran has managed to create its own proxies in Iraq, with some groups in the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs, or al-Hashd al-Shabi) practically controlled by Iran. Tehran started supporting Iraqi Shia militants back in the 1980s as a way to destabilize the regime of Saddam Hussein and increased such support after the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. Exploiting Baghdad’s fragility, Tehran backed Shia militants with money and arms, ordering them to create an insurgency²⁰ and fight U.S. forces.²¹ Furthermore, Iran has deliberately adopted a policy of divide and rule, encouraging splits in Shia organizations and promoting multiple groups at the same time. Hence, the ITN has a variety of Iraqi proxy groups performing different tasks and functions. For example, extreme groups such as Kataib Hezbollah and Asaib Ahl al-Haqq have been used by Iran to bolster its regional network (e.g., arming Bahraini Shia²²), target Tehran’s enemies (e.g., firing rockets into Saudi Arabia²³), and resist Israel (e.g., forming units to liberate the Golan Heights²⁴), all leaving a light Iranian footprint. In parallel, the Badr Organization, Iran’s most established proxy in Iraq, has served as a major tool to influence Iraqi politics and policy. Badr began as a covert organization against Saddam’s regime, but by the mid-2000s it had joined the Iraqi government and is now controlling the Ministry of Interior while wielding significant influence over other ministries.

The recent augmented influence held by Iran in Iraq appears to derive from the vacuum left by the withdrawal of U.S. forces combined with a reluctance by Sunni states—such as Saudi Arabia, Iraq’s longtime rival—to assist Iraq. Thus, when the Islamic State captured much of northern Iraq in June 2014, Baghdad was compelled to seek help from Tehran, allowing Qasem Soleimani to head both Iraqi and Iranian forces in the campaign against the jihadist group.²⁵ Regarding the future of Iraqi militias, some may indeed seek to evolve along the lines of the “Hezbollah model,” ultimately granting Iran even more control over Iraqi politics.²⁶

Iran also enlists a “Shia foreign legion,” a reference to militias under its command and strongly influenced by its ideology. Those militias include Liwa Fatemiyoun (consisting of Afghan fighters) and Liwa Zainabiyoun (of Pakistani fighters), alongside the other Iraqi and Syrian militias discussed earlier.²⁷ These groups are trained by



FATEMIYOUN



ZAINABIYOUN



HEZBOLLAH



IRGC

Iran and used as cannon fodder on Syrian and Iraqi battlefields, under Qods Force control. Although the use of Shia militias does not represent a new concept for Iran’s leadership, the mobilization and redeployment of such groups from one arena to another reflects a new component of Iranian strategy. A recent example can be found in Nasrallah’s latest threats that such militias will fight side by side with Hezbollah in any future war with Israel. The leader of the Houthi militia in Yemen has echoed those remarks in his most recent speeches.²⁸

**MODEL 2:
INDEPENDENT PROXIES**

A prominent example of the second model of proxies developed by Tehran, a set over which it has less control, is the Shia Zaidi Houthi movement in Yemen. The Zaidi belief system differs from that of Iranian Twelver Shia, and the movement was not created by Iran or based on Khomeini’s ideas—although the Houthis eventually showed great sympathy toward Khomeinism.²⁹ The Houthis emerged in the 1990s as a local opposition movement to Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh and started an insurgency that intensified over the last decade. Although not a realization of “revolutionary export,” Tehran was more than willing to seize the opportunity and support the Houthis.

Indeed, Iran saw a triple opportunity in this arrangement: (1) a way to engage in a proxy war of attrition with Saudi Arabia and its allies and to create a deterrent force against Riyadh—similar to the use of Lebanese Hezbollah against Israel; (2) an opportunity to attain a base of operations in the Bab al-Mandab Strait, a chokepoint essential to oil transport and trade routes, which in Iran’s perception could deter the United States from acting against Iranian interests;³⁰ and (3) a potential to influence the Houthis in pursuit of exporting the Islamic Revolution over the long term. To those ends, Iran is supplying the Houthis with weapons, including long-range missiles that could hit deep into Saudi territory. According to Israeli officials, such assistance is aimed at providing the Houthis with production facilities for precise weaponry in Yemen.³¹

The Houthis are still considered a fairly independent and “rogue” player whose goals and strategy are mainly determined by their own interests (e.g., the Houthis are reported to have conquered Sana, the Yemeni capital, against Iran’s advice).³² Nevertheless, one can logically assume that as Tehran supplies more-advanced capabilities and arms to the Houthis, it will increase its influence over Houthi decisionmaking to ensure, among other things, those weapons are not used in ways that trigger an escalation between Iran and its neighbors. Such increased control will not make Tehran the ultimate arbiter of Houthi actions, but it would definitely provide it more leverage over the Yemeni militia.

**MODEL 3:
SUNNI COBELLIGERENT PARTNERS**

Despite being an essentially sectarian actor, Iran has nevertheless expanded its threat network by supporting Sunni partners and cobelligerents. Tehran has sent weapons and money to non-Shia “resistance” groups that share its commitment to confronting Israel and the United States, although it has repeatedly come up against a political and sectarian ceiling when seeking to expand such alliances beyond cobelligerence. In any case, the costs Iran bears when supporting its Sunni partners are fairly low, and the resources it needs to invest in command-and-control endeavors are negligible.

Exemplifying such an alliance is Iran’s relationship with Hamas. Since Iran pledged



IRGC COMMANDER MOHAMMAD ALI JAFARI GIVES ABDUL-MALİK AL-HOUTHİ THE “RESISTANCE” AWARD FOR 2016.

its support to the Palestinian movement in the 1990s, the arrangement has had its ups and downs. Although both sides adhere to Islamist ideology and consider “resistance” the main strategy to confront Israel, sectarian differences have always hampered and limited cooperation. All the same, Iran has supplied Hamas with various weapons, technical knowledge on rocket development, and advanced training and money for the group’s political and military wings. Recently, the Israel Defense Forces estimated that around 50 percent of the budget for Hamas’s military wing comes from Iran, with Iran giving a combined \$70 million to Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad in a year.³³ Historically, the main route for smuggling arms was through Sudan, Egypt, and into the Gaza Strip. Smuggling by sea was more challenging, and some Iranian shipments were intercepted by Israel, probably en route to Sudan and Gaza.³⁴ In 2011, Israel seized fifty tons of weapons, including mortars and antiship missiles, aboard the *MV Victoria*, and in 2014 it seized another shipment, which included M-302 rockets (with a range of up to 200 kilometers), from the *Klos C*.³⁵

Political rifts between Hamas and Iran have deepened since the eruption of the Syrian civil war in 2011. While Tehran backed Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, Hamas supported the Sunni rebels and eventually sought Saudi Arabia and Qatar as possible new patrons. Hamas even tacitly supported the Saudi-led campaign against the Houthis.³⁶ Still, throughout this turmoil, clashes with Israel repeatedly and temporarily unified Iran and Hamas. After Israel’s Operation Pillar of Defense in November 2012, senior Hamas figures such as Mahmoud al-Zahar admitted that some of Hamas’s

rockets originated in Iran and that Iranian money had helped develop the group’s long-range rockets. Zahar emphasized further that “Iran had not asked for anything in return except for the rockets to be used to liberate Palestine,” demonstrating the cobelligerent nature of Tehran-Gaza relations.³⁷ Operation Protective Edge, in summer 2014, followed another reconciliation between the parties, and the latest reports—especially after the election of Ismail Haniyeh and Yahiya al-Sanwar as Hamas’s new leadership—suggest a possible rapprochement, although mainly owing to Hamas’s lack of significant support from any other party.³⁸

Relations between Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) and Iran are likewise complex. The PIJ founder, Fathi Shiqaqi, was inspired by the Islamic Revolution and even wrote a book titled *Khomeini: The Islamic Solution and the Alternative*. Further, PIJ was almost the only Sunni group to support Iran in its war against Iraq. Current PIJ secretary-general Ramadan Shallah frequently visits Tehran to consult with Iranian officials, and PIJ takes an extreme stance on the resistance to Israel. In exchange, Tehran has supported PIJ with arms and money, and spokesperson Daoud Shihab said in 2013 that the “largest share of financial and military support for PIJ is coming from Iran.” Other PIJ officials have highlighted Iran’s help in developing the organization’s long-range rockets.³⁹

Nevertheless, politics have also affected Iran’s relations with PIJ. In the same interview, Shihab emphasized that PIJ does not serve Iran’s agenda, and Tehran temporarily stopped its financial support to the organization in response to PIJ’s neutral stance regarding the Saudi campaign against the Houthis.⁴⁰ Iran even started backing al-Sabirin, a group that broke off from PIJ in 2014 and was accused within Gaza of practicing Shiism. Rumors even suggested that al-Sabirin receives \$10 million annually from Iran.⁴¹ Ultimately, relations appear to have returned to normal—Israel’s intelligence chief recently estimated that about 75 percent of PIJ’s budget comes from Iran⁴²—but the residual strains prove that PIJ-Iran ties are based mainly on PIJ’s resistance to Israel and its support of Iran’s interests, and not on a broader strategic alliance.

Elsewhere in the Middle East, Iran has been engaging with Sunni extremist groups that use terrorism to resist U.S. and Western forces. On this count, the Taliban and Iran have a complicated relationship; at times, it is characterized by a mutual enmity based on differing religious beliefs. In 1998, the discord almost escalated into an

Iranian invasion of Afghanistan after Taliban forces killed members of the Iranian consulate staff in Mazar-e Sharif. In internal fights, Iran supported the Taliban's rival, the Northern Alliance. Yet according to *Country Reports on Terrorism 2011*, Iran has, since 2006, provided arms to the Taliban, including grenades, rockets, and explosives, and the Qods Force has trained the Taliban on various tactics and weapons.⁴³ In 2012, Iran even allowed the Taliban to open an office in Iran, and in May 2016 Afghan Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansour was killed after visiting his family in Iran by a U.S. drone strike on the Iran-Pakistan border.⁴⁴ Further, reporting in August 2017 indicates that cooperation between the Taliban and Iran has evolved and that the parties are now working together on a tactical level, jointly planning Taliban operations. Tehran has evidently been acting this way to increase its influence in Afghanistan and help push U.S. forces out of the country.⁴⁵

Iran also supports al-Qaeda operatives when such support fits its interests, although Tehran continues fighting against the ideology of global Sunni jihad. Even before the 9/11 attacks, Iran allowed al-Qaeda to operate a core facilitation pipeline and, from the early 2000s, let Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who founded the Islamic State of Iraq—the ISIS predecessor, then under al-Qaeda—to operate from Iran.⁴⁶ *The Exile*, a recent book by Cathy Scott-Clark and Adrian Levy, reveals that Iran and the Qods Force helped Osama bin Laden's family after the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001.⁴⁷ According to *Country Reports on Terrorism 2015*, Iran still enables al-Qaeda to move funds and fighters to South Asia and Syria through its territory.⁴⁸ Verifying the informal agreement between al-Qaeda and Iran is a document recovered from bin Laden's compound after the 2011 raid that led to his death. In this document, bin Laden orders the Islamic State of Iraq not to threaten Iran, because it is "our main artery for funds, personnel, and communication."⁴⁹

Al-Shabab, based in Somalia, is another Sunni jihadist group with which Iran has cobelligerent relations. Iran has provided the group with arms and explosives, and in 2012, Kenyan authorities arrested two Iranians, suspected of being Qods Force operatives, who had shipped more than a hundred kilograms of explosives to Kenya, evidently to support al-Shabab's revenge attacks against Kenya.⁵⁰ Iran's connections with al-Shabab go back to at least 2006, when according to a UN report the Somali jihadist group sent fighters to Lebanon to

assist Hezbollah in fighting Israel, in return for financial support and arms.⁵¹

Until 2016, Sudan was also a prominent Sunni partner of Iran—and an important hub in Iran's arms-supply network—but left the ITN under heavy Saudi pressure. The Sudanese defense minister described the previously close relations, in minutes leaked from a 2014 meeting of high-ranking Sudanese officials, as a "strategic and everlasting relationship" that Sudan could not compromise or lose.⁵² Since the 1990s, Tehran had supported Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir with arms, money, and oil supplies, in exchange for Sudan's compliance with Iranian terrorist activity in Sudan.⁵³ Sudan soon became a port of call for the Iranian navy and a venue for Qods Force activities, including arms transfers to Palestinian terrorist organizations in Gaza.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, at the end of 2014, Sudan decided to close Iranian cultural centers and to expel Iranian diplomats, and in March 2015 it shuttered Iran's missions in Khartoum and joined the Saudi-led coalition against the Houthis, preceding Sudan's official break in relations with Tehran in 2016.⁵⁵

Apart from Saudi pressure behind the scenes, sweetened by offers of payment in the billions of dollars, a poor economic situation, highlighted by the loss of oil fields to South Sudan, likely contributed to the Sudanese cutoff with Iran.⁵⁶ Thus, Sudan's case shows the fragility of ties between Iran and some of its Sunni partners and demonstrates that under the right circumstances, external pressure combined with the right strategic conditions could distance at least some of these partners from Tehran. The case of Hamas further reinforces these points.

MODEL 4: SHIA OPPOSITION GROUPS TO GOVERNMENTS

In 1979, Ayatollah Sadeq Rouhani declared that "if the Emir of Bahrain won't stop oppressing his people and restore Islamic laws, Iran will call on the people of Bahrain to demand annexation to the Islamic Republic."⁵⁷ This was the first in a series of Iranian attempts to nurture Shia opposition groups in the region and urge them to revolt against their governments with the goal of establishing Islamic republics modeled after that of Iran. And while such moves could incite tensions between Tehran and neighboring capitals, Iran was usually careful not to leave a footprint. Moreover, supporting Shia movements does not require significant resources or impose high costs on Tehran, since those movements usually

only need light weapons, explosives, and small amounts of money and training.

In the late 1980s, reflecting its focus on sponsoring Shia opposition in neighboring countries, Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah helped found Hezbollah al-Hejaz, a branch of the organization in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf. Hezbollah al-Hejaz became a major facilitator of Iranian support to Shia terrorist groups in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Kuwait, and a tool to act against U.S. targets in the area.

In Sunni-ruled Bahrain, the Shia population is estimated at around 70 percent, or 400,000–500,000 residents.⁵⁸ Regarding the operations of Hezbollah al-



HEZBOLLAH AL-HEJAZ

Hejaz in Bahrain, a CIA report from the 1990s identified Kuwait as a “key transit point” for money and weapons.⁵⁹ Bahraini authorities managed to disable the group’s operation, but when the Shia population began protesting in 2011, demanding democratic reforms, Bahraini authorities needed Saudi help to suppress the riots, leading to the killing of some protestors and the arrest of thousands. Following these events, new Iran-sponsored Bahraini militant groups were founded and increased the attacks on Bahraini government targets, with Tehran supplying these groups with arms. For example, a maritime shipment from Iran to Bahraini militants, intercepted in 2013, carried arms and explosives, including fifty Iran-made grenades and nearly three hundred explosive devices.⁶⁰

The Department of State claimed in its latest Country Terrorism Reports that “a sense of economic and political disenfranchisement has persisted among sectors of the Shia community for years and remained a primary driver of violent extremism in 2016.”⁶¹ This reality endures as Manama continues to take measures

against the Shia political opposition, and not only its militant groups.⁶² Iran and other members of its network have persistently threatened a fierce response if Bahrain were to act against Shia opposition leaders—most notably Sheikh Isa Qassim, the spiritual leader of the al-Wefaq movement—and Qods Force commander Soleimani even threatened to “annihilate the Bahraini regime.”⁶³ The State Department noted in this regard that “Shia militants remained a key threat to security services,” and the near future does not portend a better outlook.

In Saudi Arabia, the Shia minority in 2009 was estimated at 2–4 million, out of some 26 million citizens in the kingdom.⁶⁴ These Shia are concentrated in the Eastern Province and its Qatif governorate, close to the kingdom’s oil-export infrastructure. Tehran and Riyadh share a history of enmity and war by proxy, inflamed by the broader Shia-Sunni conflict, especially since the events of the Arab Spring in 2011. Following the 1987 Hajj catastrophe—a stampede that killed more than four hundred, including Iranian and Shia pilgrims—Iran intensified its attempts to destabilize Saudi Arabia. To this end, Hezbollah al-Hejaz started a series of attacks against Saudi targets, including gas and oil installations, aimed at challenging the Saudi government, a campaign that drew a fierce Saudi response. In 1996, Hezbollah al-Hejaz targeted Khobar Towers, killing nineteen U.S. forces and wounding hundreds of Saudi civilians. Louis Freeh, then FBI director, later claimed that the Khobar attacks were planned, organized, and sponsored by Tehran under direct orders from senior Iranian leaders. Freeh revealed that the bombers admitted they had been trained by the IRGC in Lebanon’s Beqa Valley, and received their passports at the Iranian embassy in Damascus, along with \$250,000 cash for the operation from IRGC Gen. Ahmad Sharifi.⁶⁵

Nevertheless, the Shia community in Saudi Arabia is not monolithic, and some sectors in it push for reconciliation with the government, with such reconciliation having been briefly achieved in the 1990s.⁶⁶ Iran has tried over the years to expand its influence among Shia in the region, using its Arabic-language channel al-Alam and Hezbollah’s channel al-Manar as propaganda devices, while exploiting Saudi Shia frustration and feelings of marginalization. In 2016, Riyadh executed Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, a Qatif-based Shia cleric with strong ties to Hezbollah al-Hejaz. Nimr had called for an armed struggle against Saudi Arabia and was tapped by top Hezbollah

al-Hejaz officials as a leading fundraiser, recruiter, and facilitator for the organization in Qatif and Bahrain.⁶⁷

Since then, tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia have intensified and Iran has resumed its attempts to destabilize the kingdom. Evidence of this trend can be found in the growing number of violent incidents in Qatif in recent months, which led to the deaths of Shia activists and members of the Saudi security forces, and to a Saudi siege on al-Awamiyah, a town in the al-Qatif region.⁶⁸

In Azerbaijan, one of Iran's neighbors to the north, around 65 percent of the population is Shia (5–7 million residents in 2009),⁶⁹ but the country is largely secular. True to the policies of its Soviet predecessors, President Ilham Aliyev's government keeps a close eye on religious groups, and surveys show that the Azeri population has a limited association with religion.⁷⁰ Tehran has a complicated relationship with Baku, although the countries share strong historical ties, with Azerbaijan having been a province of Iran for centuries. The two countries pursue different policies, and Azerbaijan's positive stance with respect to Israel and the United States—e.g., in the \$5 billion arms deal between Jerusalem and Baku, signed in late 2016—is considered by Tehran a security threat.⁷¹ Iran, for its part, has sided with Azerbaijan's rival Armenia in the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh province. Nevertheless, the countries keep "correct" neighborly relations.

Shia religious leaders in Azerbaijan are fairly moderate, and the top religious authority in the country even issued a fatwa in 2014 declaring that fighting in Syria was not a jihad and its casualties not martyrs—thereby seeking to dissuade Azeri youth from joining the so-called Shia foreign legion.⁷² The extent of Iranian support for Azeri Shia and militants is unclear, although evidence of Iranian terrorist activities in the country arises occasionally. In 2012, for example, Azeri authorities stopped an Iran-sponsored terrorist plot on Israeli, and possibly also U.S., targets, detaining twenty-two Azeri nationals for their participation. More recently, Baku's Court for Serious Crimes sentenced eighteen opposition activists to lengthy prison terms for their involvement in an Iran-sponsored coup d'état. Among them was a Shia opposition leader with links to the Islamic Republic, who was accused of trying to "[overthrow] the constitutional order and [establish] a religious state under Shari'a law."⁷³ Iran, in turn, exerted political pressure on Baku to moderate its actions against the Shia opposition.⁷⁴

Finally, Nigeria might perfectly exemplify Iran's potential to export its revolution beyond countries with Shia majorities, or at least pluralities, and to establish a major Shia opposition to a Sunni central government. Nigeria was home to hardly any Shia before Iran's Islamic Revolution. Nevertheless, Khomeini's ideas influenced a young Sunni Nigerian student named Ibrahim Zakzaky, who soon converted to Shiism and traveled to Tehran. Zakzaky formed a close relationship with Iran's leadership and became its main change agent in northern Nigeria, an area rich in oil and other resources.⁷⁵

Zakzaky founded the Islamic Movement in Nigeria (IMN) and started recruiting students for his cause of establishing an Islamic republic. He successfully converted a large number of Nigerians to Shiism—in 2009, Nigerian Shia were estimated by the Pew Research Center at around 4 million, out of a total population of around 154 million⁷⁶—transforming the IMN from a student group to a mass movement with social welfare infrastructure and armed guards. One report even revealed the guards to be a "uniformed, regimented organization modeled on the Revolutionary Guard."⁷⁷ Zakzaky's followers estimate that their supporters number around 5–10 million, while Nigerian authorities claim there are only 60,000 registered IMN members. The real numbers are unclear, although it is safe to assume that Zakzaky influences between hundreds of thousands and millions of Shia Nigerians.⁷⁸

The full extent of Iranian arms and financial support to the IMN is unclear. Matthew Page, a former State Department official, told Bloomberg that the IMN has been receiving about \$120,000 a year from Iran, and Iranian arms shipments to West Africa were previously intercepted by Nigerian authorities en route to the IMN and neighboring countries.⁷⁹ In 2010, Nigerian authorities seized a shipment of thirteen crates of weapons and convicted an IRGC member for involvement in the event; the shipments were suspected to be destined for insurgent groups in West Africa, including in Nigeria.⁸⁰ After the incident, the U.S. Treasury Department designated Sayyed Ali Akbar Tabatabaei—the commander of the IRGC-QF Africa Corps, who oversees Iranian arms smuggling to the continent—as a terrorism sponsor.⁸¹ Other reports and allegations of Iranian support to Zakzaky have likewise emerged over the years.⁸² Publicly, Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei and Hezbollah secretary-general Nasrallah have been increasingly referencing Zakzaky and the IMN in their speeches, imply-

ing that he is an integral part of Iran’s network. Iran likely sees the IMN as its main foothold in West Africa, and a tool to compete with Saudi influence in a developing resource-rich area.⁸³

Living up to its side of the deal, the IMN has become a prominent Shia opposition force against the Nigerian government. Zakzaky has been detained several times by Nigerian authorities, and the IMN has repeatedly clashed with the Nigerian Army. According to the army, IMN members even tried to assassinate the Nigerian chief of staff—an event that led to riots resulting in the death of more than three hundred IMN members.

MODEL 5: SHIA POPULATIONS SYMPATHETIC TO IRAN

Iran considers Shia communities abroad as potential external bases of support for Iranian policy, and assigns them a role in expanding Iranian influence and spreading its ideology. Although Shia communities differ from one another, the Iranian government employs a unified model for building its “bases of influence.” Thus, Iran establishes cultural and religious ties with Lebanese Shia and other diaspora communities to strengthen their connection to the Islamic Republic. Thereafter, it enlists these local Shia as brokers for Qods Force, Hezbollah, and Iranian Ministry of Intelligence operations, in exchange for Iranian support through money, arms, training, and advice. The brokers, additionally, back Iran and Hezbollah in malign operations as well as fundraising in these countries,⁸⁴ to be applied to missions such as the founding of groups similar to the IMN in Nigeria.

Worth noting is that when engaging Shia communities abroad, Iran’s clerical leadership faces competition for influence from other clerics, such as Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani in Iraq, who promotes a different model of Shiism, sometimes mixed with Arabism, that Iran finds hard to match. Nevertheless, in some countries the Islamic Republic has established strong connections with local communities, which it tries to exploit for its goals and interests.

AFGHANISTAN. In 2009, the Shia population of Afghanistan was estimated at 3–4 million, out of a total population of around 28 million.⁸⁵ Many of these Shia are Hazaras, who were targeted by the Taliban and feel discriminated against by Kabul. In 1979, Iran established relations with local clerics and supported Shia militants with arms and money. Sponsoring local Shia was, first, a means to limit Soviet influence in Afghanistan, second, a way to defend Shia against the central govern-



ZAKZAKY POSTER ISSUED BY KHAMENEI’S OFFICE

ment and the Taliban and, finally, a device to secure leverage with Kabul.⁸⁶ One Afghan leader explained that Tehran gained a “strong and unofficial presence in Afghanistan” mainly through religious and cultural centers, like the Khatam al-Nabiyen Islamic University in Kabul, which is described as “a focal point of Iranian influence,” and through scholarships for Afghans to study in Iran.⁸⁷ Tehran later used its connections in the country to recruit Hazaras for Liwa Fatemiyoun, a brigade in Iran’s Shia foreign legion that is sometimes referred to as “Hezbollah Afghanistan.” The brigade, according to one study, represents a merger of two Afghan Shia groups that fought under Iran’s directive against Saddam Hussein’s Iraq and the Taliban.⁸⁸

PAKISTAN. In 2009, the Shia population in Pakistan was estimated to be 17–26 million, out of a total of approximately 167 million. Until the 1980s, they were integrated into society,⁸⁹ with a legacy of Shiism traceable to the country’s founder, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, who was born to a Shia family. The Islamic policies of President Muhammad Zia ul-Haq, who served from 1978 to 1988, however, were seen as an attempt at “Sunnification”

and increased sectarian tensions and Shia discontent. This created new groups, some militant, with enhanced ties and support from Iran. One source even mentions a 1986 fatwa issued by Ayatollah Khomeini regarding support for Pakistani Shia.⁹⁰ Since the 1990s, Tehran has sought détente with Islamabad, limiting its activities in the country mainly to religious and cultural outreach and refraining from speaking out against Pakistan's mistreatment of local Shia—a trend criticized by some Shia figures in the face of increased attacks on the Shia community. Nevertheless, some of the Iran-sponsored militant groups still exist, although the extent of Iranian aid to them is unknown. As one analyst elaborates, "There are still pockets within the Pakistani Shia who are willing to pick up arms and fight for their Shiite identity," as demonstrated by local recruits to Liwa Zainabiyoun, sometimes referred to as "Hezbollah Pakistan."⁹¹

GULF STATES. Major Shia communities exist in Kuwait (500,000–700,000), the United Arab Emirates (300,000–400,000), Oman (100,000–300,000), and Qatar (100,000). These communities are known to be fairly moderate thanks to their integration in local societies, with Kuwait's case discussed in an August 2017 piece in *Al-Arabiya*.⁹² Such moderation, though, does not deter Iran from occasionally supporting Shia militants within the Gulf Cooperation Council. In 2015, Kuwaiti authorities raided a local Shia terrorist cell that was storing a large amount of weapons, accusing Iran and Hezbollah of supporting it. Even more recently, Kuwait expelled the Iranian ambassador and shut down Iran's cultural and military missions in the country, citing Iran's links to a "spy and terror cell."⁹³

AFRICA. Among the highest concentrations of Shia on the African continent can be found in Nigeria (4 million in 2009), Tanzania (2 million in 2009) and Niger (close to 900,000 in 2015). Minor Shia communities also exist in Kenya, Uganda, Senegal, and other countries.⁹⁴ Across Africa, Iran and Hezbollah invest in enhancing cultural and religious ties with local Shia movements and members of the Lebanese diaspora, aiming to duplicate the successful experience in Nigeria and win "hearts and minds." Iranian cultural centers and scholarships have thus been reported in Côte d'Ivoire, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, Senegal, and elsewhere. Some students who were granted a scholarship to study Shiism in Iran or Lebanon later returned to their home countries to set up terrorist cells to serve the Islamic

Republic.⁹⁵ African Shia appear even to have fought in small numbers in Syria, according to some reports.⁹⁶ Another study sheds light on the widespread presence of Iranian arms in Africa—some for Shia movements and some for other militant groups, including in Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya, Guinea, Uganda, Sudan, Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Niger.⁹⁷

SOUTH AMERICA. Iranian activities in South America resemble those in Africa, with Qods Force, Intelligence Ministry, and Hezbollah operatives drawing on Iran's vast cultural and religious networks, as well as the Lebanese diaspora, to support terrorist activities, drug trafficking, and illegal financing. A report by Alberto Nisman, the Argentinian AMIA investigator who was found dead in January 2015, explains in detail the Iran- and Hezbollah-built network designed to "sponsor, foster and execute terrorist attacks" in Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay, Chile, Columbia, Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana, and Suriname. Nisman even references a map, seized at the residence of an Iranian diplomat in Argentina, that highlights Muslim population centers in South America and outlines a strategy to export Islam to the continent and later to North America.⁹⁸ Another Iranian tool to enhance its relations with local communities is its Spanish-language HispanTV channel, which promotes an Iranian agenda.

OTHER REGIONS OF IRANIAN INFLUENCE

Elsewhere in the world, Iran invests in building cultural and religious relations with the population but has not yet achieved a solid foothold.

INDIA. In 2009, the Indian Shia population was estimated to be 16–24 million out of an approximate total Muslim population of 121 million.⁹⁹ Until the 2000s, Indian Shia and Sunnis were fairly unified, but the radicalization of Sunni groups has increased polarization among Muslims and marginalization among Shia, to the extent that many prefer voting for the Hindu nationalist party to supporting Muslim blocs.¹⁰⁰ Sectarian feelings have also pushed some Indian Shia to express their desire to join the fights in the Levant, and one Shia religious group even declared that 25,000 Indian Shia had volunteered to defend Shia holy places in Iraq. Later, the group clarified that these volunteers would mostly provide help to local civilian populations and not fight the Islamic State. Whether such volunteers actually went

to Iraq is unknown—a public relations stunt is the likely explanation, given that many of the volunteers do not even have passports—but it shows the potential for Indian Shia to be exploited for Iranian interests.¹⁰¹

Specifically, the Shia community of Jammu and Kashmir, an Indian state long disputed by Pakistan and India, is estimated at around 1.5 million.¹⁰² In the 1990s, Shia militant groups such as “Hizb ul-Mouminin” emerged with a focus on defending Shia communities while fighting the Indian government. Reports have suggested Iranian financial support for the group, along with reports claiming sponsorship by Pakistani intelligence.¹⁰³ Nowadays, Iranian influence in Kashmir is limited to cultural and religious activities. In particular, the Imam Khomeini Memorial Trust spreads Iranian ideology in the state, while Press TV—Iran’s English-language station—is viewed widely by local Shia and disseminates Tehran’s perspective on current events. Indeed, Indian authorities have accused the station of engaging in incitement.¹⁰⁴ And even though Tehran does not currently support any militant group in Kashmir, Iranian officials use the threat of supporting local Shia as leverage against the Indian government. In summer 2017, Supreme Leader Khamenei did so twice—in parallel with Indian prime minister Narendra Modi’s visit to Israel—calling on the world’s Muslims to support Kashmiris against their “oppressors.”¹⁰⁵

TURKEY AND TAJIKISTAN. As of 2009, Shia in Turkey numbered some 7–11 million, about 2–3 million of them from the Twelver sect, predominant in Iran;¹⁰⁶ that same year, some 400,000 Shia were counted in Tajikistan. Parts of these communities are suspected of having ties to Tehran, although they have not shown significant signs of forming militant groups.¹⁰⁷ Also, even though the Turkish government classifies Shia as Muslims, the minority is discriminated against and regarded as a source of potential “Iranian spies,” intensifying Shia marginalization and creating a possibility for future Iranian inroads.¹⁰⁸ For their part, Tajik authorities have repeatedly targeted their country’s Iranian economic, religious, and cultural centers, partly due to Iran’s support for an exiled Tajik opposition leader, Muhiddin Kabiri, and its affiliation with new Shia movements formed in Tajikistan. Such efforts may reflect an Iranian effort to gain leverage over Tajikistan and push back against Saudi influence over the government in Dushanbe.¹⁰⁹

Guidelines for a Counter-ITN Policy

The foregoing assessment yields the following conclusions regarding Iran’s relationships and strategic behavior vis-à-vis the ITN:

- ***Iran is more an opportunistic player than an initiator.*** Hardly any cases can be identified of Iran successfully initiating a change in basic domestic conditions abroad (e.g., demographics, the spread of ethnic minorities) so as to cultivate new members of its network. Instead, with Nigeria being the single exception, Iran usually looks to exploit fragile national situations to fulfill its goals, as it has done in Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria.
- ***Shiism offers the main incentive to cooperate with Tehran.*** Although Iran portrays itself as the leader of the global *umma* (Muslim community), it uses its image as Shia “big brother” to attract supporters among Shia communities worldwide. Tehran considers supporting those communities a religious and moral duty, as well as a means to project influence and export its ideology.
- ***Iran likewise prefers to engage with Shia groups, mainly in countries polarized along sectarian lines.*** Iranian efforts thrive in sectarian conflicts, and Shia populations that feel threatened have proved especially susceptible to Iranian persuasion. In some countries with minimal Shia populations, Nigeria being the exemplar (now with millions of Shia), Iran has sought to spread the denomination. In countries like Kuwait, by comparison, where Shia are well integrated into the larger population, such Iranian attempts have tended to falter.
- ***Iran also engages with Sunni partners on a limited basis.*** In recent decades, Iranian relations with Sunni organizations have been characterized by cobelligerence rather than strategic alliances, with Tehran supporting these groups against a common enemy such as Israel or the United States. That said, sectarian rifts have constrained this type of cooperation, and the case of Sudan shows that a Sunni state can successfully compete with Iran for influence over Sunni cobelligerents.
- ***Tehran prefers engaging with substate actors to states.*** Iran has a positive experience with exploiting

fragile and fragmented countries, and, in seeking to expand its ties, supports Shia clerics, tribal leaders, and militants with money and arms. In contrast, Iran finds it difficult to compete with other countries on the state level. When Saudi Arabia offered billions of dollars to Sudan—then an important hub in Iran’s arms-smuggling network—it succeeded in distancing Khartoum from Tehran.

- **Iran uses a variety of tools to extend its influence, with cultural-religious serving ties as a key device.** In contouring its approach to the particular conditions of a given society, the Islamic Republic often harnesses religious and cultural activities to attract local Shia before enlisting them as change agents. In some arenas, Iran only uses its cultural and religious connections to enhance its influence, while in others it builds on those connections to support local militant groups with arms and money, thus empowering its partners and increasing their dependency.

Although possessing proxies has merits for Iran, it also entails heavy costs. The first of these involves the resources needed to supply proxies with arms and goods, including by maintaining a mechanism such as Unit 190 of the IRGC-QF, which oversees arms supplies.¹¹⁰ The second is a dedicated quasi-command-and-control system to supervise proxies, directing Iranian support and intervening in the proxy’s decisionmaking. Indeed, Iran’s proxies are backed by regional IRGC-QF corps that oversee operations in each designated arena. Third, Iran’s proxies are perceived as being directed by Tehran; thus, an escalation with them has the potential to expand into an escalation with Iran. For example, a Houthi attack on a U.S. ship in the Bab al-Mandab Strait might, under certain circumstances, elicit a U.S. response that could eventually involve Iran.

- **Iran’s arms-supply mechanisms are dependent on third-party actors and thus might be vulnerable.** Various reports mention that Syria, Nigeria, and Sudan have served as intermediate points for Iranian arms shipments, while Omani territory has also been used for this purpose.¹¹¹ Some of those countries are part of Iran’s network, assisting it in shipping arms, while others are either reluctant to prevent Iran from engaging in those activities or simply lack the capac-

ity to do so. Another method Iran uses to supply its proxies is to utilize Iranian aviation companies as arms shippers, exposing the shipments to possible interdiction or seizure by a third-party state.¹¹²

Because maintaining proxies is costly, Iran has developed alternative models for partnerships. Iran can only manage a limited number of proxies at a given time, owing to the costs and the need for command-and-control mechanisms. Thus, Iran has been forced to develop different models for its network. One such model is represented by the Houthis in Yemen, a fairly independent proxy that receives advanced weapons in exchange for projecting Iranian influence in the Bab al-Mandab, yet without being fully subordinated to Iran’s will.

- **IRGC-QF growth and expansion, however, could allow Iran to control more proxies.** If Iran evolves its mechanisms and makes them more efficient, it could oversee more proxies, including in farther-flung arenas such as Africa. This would require Iran to have more logistical hubs for smuggling arms and maintaining communications between Tehran and the new proxies. Another option might entail having more Artesh (Iranian army) and Basij (a paramilitary volunteer militia force) participation in the process, as is occurring now in Syria.
- **Iran uses Hezbollah as a close partner in expanding its network.** Hezbollah brings to the table not only its connections to the Lebanese diaspora but also its identity as an Arab organization, offering Tehran various contacts and connections within the Arab world. Deeper Hezbollah involvement in managing Iran’s proxies—e.g., outsourcing some IRGC-QF duties to group, already happening to some extent—could allow Iran and Hezbollah to control more proxies at the same time.
- **Finally, preventing a “junior” ITN member from evolving into an Iranian proxy appears easier than reversing a “mature” relationship with Tehran.** Given that hardly any precedent exists for rolling back Iranian proxies, whether voluntarily or under pressure, the critical phase in stopping ITN expansion is when a Shia group has not yet established strong connections with Tehran, and IRGC-QF operatives are not yet integrated into the group’s decisionmaking process.

IN DRAWING ON the findings just enumerated, any policy seeking to counter the ITN and Iran's regional activities must do the following:

- **Make Tehran, and mainly President Hassan Rouhani, understand that maintaining and supporting the ITN will be costly for Iran.** Such a mindset would replace Iran's sense of immunity when acting via proxies, rooted in the regime's traditional risk-averse approach. Indeed, doing so might drive Rouhani—who probably sees the proxies as a means, not an end—to push back against some of the IRGC's actions in the region. Rouhani, however, has limited influence over the ITN, which is almost entirely under the control of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Impressing upon Khamenei the price Iran will pay for maintaining its network will not be easy, but this is a central task for the West.¹¹³
- **Embrace a holistic approach to countering the ITN.** Together with countering Iran's activities in specific countries, moves to target the ITN's centers of gravity could generate an aggregate effect on the network's members. A focus on ITN soft spots—e.g., its logistical networks for financing and supplying arms—and on the IRGC-QF and its leadership as the main ITN “conductors” at least in the Middle East would be one way to achieve this goal.
- **Counter Iran's mechanisms for smuggling arms, mainly to its proxies.** Designating Qods Force personnel who are responsible for arms supplies and taking action against their smuggling methods could significantly weaken Iran's ability to support its proxies, and thus decrease Iran's influence on them. Such an end could be achieved, inter alia, by increasing the number and widening the scope of maritime interdiction operations in the Gulf—as another study proposed in the case of Yemen—and tracking the use of Iranian aviation companies for shipping arms and militiamen.¹¹⁴ A parallel effort should be aimed at helping countries whose territory is used by Iran for smuggling arms to build the awareness and capability needed to prevent Iran from engaging in such exploitation.
- **Disrupt Iran's mechanisms for controlling its network.** Increasing pressure on the Qods Force, Iranian Ministry of Intelligence, and Hezbollah's operatives abroad could disrupt the ITN's command-and-control mechanisms. Particular means of such disruption might include exposing operatives' identities in public, designating them, and placing them on various sanctions lists, while also tracing the money trail to fight the network's illicit fundraising. Another aspect of this effort should be pressuring countries to close any Iranian religious and cultural center used as a front for the Qods Force, Intelligence Ministry, or Hezbollah infrastructures—a step recently taken by Tajikistan.
- **Adopt efficient processes for sharing information and intelligence with other governments.** Enhanced information sharing will enable evidence related to the ITN's activities and fronts in a specified country to be used by its government to take on the network's “civilian covers” using legal tools.
- **Focus on dissuading Shia communities from cooperating with Iran at an early stage, thus preventing them from evolving into Iranian proxies.** Engaging with Shia populations based on their needs and problems—including by encouraging governments to integrate them into local society and government and offering them incentives for constructive behavior—could contribute to this goal. Communicating directly with and empowering local Shia leaders could help them distance themselves from Iran while also providing the means to do so. Such means could be similar to those used in the fight against al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan, some of which have been described in Daniel Green's book *In the Warlords' Shadow*.¹¹⁵
- **Encourage regional actors to fill vacuums and gaps in fragile states, thus preventing Iran from exploiting the gaps to increase its influence.** For example, Sunni actors (e.g., Saudi Arabia and the UAE) could enter a money-based competition with Iran over fragile areas, including by investing in social welfare infrastructures and good-governance projects, thus changing domestic conditions in the designated country to roll back Iran's influence.
- **Encourage Sunni-majority states to adopt a differentiated approach to Shia opposition groups in order to dissuade them from cooperating with Iran.** Offering incentives to Shia leaders and communities to oppose Sunni-led governments in a political manner only and to keep away from militant activi-

ties could moderate local opposition groups and decrease Iranian leverage and impact on them. Such incentives could be enacted in the economic and social spheres but would probably also require local governments to make some political reforms to appease the opposition. In any case, adopting a generalized policy of collective punishment against Shia communities or opposition groups would have the opposite of its intended effect, only helping Iran attract supporters.

- **Engage in an intensive information war with Iran.** In doing so, first show the Iranian public the cost of supporting the ITN, especially the ways it cuts into the Iranian economy, which is already struggling to recover from years of international sanctions. Second, demonstrate to Shia communities worldwide—and to Iran’s Sunni partners—that the Islamic Republic only seeks to exploit them for its own interests, and that eventually they could be abandoned for a larger Iranian strategic interest.

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